
The 80th anniversary of the 1944 Education Act

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Introduction

The '44 Act, celebrated as a Great British Compromise, was passed by the wartime National Government. It laid the tracks still being followed at all levels of institutionalised learning from primary to post-graduate schools. Whether they will do so for much longer is open to question since the anniversary may also mark the end of this phase of English education. Certainly, *Post-16 Educator's* focus on 16+ students and those who teach them in school sixth forms, sixth-form and further and higher education colleges, as well as on training and apprenticeships in and out of employment, affords a unique vantage point to make such predictions and to propose interventions.

The 1944 Education Act

The Act made secondary schooling free and compulsory until 15. Instead of bringing fee-charging private schools for circa 7 per cent into this new state system, the first Minister of Education, R. A. Butler, recalled in his autobiography that 'the first class carriage had been shunted onto an immense siding'. Although an academic curriculum linked the school exam boards and Oxbridge colleges, higher education was not included in the Act.

The educational 'tracks' for which the Act is remembered divided 'tripartite' compulsory state secondary schools into three. Circa 20 per cent of primary children were allocated to grammars by the 11+ test. Here they followed an academic curriculum shadowing the privates and intended for future non-manual office and professional employment. In

reality, these tracks were mostly bipartite since secondary technical schools were too costly to provide education and training for the skilled manual labour of the next circa 40 per cent intended for industrial apprenticeships (only circa 10 per cent of them for young women). Instead, many school-leavers attended apprenticeships run with FE by trades unions and employers. The bottom 40 per cent left secondary modern schools for 'unskilled' manual occupations, most of which did not require educational qualifications but needed labour.

As well as following pre-war divisions of employment, the Act was intended to reproduce the traditional social pyramid between upper, middle and working classes, though with the growth of service and technical jobs, there was limited upward social mobility for a brief period from the working to the middle class. The latter therefore grew at the expense of the traditional manually working class, itself divided between 'respectable' and 'rough' for those consigned to skilled and unskilled labour.

From school to YTS

This limited upward social mobility came to its end following the onset of recession in 1973. Comprehensive schools were blamed for the 'lack of opportunities' for school leavers, despite the partial and piecemeal structural reform begun in 1965 being unaccompanied by the curricular reform that might have made comprehensivisation work. Instead, the new schools imitated the surviving grammars in imposing their academic curriculum through tiered examinations, even after the merging of 'O' levels with CSEs. Although numbers of HE students

increased, supplemented by more technical universities and later by polytechnics, upward social mobility was never regained, despite being the target of an endless series of school-to-work-schemes.

Automation in industry was obviating apprenticeships as skills were reduced to competence-based performance of itemised tasks. After raising the school leaving age to 16 in 1972, the Youth Training initiative became the Youth Opportunities Programme/Scheme, raised from one to two years after riots in 1981. Intended as temporary responses, these were attempts to provide 'counter-cyclical' training for the recovery in the labour market that never followed. Increasing numbers voted with their feet at 16, remaining in 'new sixth forms' or migrating to further and then 'higher' education as access was increased through marketisation.

The National Curriculum was sold to teachers as another chance to increase opportunities for all since all 16 year-olds would be tested in the same things. Allegedly drawn up on the back of a fag-packet by then-Minister, Kenneth Baker, it replicated what he could recall of his own grammar-schooling. Just as skills had been degraded by competence training, knowledge was similarly disaggregated into component 'bits' of information for regurgitation in acceptable, largely literary, forms. This 'task-based learning is policed by Ofsted for quantification into league tables and to better manage teachers!

The class arrangements that the post-war education system sought to sustain no longer exist. Instead, especially after Blair's 'education, education, education', young people were encouraged to invest in their own human capital by taking out fees/loans to gain qualifications to apply for secure jobs with prospects. Blair effectively reprised Thatcher's privatisation of public industries by privatising public services. Schools were primed for privatisation under academy trusts, whilst curricular reform was rejected in favour of new vocational tracks and new style apprenticeships. Repeatedly raising the price of fees and loans excluded poorer students from HE.

Social mobility was now downward as the class structure went pear-shaped with students and trainees running up a down-escalator of devaluing qualifications. Despite class polarisation widening the distance between top and bottom, the new class structure retained the tripartite form of the old: beneath a globalised ruling class, surviving

managers and professionals merged into a new middle-working/working-middle class whose children desperately strive not to fall into the growing deskilled, insecure precariat beneath. Pervasive individualisation of now remote class and other cultural identities contributes to lack of awareness of this new social situation.

Nevertheless, this has simultaneously affected further and higher education where 'the student experience' is controlled by ever multiplying administrators who increasingly substitute for lecturers. The whole education system thus selects applicants to 'elite' institutions on the basis of previously more or less expensively acquired cultural capital. However, ideologies of 'individual achievement' cannot mask the heightened frustration and disillusion of students and staff at all levels of this academic assessment-driven learning. Moreover, the privatisation of competing universities has ended in bankruptcy, its business model broken, like all the other privatisations.

What can be done?

Post-16 Educator and its precursors fought a long rear-guard action against these tendencies in education and training, even as they were extended from youth training to colleges and universities. Drawing from traditions of independent working-class education, the journal has consistently advocated 'publicly funded provision of valid post-compulsory education and training'. Today this requires replacing student fees/loans with lifelong entitlement to free study and recreation with the right to paid apprenticeships in and out of employment for guaranteed green jobs. This means in turn developing a much broader approach to compulsory and post-compulsory education that both comprehends and responds to the economy and the labour market to create a new settlement for young people. Unless we begin to move in this direction, education and training will continue down the same tracks they have followed for the last 80 years.