



WILL THE RECENTLY ANNOUNCED EXPANSION OF GRAMMAR SCHOOLS INCREASE SOCIAL MOBILITY WITHIN THE BRITISH EDUCATION SYSTEM?

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INTRODUCTION

The aim of this paper is to examine whether the recently announced expansion of the grammar school system is likely to increase social mobility. As education is a devolved matter in the UK, this paper relates to the situation in England. Having contextualised the debate and introduced the key concepts used, the paper then proceeds to examine the issue from two opposing sides. The paper concludes by suggesting that perceptions on whether grammar schools can increase social mobility is highly dependent on political viewpoint.

CONTEXT

The debate about grammar schools versus comprehensive schools is a highly emotive one which has again come to the fore. Since the mid-1960s, when almost a quarter of all secondary school pupils attended one of the 1,300 grammar schools available in England, there has been a vast reduction in the number of state-funded schools which select pupils on the basis of academic ability (Bolton, 2017). There are currently 163 grammar schools in England (Wright, 2018), compared to more than 3,300 secondary comprehensive schools (BBC News, 2018a), i.e. under 5% of schools are classified as grammar schools.

In May 2018, the Government announced an extra £50 million, as part of a “Selective Schools Expansion Fund” (DfE, 2018: 1) for the 2018/2019 academic year, to enable existing schools to create new grammar school places. This is a slimmed down version of the Conservative Party’s 2017 election manifesto, which included a pledge to enable new grammar schools to be created (Conservative Party, 2017). However, as the Conservatives lost their overall majority in the June 2017 election, these plans were subsequently shelved (Busby, 2018).

On the one hand, the Government refers to this new policy as an opportunity for children from disadvantaged backgrounds to attend “good” schools (DfE, 2018: 1), as well as increasing “choice” (Millar, 2016: 1) for parents. It is suggested that these are highly value-laden terms, which are derived from the “neoliberal” ideology (Angus, 2015: 395) underpinning both the current and previous governments’ educational policymaking. On the other hand, the National Education Union describes this expansion of selectivity within education as “the grammar school corpse” climbing “out of its coffin once again” (Courtney, 2018 quoted by Adams, 2018: 1).

DEFINITIONS

For the purpose of this paper, the simple definition of a grammar school as “a state-funded selective secondary school” is used (Bolton, 2017: 2).

A review of the literature suggests that social mobility is a problematic concept to define. The definition used here is the “ability of individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds to move up in the world” (Crawford et al, 2011: 6).

DISCUSSION

In terms of impact on social mobility of increasing capacity within grammar schools, this is a highly polarised issue (Long et al, 2018). The next section examines these two opposing perspectives.

ARGUMENTS FOR GRAMMAR SCHOOLS

The paper suggests that grammar schools can have a positive impact on mobility in three interrelated areas. First, using the above definition of social mobility, one can argue that at an individual level, being accepted into a grammar school - usually by passing the 11 plus exam (BBC Two, 2018) - can be perceived as potentially having a positive impact on a child’s ability to “move up in the world” (Crawford et al, 2011: 6). The child has demonstrated his or her academic ability to pass a selection test, which is perceived as opening up doors that can subsequently lead to entrance to Russell Group universities and improved career opportunities (Warikoo and Fuhr, 2014).

Secondly, grammar schools may promote academic aspirations and attainment, as children are working within a learning environment where all pupils have reached a certain standard. Teaching may therefore be at a higher level, which one could argue is likely to improve student achievement. Therefore, if pupils’ attainments are enhanced by attending a grammar school, one could argue that this has the potential of improving their social mobility.

Thirdly, according to Ofsted, grammar schools often have better ratings than comprehensive schools (Ofsted, 2015). Outlining her educational vision at the beginning of her Premiership, Theresa May highlighted that “99% of existing selective schools are rated good or outstanding – and 80% are outstanding, compared with just 20% of state schools overall” (DfE, 2016: 1). This is likely to impact positively on a child’s progression onto university, as these schools often act as feeder schools into elite universities. However, at the same time, it is important to note that the wider research evidence on impact on attainment as a result of attending a grammar school is somewhat mixed. The Institute for Fiscal Studies (Sibieta, 2016) highlights evidence showing that grammar schools have a positive impact both on attainment and on future earnings. However, there is also a wealth of research showing the opposite perspective. The next section turns to consider the arguments against grammar schools.

ARGUMENTS AGAINST GRAMMAR SCHOOLS

The paper suggests that there are more convincing reasons against selectivity, as 95% of children still attend comprehensive schools. As a consequence, improved social mobility through a grammar school education is only available for the few, rather than for the many.

In terms of impact on pupils’ achievement, Andrews et al (2016) show that the attainment of children who do not go to grammar schools is lower, but that this could be due to the fact that grammar schools attract higher achievers in the first place. Therefore, they conclude that attending a grammar school has no positive, nor negative impact on overall attainment (Andrews et al, 2016). These findings are mirrored by Gorard and See (2013), who make the further crucial point that selective education harms social justice, in that more children are disadvantaged by a selective system. This is again reiterated in a subsequent study comprising over half a million pupils (Gorard and Siddiqui, 2018), where the authors recommend that the Government phases out selective schools altogether due to their damaging effect on equality within society. The paper shares this view, on the basis of promoting equality rather than social mobility for the few.

In addition, a comprehensive study of changes in social mobility between 1951 and 2011 by Goldthorpe (2016) showed that there had been few improvements in mobility over the period studied. Goldthorpe highlighted that better resourced families continued to use “their economic, cultural and social advantage” to maintain their children’s position “at the top of the social class ladder”, by seeking a selective education (Goldthorpe, quoted by Doward, 2016: 1; Ball, 2003).

Furthermore, Burgess et al (2017: 1) showed that the “ordinary working families” which have become the focus of the current government, are unlikely to benefit from increased selectivity. Instead, they suggest that it will be those from affluent backgrounds who are most likely to get one of these new grammar school places, as parents with more resources at their disposal are more likely to purchase private tutoring for their children in order to improve their chances at passing the entrance tests (Burgess et al, 2017: 1). Research by Education Datalab draws the same conclusion and highlights that the majority of children will still attend comprehensive schools (Education Datalab, 2017: 1).

The paper further suggests that directing funding away from the many towards the few is unlikely to have a positive impact on social mobility. The funding crisis within the comprehensive sector is well documented (National Association of Head Teachers, 2018; National Audit Office, 2016; National Education Union, 2018) and there are recent examples of schools asking parents to donate essential supplies to comprehensive schools (BBC News, 2018b; Sandhu, 2018). By choosing to direct additional funding away from the comprehensive sector towards the selective system, this will not improve social mobility for the majority of pupils. In addition, there is a substantial amount of evidence which suggests that that selective education leads to social segregation (Burgess et al, 2017; Education Datalab, 2017; Gorard and See, 2013; Gorard and Siddiqui, 2018), which is also likely to harm social mobility.

In summary, the paper finds the research evidence highlighting the lack of impact of grammar schools on social mobility amongst the majority of pupils more convincing. Social mobility may be improved for the few who have been admitted into a grammar school, however, the crucial point is that most pupils still attend a comprehensive school. Furthermore, it is argued there is no justification for the government to refer to some schools as “good”, and thereby implying that the rest must be bad. It is suggested that there should be a level playing field where all schools are “good”. By labelling schools as “failing”, there is a risk that children who attend these schools are by association perceiving themselves as failing, which is likely to have a negative impact on their achievements and on social mobility. Furthermore, social mobility is closely related to the British class system. However, this is outside the scope of this paper

CONCLUSION

The paper has examined whether the forthcoming expansion of grammar school places is likely to lead to improved social mobility. Having outlined the potential impact of selective education, the paper suggested that there may be benefits of attending a grammar school at the level of the individual. However, as the majority of

pupils still attend comprehensive schools, any benefits only apply to a small percentage of pupils. Therefore, the paper argued that an increase in grammar school places was likely to lead to further divisions within society, which is to the detriment of social justice. To conclude the paper also recognised that this was a highly contentious issue which was ultimately dependent on political persuasion and which is closely related to the issue of the British class system. In summary, the paper argues that it is unlikely that the expansion of grammar schools will lead to increased social mobility.

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