

Reflections on secondary education policy in England and Wales since the 1944 Act

Anne Smith

Before the second world war, education in England and Wales was compulsory for all children until the age of 12. Most pupils attended elementary schools between the ages of 5 and 14, and few took their formal education any further, although there was a system of work-based apprenticeships in areas where businesses wished to attract young people and pay them very little until they had been properly trained. Independent schools were available for the children of the rich, even – with a few exceptions – those foundations which had originally been set up to assist the poor. The grammar school, with its sixth form, was largely fee-paying, and took in some scholarship pupils who did not have to pay fees. Apart from the fact that social divisions often meant that such children had a hard time out of the social milieu of their homes, many were unable to take up these free places as they could not afford the uniforms, and their parents could not afford to keep them at school after the age of 14 when they might have been out at work contributing to the family income. So, although there were exceptions, the upper classes and the *nouveau riche* patronised the independent sector, the middle and professional classes the grammar schools, where education was available until the age of 18, and the poor working classes the elementary schools.

It was clear before the end of the war, however, that there was no public mood to return to the status quo when peace was restored. The Labour landslide of 1945, sweeping aside even the great Churchill, showed how right the government was to plan the education reforms embodied in the 1944 Education Act. There was a greater desire for egalitarianism than there had been before the war, and those who had experienced at first hand in the armed services the products of some of the elementary schools were eager to see an educational system in which the free compulsory provision also led to mass literacy and numeracy, as well as the opportunity for the academically able child to carry on at school until he or she was 16 or even 18, and to take the School Certificate or Higher Certificate. Certain concepts remained

Copyright Agency Limited (CAL) licensed copy. Further copying and
Communication prohibited except on payment of fee per Copy or Communication
And otherwise in accordance with the licence from CAL to ACER. For more
Information contact CAL on (02) 9394-7600 or info@copyright.com.au

unchallenged in the Act: secondary schooling for the most able remained for the most part single-sex (and in some areas to the detriment of girls, where there was markedly more provision for able boys than for able girls); independent schools were left alone, even being allowed to retain their charitable status; and church schools were allowed substantially more independence than state schools as well as receiving capital assistance. This inability to see the holistic view was understandable in the economic climate of the war and its aftermath, but an opportunity for more radical change was lost and remains lost to this day.

Most of society's leaders of the day had been educated at prestigious fee-paying public schools. Anyone else who had achieved a position of influence had been educated at a grammar school. These were not to be touched in the new regime, even though they were to be enabled – or forced – to take intelligent working class pupils. So the idea of changing and improving the current system, rather than introducing something entirely new, took precedence. All children would be entitled to receive a free education in state schools from 5-16 or 18, although the raising of the school leaving age to 16 did not become law until the 1970s. They would attend primary school from 5-11, and at the end of that time would take an examination to decide where they should go next. This was not to be a pass/fail examination, but an attempt to discover which kind of school would most suit each individual child. The schools for non-academic children would be renamed 'secondary modern' schools to show that they were not to be like the old elementary schools. They would offer a different curriculum which would suit the less able child better than the grammar school curriculum.

But during the twentieth century the old system had been tinkered with in some places to take account of those children who, while not necessarily being academic, were nevertheless able to learn effectively before moving on to apprenticeships. So a third choice was to be available: the technical school, for those whose chosen method of learning was primarily practical but who were able to support these studies with good levels of literacy and numeracy. The purely practical woodwork and metalwork would be supported in the technical schools by technical drawing and art, for example. Book-keeping and other vocational studies had a place in the technical schools though not in the grammar schools whose alumni would have secretaries and book-keepers to do that sort of thing for them.

So the tri-partite system came about. It provided as great a step forward as the great 1870 universal education act; and yet it was essentially a failure for a number of reasons. The grammar schools already existed. Some of them were of great age and were much revered. They were to expand to take those children who would fit in with their existing curriculum and ethos. And those children would become in their adult lives professionals and white collar workers. Those who were not suited to the grammar schools would clearly be more suited to something else. The 11+ examination was never free of the pass/fail connotation. Parents certainly never got the point and would promise their children bicycles and pens if they were found to be suited to grammar school education.

In no time the technical schools became second string grammar schools, and the secondary moderns became the up to date equivalent of the elementary schools. This seemingly innate social desire to categorise and rank people was compounded by the fact that the only full curriculum which was known and understood was the academic one. So the alternative methods of education never really came into existence. Secondary moderns taught the subjects – cooking, car maintenance – befitting the hewers of wood and drawers of water their pupils were destined to become, side by side with an academic focus on reading, writing and arithmetic. Why it was supposed that tomorrow's boffins would automatically be able to look after themselves is anybody's guess. 'Successful' secondary moderns were those which enabled pupils to take examinations and even to enter the grammar school sixth forms. In more deprived areas the secondary moderns which taught their pupils differently yet effectively were rare, and frequently this was not what parents wanted anyway.

The other reason for the tri-partite system's failure was that the number of children deemed suitable for an academic, technical or a secondary modern education in an area had to fit exactly the number of places available in each kind of school in that area. So in Rutland only 15 per cent of children were found to be suited to the grammar schools, whereas in Croydon about 30 per cent went to them. And a growing amount of educational research showed that teacher and pupil expectation had a great influence on the success or otherwise of the child, so that a child who had 'failed' the 11+ was likely to have an IQ which fell after a couple of years of secondary education, where as a borderline 'pass' would show an improved IQ. And the idea that IQs were 'set' at the age of 11 and were good predictors of future

development was finally exploded with the revelation that Cyril Burt had falsified a number of his experimental results.

It was equally apparent early on that the new system was not going to effect the social changes that had been predicted. Indeed it was never clear that everyone wanted the same social changes. Poor working class parents rightly objected to being looked down on by the rich middle class – but their ambition for their children, if they had one, was not that they should do something different and be respected for that, but that they should rise above the despised working class and become middle class instead. It was left, for example, to the Prince of Wales Trust to support and value the working class entrepreneurs who wished to set up their own businesses, just as vocational education even now is valued most highly by City and Guilds' graduates, who have often used this non-mainstream qualification to move on to higher and better things. There was no way in which the tripartite system would lead to a less class-ridden society and breed understanding and respect for all people, no matter what their academic ability.

If division at 11 was not a good predictor of later academic success or failure, then it came to be argued that it would be easier to encourage understanding of and respect for all people if they were educated together after 11 as they had been before that age. Those who espoused this argument had often been educated separately from working class children and had little or no understanding of, or respect for them. (If they had been to private preparatory schools they would equally have never have been educated with children of the opposite sex). A comprehensive system would ensure that all children in a school enjoyed (or suffered) the same quality of education, and it would be easier to move late developers and those who did not live up to early promise from one class to another rather than their having to move schools if there were a vacancy. Grammar school children would no longer be taken out of their residential area and away from their peers, and forced to travel often some distance to school every day. All the children in an area would wear uniform or not wear uniform as the local school decided. Everyone could be valued equally.

Logically, those who espoused this view also supported coeducation. In some areas there was an imbalance of places for girls available in grammar schools, and technical schools also tended to be boys' only schools. Coeducation would correct this kind of institutional imbalance. As ideas of equal opportunities for men and women grew, so too did the idea that neither children nor adults should be put into stereotypical

boxes. Boys should be able to cook and be allowed to learn sewing; girls should be allowed to learn woodwork and metalwork. All children should be given sex education, whereas this had often been minimal, especially in boys' grammar schools. A head master of a boys' grammar school once explained to me that it was less necessary for boys to have sex education than for girls as they did not become pregnant; by the 1970s this was a highly unpopular opinion, yet it was in that decade that the point was made to me.

At this point I should explain that I am not an educational historian. I entered teaching in 1960 and continued in that profession until my retirement in 1999, having been in senior management in a school and sixth form college for 29 years of that time. In the eyes of government – of both major parties – this makes me *parti pris* rather than an expert; but I have taught in mixed and single sex secondary schools, both male and female, in the private and the public sectors, and in 11-18, 14-18 and 16-18 educational establishments, as well as doing a little part time adult education. I have taken part in two major reorganisations of secondary schools in the area in which I live, both of them instigated by politicians and economists rather than by educationalists, which is also true of all major curriculum changes in my working life. I am now the Chair of a Board of Governors at a local 11-16 school. So although I am not an expert theoretician, I have met children from all walks of life with all sorts of different needs, which is more than some civil servants at the Department for Education and Skills seem to have done.

Comprehensive reorganisation came late to Croydon, an urban borough of outer London some 12 miles from Westminster Bridge, where I was working, and was only introduced because the government promised to reduce the grants given to the local authority if they did not reorganise. So, half-heartedly, and without the land available for the large new comprehensives which had been built in central London, Croydon introduced a system based on the use of existing buildings and minimising school closures with consequent possible loss of votes from the disgruntled. Most, but not all, secondary schools became mixed. Former grammar schools became 14-18 schools: former secondary modern schools became 11-14 schools feeding the 14-18 schools, or remained 11-16 schools. The three Christian grammar schools remained 11-18 schools. This structural nightmare was compounded by the fact that teaching posts in the new comprehensives were not to be readvertised; by and large teachers would remain where they were, with such additions to staff as were required for those schools which were

becoming mixed. A still further complication was that the reorganisation coincided with RoSLA – the raising of the school leaving age – to the end of the year in which a pupil turned 16. This meant that less able pupils who had expected to leave before the examination period now had to stay on at school, and in many cases join a new school for the last two years of their compulsory schooling.

In the school in which I worked, the head master gave existing parents a promise that boys (it was a boys' grammar school and became a 14-18 mixed comprehensive school) would not have to mix with the new intake at 14+. Some of the teachers wished he could have given them the same assurance. Most of them had never taught less able pupils, pupils with special needs, or girls. Corporal punishment operated until girls arrived, when it fell quite quickly into desuetude without being formally abolished. This was hard on those who used this as a disciplinary tool and male senior managers could give no guidance to them.

Effectively, then, there was a grammar stream with three classes of boys, and a non-grammar stream consisting of six classes of mixed pupils. The latter, being mixed, were addressed by their first names; the former were addressed by their surnames only. In the first year I was there, the last of the grammar school, there were three women on the staff; the next year we added a woman PE teacher and a woman teacher of Home Economics. Over the years, of course, this balance was largely redressed, but it took a long time before there were any women in senior positions on the teaching staff, which was hardly a good role model for the girls in the school. In one respect, the headmaster was unable to keep his word to the parents: the thirty or so girls who entered the new school at the age of 14 were either so intimidated that they spent all their time when they were not in the classroom in the girls' toilets, or they abandoned their boy friends in their own year and from their old school and ran through the grammar school ranks like a rash.

Even so, and especially in conservative-minded Croydon, the comprehensive system soon showed some good results. In particular, pupils who had been at the bottom of the heap in grammar schools, and had frequently responded to teacher expectation by gaining few if any O Levels, now found themselves near the top of the heap and their results were correspondingly better. After the headmaster who had promised apartheid had retired, it became easier, as predicted, to move pupils whose development had been early but had not been sustained into 'lower' ability groups, and to transfer late developers into 'top' ability

groups. The language of differentiation remained, however, and it was hard if you had to move from a school in which you were in the bottom group of six to one in which you were in the bottom group of eight or nine. The curriculum remained largely academic even after the introduction of CSE or the Certificate of Secondary Education in the 1970s. But the major problem with this, as with the comprehensive system as a whole, was that it failed entirely to generate any social change. Both parents and employers saw the CSE as inferior to the O Levels they already knew, although a CSE grade 1, which was equivalent to an O Level C or above, was in fact harder to attain and often reflected more real learning than the memory-based O Level. A good example of this was French; O Level pupils could often write the language but had little idea of how to speak it, whereas CSE French was predicated on the desirability of being able to converse in French.

Other improvements went unacknowledged except by those who benefited from them. When I joined the grammar school careers education was displayed on the board outside the careers master's workshop, for he was really the metalwork teacher. Once pupils joined the school who were not to go on to college or university, but who would go straight to work, it became necessary to take careers advice far more seriously. We appointed a careers teacher who would arrange talks and who had a whole office for displaying materials about different careers. Later still, of course, we were to have computers with direct access to programmes about the different things young people could do with their lives. It became common for all pupils to have some form of work experience, and even when this was not particularly good it was still an improvement. All pupils had some form of sex education too, even though the film showing the birth of a baby was greeted on one occasion with a groan of 'Oh, not again!' It transpired that this film had been shown as part of biology, social studies and health education, and the pupils simply did not want to see it again. Sadly many teachers found it easier to deal with what came out than with what had had to go in first.

Once we had a school population which included the whole ability range we had to draw back from the view that teachers provided the square holes into which the round-pegged pupil had to fit. We accommodated young people with all sorts of special needs, and those staff who could not accept this left for independent pastures. One colleague was observed stepping over two boys who were fighting in the corridor, saying as he did so, 'I am a teacher, not a social worker'. He

left shortly after for a boys' school so civilised that it had a bar in the Staff Common Room. We only had a staff room and it certainly didn't have a bar. We also learned to liaise with social services and the borough's special needs team, and to use outside expertise to help us with pupils for whom English was not their first language. Grammar school teachers were sometimes accused of living in ivory towers; now we were well and truly in the midst of real life.

Two girls come to mind from the early days of the comprehensive school. One, from a poor home, had a father who was very ill with diabetes and who had had both legs amputated. One day she came to school and rang her mother as she had been worried about her father when she left home. Her mother told her that her father had just died but added that there was no point in her coming home. I shall never forget the cry which brought me from my room to see what was wrong; and she was the only pupil to whom I ever offered a cigarette. The other girl came to school one day and told me that she was worried as her mother had disappeared and she was sure that her mother's boyfriend had done something to her. Sure enough, her mother was found murdered and the boyfriend was accused of the murder. Formal education seemed irrelevant for both these girls at those times and it was true that a certain amount of social work or counselling was of far more value to them.

It was foolish to expect that introducing comprehensive schools would bring about social change. Education can never do more than reflect the prevailing moods and ethos of society at large. The new system of secondary schooling which was to bring about an egalitarian utopia was conceived and implemented by people who had themselves benefited from inequality and non-parity of esteem, many were deeply conservative. What most teachers had in common was that they had been successful in school, which did not necessarily help them to cope with those who weren't. Only a minority of stakeholders in education was convinced that change was desirable, except for those parents who had wanted their children to go to grammar schools to enhance their opportunities later in life and who hadn't been able to get them in. The habit of thinking in boxes, and of ranking people and systems, was deeply ingrained as could be seen by the 'top' sets in classes. The abolition of corporal punishment was bitterly opposed by those who felt that being beaten had done them no harm – and whatever one's reservations one could not, of course, disprove this. Yet I do remember one boy from the grammar school days who was beaten unfairly in the

fourth form, and who carried a chip on his shoulder about this into adult life. He may have been atypically sensitive but in those days we had no such thing as horses for courses, and the prevailing theory was that, if a boy was beaten for what he had not done, it would make up for the times when he had not been caught. A robust view which did many boys no harm at all, but oh, the wastage along the way!

What happened, in effect, was that the comprehensive schools which were most effective were situated in areas in which the parents were mostly middle class but probably not affluent enough to be able to afford private education. They were involved in their children's education, and subscribed to the teachers' values and beliefs, which meant that there was a uniformity of approach to the children which provided them with stability. Schools which were judged to be effective had uniforms and pupils who got good examination results, and they became popular even with parents whose children were unlikely to get really good results because they were not academic. It was supposed, I think, that the good education would rub off on them, and up to a point they were right. We once had a father with twin sons who was unwilling to accept that they would be better off in CSE classes because he told us they were to be doctors. He was a doctor as was his father before him, and he told us that it had taken thirteen tries before he finally qualified. We noted this in order to avoid his services and duly put the boys into CSE classes. Needless to say they did not become doctors though they did achieve worthwhile white collar careers.

Throughout the post-war years society has continued to believe that it is better to have a job in an office than to take on a manual trade, even if the latter involved a long apprenticeship and a high level of expertise. Only recently there was such a shortage of plumbers in the UK that they were earning very high salaries; in this materialistic age this made plumbing at least an attractive career, and their numbers have now increased. But a great many middle class parents still prefer their children to enter the professions even if they earn a great deal less than a plumber. Vocational education was and still is something you do if you cannot hope to go to university. Employers encourage the acquisition of academic qualifications by asking for them even though they do not qualify young people for the jobs on offer, and then grumble because school leavers do not have the skills they require. The partnership between schools and businesses, in which businesses ask schools to provide them with employees with certain skills, and the schools provide courses which incorporated these skills, is still a long way off. In recent

years the link has improved but the relationship between business and education is still an uneasy one, and is not seen by either side as a real partnership.

One of the reasons why the comprehensive schools were widely believed to have failed was because politicians and employers did not compare like with like. Before the comprehensive schools came into being, the least able pupils left school early. The most able of the early leavers entered into apprenticeships while the least able got unskilled manual jobs or were unemployed. Once the comprehensive schools were established the stay on rate, even after 16, rose sharply. The least able, who had disappeared early, now stayed on and sat the new CSE exams. They were compared with the top classes of the old secondary modern schools. It was alleged that literacy rates were falling rather than increasing, but little evidence was given for this. Once the General Certificate of Secondary Education [GCSE] arrived on the scene to supersede the divisive CSE and O Levels, groups of parents and businessmen occasionally sat the GCSE papers they had denounced as 'dumbing down' the academic approach. They often did as badly as the pupils who sat O Levels to see if they could cope with them. The new curricula taught children to think, though sometimes at the expense of the rote learning which is necessary if you want everyone to share a common body of knowledge. It is certainly true that in my school parents with degrees commented, especially about science and maths, that their children were doing work at Advanced Level which they, the parents, had not met until they were at university.

When I started teaching I was able to teach in the ways in which I had been taught myself, and things went on in that vein for some time. It was not possible therefore to blame all the ills of society on education. When the comprehensive schools were introduced the changes that took place enabled the critics to lay any faults of young people at the door of the school system; and for those who had embarked on the experiment with high hopes there was sometimes disillusionment as the nature of the school system failed to change society for the better. Education was politicised for better or worse, and was to remain so. Tony Blair's 'Education, Education, Education' rang like a knell in the ears of those who had suffered from successive Secretaries of State and the different bees in their bonnets. There is nothing intrinsically wrong with the national debate on education which Jim Callaghan called for in the mid 1970s, and I am not in favour of teachers or doctors or lawyers setting themselves up as acolytes at some esoteric altar; but the fact is that since

that time the national debate, which has continued, has shown little respect for those who work with young people in the schools and colleges. Indeed the public seems to think that we cannot be objective about anything if it is our area of expertise. Sadly this has led to a defensiveness on the part of some teachers which has only perpetuated this opinion. When I was an educational manager I became used to those who welcomed any change with predictions of doom, yet what I observed over the years was that the best teachers could pervert any misguided governmental initiative to get some educational value out of it, and that all teachers feel a great sense of responsibility towards the children who pass through their hands only once.

So more and more children stayed on to take their examinations, and more and more of them moved into the sixth form where they could start an A Level course or retake their O Levels or CSEs until they qualified for the higher level studies. The arrival of the National Curriculum did not impact much on our school since we took pupils in at 14, when they were beginning their public examination courses. The abolition of O Level and CSE in favour of GCSE did affect us. Once again much that had been good about the CSE syllabuses, which had been developed by school teachers and not, as the O Levels and before them the School Certificate had been, by the universities, was abandoned for new ideas espoused by those who were not teachers. (This is an extreme view, I know, as there were many teachers' consultative panels, but those I knew who sat on them spent a lot of time complaining that they were not listened to.)

Partly this increased staying on rate was attributable to the success of the inclusive comprehensives, but partly also to the beginnings of the technological revolution and the corresponding reduction in jobs which demanded unskilled manual labour. Our school educated those who entered at 14 from one local 11-14 school, but also took into the sixth form at 16 pupils from local 11-16 schools – and, increasingly, pupils from independent schools with sixth forms. Most of these were able but difficult square pegs, refugees from schools which were still able to insist that their pupils become round if they were not born that way. The most intelligent boy I ever met came to us from Dulwich College, a very highly selective public day school in south London. He claimed that he had developed a conscience and could no longer benefit from a privileged education denied to those who were not rich or who had not been given scholarships. I do not hesitate to say that this was rubbish, as he was the most self-centred boy I had ever met. He had made his way

so far by insisting that he was removed from his year group because he was bored, and by succeeding despite his teachers' predictions to the contrary. His teachers proved to be too weak to stand up to him, so he went on his way despising them. We too, let him have his head, with the result that he won an exhibition to University College Oxford at the age of 16. Sadly, however, we didn't have him long enough to tackle his glaring social inadequacies, and he was sent down at the end of the first year at Oxford for taking and peddling drugs.

And so we entered the Thatcher years. In 1979 the Conservatives formed an administration under Margaret Thatcher which was to last until her downfall in 1990. Her government introduced a radical programme of privatisation and deregulation which was combined with the introduction of market mechanisms into both the education and health services. The deregulation brought about the Grant Maintained [GM] schools, which were no longer answerable to local government although they were publicly funded; indeed, it seemed to us as if they were not answerable to anyone, so deregulated were they. This form of deregulation involved, oddly enough, since this was in direct contravention of the policy of the conservatives in opposition, a far greater grasp of power at the centre, and far less delegation of power to local areas through the democratic system of local government. GM schools could take decisions which maintained schools could not – the one which was to influence us was the decision of a local GM school to open a sixth form after it had been turned down twice – and also received more money for doing so. As might have been expected, neither the existing grammar schools nor the independent schools were reduced in number, and there was, if anything, an increase in the number of grammar schools during the prime ministerial period of one of their most famous alumni.

The government also introduced the Local Management of schools as another tactic to reduce the powers of local government. Schools were increasingly to manage their own budgets and local authorities were to offer services which schools, especially the large secondary schools, could reject if they chose to look elsewhere. Naturally enough there was to be no more money for them to manage this increased financial responsibility as central government thought local authorities so profligate that the savings would naturally come about when schools were free of them. It didn't seem like that to us, however, when we finally joined the scheme. Along with this new freedom came a new mood of blaming schools for all that went wrong with young people: it

was said increasingly that more and more pupils were illiterate and innumerate than had been the case in the past, and that teachers were often incompetent and hard to get rid of. The National Curriculum was brought in mostly to ensure a higher standard of achievement in the primary schools most of which were no longer working towards the 11+ examination. Her Majesty's Inspectorate was also reduced in size and authority to make way for a new regulatory inspectorate, Ofsted.

Like all reforms, there was some truth in what was said to justify them. There had been some rogue local authorities in which the general standards of education had hit rock bottom while councillors debated important matters of political correctness, such as the renaming of manhole covers as personhole covers. Similarly, while there were primary schools which were models of educational achievement, some of them in deeply deprived areas, there were others from which the pupils emerged lamentably under-performing and ill-equipped for lessons in the secondary sector. I remember when I started teaching English in a grammar school, asking a first year class what experience they had had of poetry in their primary schools. Not much was the general view: one girl said poignantly, 'We used to have it but she left'. That would not happen any more. They would all have it or none of them would have it. There were bad teachers in some schools, but there were excellent and often eccentric teachers in others, who were remembered with affection by their pupils many years after they had left.

In my school we had a Head of Music who had spent some time composing film scores, and of whom the headmaster was extremely wary; he played the organ at assembly and used to improvise his voluntaries on the theme of advertisements of the day, or play his own version of 'Oh I do like to be beside the seaside' as the end of the summer term approached. He maintained his orchestra by selecting the two tallest boys in the first year and telling them that they were to learn the double bass, on the grounds that enough of them would stay the course. Fortunately for him he left before the major changes of this period came about, for he would not have been able to conform to them. He went back into the film world, and I remember his visiting the school when all the pupils who had known him had left. He came into my office and told the boy I was trying to help with his reading that he was to have a reward and go early; and many young people looked on amazed as, clad as he was in a fur coat which made him look a bit like Orson Welles, he encountered the Head of Sixth Form in the corridor and embraced him warmly.

We were not much affected by many of the changes of the 1980s as we were protected from the major shocks of the National Curriculum by only having pupils of examinable age. We did not complete our reorganisation for several years as the grammar school boys were gradually replaced by comprehensive boys and girls, and the numbers in the sixth form grew enormously. Although budgets were tight in the 1980s, we were fortunate in expanding each year until we were very full. Our reputation was good when we first reorganised, and so the school became sought after and the results improved. We did change the curriculum during this period: classics disappeared and social studies was introduced; typing and business studies took their place next to the more academic economics. We were not allowed to engage a specialist for social studies until it was on the timetable so four of us spent a year teaching a subject in which we had no expertise to the ex-secondary modern pupils of whom we had had no previous experience. Three of us were senior members of staff and one was a newly qualified teacher who was, I think, a geography specialist, but who never again taught geography.

We learned a great deal in that year about lower ability pupils, and the different tactics we had to employ to attract their interest. I still remember the sex education topic which I tackled with a group of 14 year olds. We first established that in the 11-14 school - as in our grammar school previously - boys had received little in the way of formal sex education. (It was at that time that I attended a conference on Sex Education and was struck by one speaker who reminded us that all children receive sex education even if it is only from their peers in the playground). So we started at square one. One lad said he didn't understand how sex worked. I suggested he thought of it as a jigsaw puzzle as he studied the diagrams and that seemed to work. Then he asked if I thought he was sexually mature. I said that on the evidence available to me I thought perhaps not yet; he asked, with an unusual intelligence, whether that meant that he could have sex with a girl without getting her pregnant. Before I could tackle this difficult question a voice from the other side of the room (the girls' side) said firmly 'Choice would be a fine thing, Raymond Judd', and the room collapsed in laughter. This became a saying in my family for many years to express the deeply improbable. It was the same boy who concluded the session with two questions: 'Is it nice?' and 'How long does it last?' I felt on safe ground with the first but was less sure what to say on the second, suggesting that he would know when the time came.

Looking back, I think that this period was one of education for the teachers who were meeting new children and often becoming aware of new subjects and new ways of teaching. Some of course found this all too challenging, and some welcomed the changes. We certainly were not educating merely, or mostly, middle class white children any more. But it also became clear that more would have to be done if we wished to challenge the historic stereotyping of class and race. The higher groups were still mainly white and middle class, and the upper sets for English and the humanities and languages tended to have more girls than boys, while few girls chose physics and chemistry as options. The West Indian children clustered in the lower groups and many of them had few expectations: not untypical was the black child of very low attainment who said: 'Why shouldn't I enjoy myself? I'm black and thick and I shan't get a job even if I work hard'. The tragedy was that he was almost certainly right. The advent of information technology seems to have changed things somewhat; Afro-Caribbean students have confidence in their ability to master this technology and are able to succeed. The shift in emphasis from academic study to skills mastery has helped in changing methods of teaching and learning, and also in preparing students for the world of work, where what you can do is often more important than what you know.

We started our first structural reorganisation in 1971, and it was not completed until 1978. By that time the local authority was trying to decide what it would do in the face of a falling birthrate, and by 1980 had settled on a further reorganisation of secondary schools. This time they would avoid the difficulties of having 11-14 and 14-18 schools side by side with 11-16 schools, and have a uniform system throughout the borough (except, of course, for the three church schools which would continue to take pupils until the age of 18!) There would be two sixth form colleges with an age range of 16-18, an existing further education college which took students of all ages from 16 onwards, and the secondary schools which would take pupils up to the age of 16. This time there would be no security of tenure in their original schools for the teachers; the number of 14-18 schools would be drastically reduced, and the 11-14 schools would badly need those with teaching experience of the 14-16 pupils. In any case, some teachers in the 14-18 schools were unwilling to continue to teach only the sixth formers, and wanted to move to the younger age group.

And so another transition period started, in our case with the loss of first a fourth form (14 year olds), and then a fifth form, and a

corresponding expansion of the sixth form. We were chosen to become a sixth form college as we already had the largest sixth form in the borough; the year before we finally became a college we amalgamated with a local school which had already lost most of its pupils but had retained some 250 sixth formers studying a new vocational course. We inherited the course, along with the teachers and the school buildings. It had been taken for granted that the new college would be established on the site of the school it was to replace, but this was not to be. The land on the old site was limited in size and had a high value for housing development, while the land on which the closing school was built was less valuable, more extensive and had an educational covenant on it. So that site was chosen for rebuilding, to be paid for by the sale of the original site. The school, and later the college, operated on both sites until there was a public outcry about the building disruption. The many temporary buildings on the old site meant that the students came together there before moving to the new site in January 1992

Central government impinged on these local changes as we progressed, though even without these the school, then the college, had not remained the same for two years together since I had joined the staff in the anticipation of the female incursion in 1970. A major change in curriculum acknowledged that skills training was as important in the world of work as academic achievement, and vocational education was introduced into the sixth form curriculum. This, it was suggested, should be given parity of esteem with the academic curriculum; but the publicity surrounding the new methods of teaching and learning did not achieve the government's intention. We were reminded then and later on of the quotation attributed to a secretary of King Charles 1: 'There goes more to it than bidding it be done'. Those who were likely to achieve academically went on choosing the traditional subjects, and those who were not chose the new vocational themes. This was compounded by the lack of enthusiasm shown by the universities for the latter as qualifications for degree entry. The renaming of colleges of advanced technology as universities likewise led to claims that these were not and never would be 'proper' universities. To some extent this is still the case; but the differences are gradually being eroded as numbers of university entrants increase to meet government targets.

We became a college in 1989. In January 1990 I became Principal, and in March 1990 we came under the Local Management of Schools [LMS] scheme and took direct control of part of our finances. I knew nothing about LMS when I was appointed. If the LEA and Board of

Governors interviewers had known enough to question me on it they would have discovered my ignorance. Fortunately for me they knew as little as I did and I was appointed. We managed to keep within our spending limits but were careful to spend all the money we had been allocated in case the authority decided we had too much money and sought ways of curtailing our budget. Once more we were helped by an expansion in numbers as our reputation was maintained in the area.

Fortunately, too, the regulations stating that an establishment of our size had to have two deputies were relaxed in 1991, just as one of them left to take up a headship. In the teeth of much teacher opposition, but with the support of the governors, I appointed a deputy (known as a Vice-Principal by this time) with no teaching experience but a long career in local educational finance to be our Bursar. This was just as well, for the most radical change in our changing circumstances came about in 1993 (though of course we had known about it for two or three years). The new Labour administration took over and implemented a radical alteration in the status of further education establishments throughout England and Wales. They were, in another bitter blow to local government, to be removed lock stock and barrel from Local Education Authority [LEA] ownership. The buildings and land were to be transferred to the colleges, and they were to be funded through a new qango, the Further Education Funding Council [FEFC]. The colleges were to become corporate bodies with most of their governors drawn from the business world. Principals of many of the larger colleges soon started calling themselves chief executives and planning how to obtain as much funding as possible from the local authorities, while some local authorities started counter-plots against the colleges.

There were at that time some 109 sixth form colleges in England and Wales, and they were administered under secondary regulations for staffing and funding; the other further education colleges were 'deemed' tertiary. It is now clear that no actual decision was taken to include sixth form colleges in the plans for incorporation; they were simply forgotten until it was too late to extract them. So, in the not unfamiliar tradition of cock-up, we were incorporated and became independent of our local authority in April 1993, just about a year after moving into new purpose-built and refurbished buildings which had cost the authority £8m to provide. We moved into the new buildings with 850 students; by 1996 we had 1350 full-time students, and were providing adult education on site after hours for another 200 part-time students.

Information Technology courses were also offered to parents at a local primary school and taken up with some enthusiasm.

Incorporation sounded to some of those who were not involved in it like another name for freedom, but it was not. The FEFC had to justify its existence and get the largest budget it could from the government by meeting government targets for expansion as well as by meeting stringent tests of value for money. Thus my college expanded dramatically, at the same time suffering an annual 3 per cent cut in budget for the first three years. Funding was based on students per course, and courses were differentially funded according to whether they were politically in favour or not, as well as according to notional differential costs between them. Colleges trawled through the list of courses for those which could be taught for the least time and attract the greatest funding, and we rapidly learned to live with conflicting objectives. We were to attract and educate the students who had dropped out of formal education or who had done really badly at school, but appropriate courses for such students should have been cost-intensive, and we were told that to have teaching groups with fewer than ten students was not cost-effective. Sometimes just keeping students in college was a major achievement for us and for them, yet we were found wanting in inspections if our success rate in qualifications was not high.

This was a real issue with the new vocational qualifications. We found work experience placements for all our students on these courses, and sometimes they were so successful that the employers offered them jobs on the spot. We had to try to convince the employers that students who seemed very good to them would be even better if they were allowed to complete their courses before starting work. Maybe this was true, but we did it mainly because of the way we would be judged if they left without gaining the qualification. In another way, however, our college was really successful. From the first we believed that there should be different ways of learning suited to different kinds of learner, rather than courses for the bright and other inferior course for the less bright. We worked very hard at convincing parents, students, higher education institutions and employers that they should judge young people by what they knew and knew how to do rather than by the courses they had followed. We succeeded with a number of local employers, who stopped insisting on giving jobs to Advanced Level academic students rather than to those on an advanced vocational course. Students applying for the college looked at the different ways of

learning demanded by the different kinds of course; and soon the universities which had taken on our vocational students were praising them for being able to take responsibility for their own learning, which was one of the core skills they had to acquire. Once these facts were known, the vocational option became meaningful and assisted us in convincing students that they should choose the course which seemed to fit their learning style best and which would bring them their greatest chance of success.

This parity of esteem, which was absent in all establishments which failed to offer a real choice to students, led to an increased take up by students who had been less successful previously. Those who entered the college for a level 1 course – below GCSE – had learning difficulties and often a chequered pattern of attendance at their schools. We were able to gain employment for those who lasted the year of the course, but a growing number elected to return for a level 2 course which was the equivalent of GCSE; of those a growing number took the Advanced Course, and a very small number went on to university. Thus we were proud of achieving the government's aim and making a difference to many students by offering them a second chance. Alas, we were in a minority. In due course the natural tendency of government asserted itself and the unique nature of the vocational courses, the concentration on skills rather than book learning, was eroded in favour of a more traditional method of assessment. Once more those students who could least manage that approach were least able to cope.

In my view and in my experience, this reflects what has gone wrong with educational development throughout my working life. If an innovation does not achieve its objective immediately, especially compared with a system which is tried and tested, the tendency is to scrap it and start again, rather than to adjust, to talk to successful practitioners, and to make sure that everyone is administering the innovation as it was intended. If it's only a bit broke, the argument runs, buy a new one. The same applied to the new Further Education [FE] sector, designed to bring a uniform approach to a neglected area of formal education. Opportunities were lost again; not only were the independent schools untouched by this, but no school was required to lose its sixth form. Despite the fact that colleges like mine maintained a high reputation for advanced level results and university entry, side by side with the offer of a second chance to the very vulnerable young people whom the Labour administration was certainly dedicated to helping, they were squeezed from the first by adverse funding

mechanisms and by the desire of middle class parents to keep their children in the 'safe' environment of a sixth form. Many such parents preferred to enrol their children at the age of 11 in a school with a sixth form regardless of what the school could offer at 16, and the ability of their children. The fact was that our size enabled us to offer truly comprehensive courses, with progression for all students leading to a career choice which was at least partly what they were looking for. Here at last, was the true comprehensive ideal.

And what has happened since I retired? In the name of freedom of choice (which was a lie since Adam was a lad) and democracy – a term which one could debate endlessly – schools are now allowed to expand as they wish, and to open sixth forms because parents want them to. The sixth form colleges, which are by nature smaller than the traditional FE colleges, are being squeezed on both sides, and in many areas, and I think mine may be one of them. They are seriously in danger of becoming working class ghettos or of going out of business entirely. It is a tragedy which I do not like to dwell on. For the fact is that the colleges were not broken and they didn't need fixing. All that was needed was that the goalposts on the level playing field shouldn't keep disappearing over the horizon.

Can education change society? Margaret Thatcher said of her regime: 'Economics are the method; the object is to change the soul'. I think government can change society, and Thatcher's children, as they came to be known, were/are totally different from my generation. They were brought up to believe that all success can be measured, and that as there is no such thing as society (Thatcher again) they owe nothing to anyone except themselves and their immediate family. If their family or their nation is challenged, their instinct is to lash out by going to war and/or litigation. Professionals are not to be trusted as they have their own row to hoe, and cannot be dispassionate. It's a sad world we have inherited, and I am not sure that it is any better than the woolly liberalism of the 1960s, or the post-war hopes of the 1950s in which I was educated.

It is unfair to ask education to do anything as big as changing society, and to some extent it can do no more than to reflect the society of the day, since its stakeholders are all living in their own day and no other. And yet it can change some things. At my college our belief in the comprehensive ideal, that students of different abilities as well as social classes and colours and creeds can live together and learn in the same establishment, did work for a time. My hope is that some of our alumni left us and went on to adult life with dreams realised and ideals

maintained, and were able to pass this on to others. I know that this happened in some cases: one will illustrate my perennial hope that good may come out of things yet. Matthew came to us at 16 with a poor academic background. He enrolled in a Health and Social Care course at level 2, a level equivalent to that which he had reached when he left school. Successful in this, he progressed to level 3, and thence to read Sociology at university. Contrary to his original expectations he found that he was able to gain a good degree, so he went on to do a Master's degree before going back to the estate he came from as a social worker. Later still he studied for the ministry and was ordained. Matthew remembers the college for giving him chances and for believing in him. Now he is trying in his own sphere to do the same for others. Perhaps the message to be gleaned from Matthew's story is that whatever you try to do, you cannot keep a good species down.