Some current problems in English education

Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER)
Some Current Problems in English Education

December, 1947.
1. SOME CURRENT PROBLEMS IN ENGLISH EDUCATION

INTRODUCTION

This bulletin contains an outline of the discussion of two topics which have been warmly debated in recent issues of English educational journals. The first is the problem of the most suitable age for transferring children from primary to secondary schools; the second is the question as to which of the three main forms of secondary school organisation (viz. tripartite, multilateral or comprehensive[1]) is most desirable on social, educational and administrative grounds.

In Australia, although a variety of procedures is found in practice, neither problem has, as yet, been the subject of any comparable discussion. However, it is no less important that local solutions should be the best possible ones for Australian conditions.

In all six States easy transfer from primary to secondary school is generally limited to the cities and country towns. In four States it takes place at the average age of 12, in one at 11, and in one at 13. In the last of these, Queensland, transfer does not take place at all for those pupils who, having completed their seventh grade in the Primary School, and having reached the required minimum age or standard for leaving school, do not wish to continue their studies in a secondary school. In the other States, the majority of pupils transfer at the ages given above to some form of secondary education (except in the isolated country districts where distance prevents attendance at a secondary school and pupils either continue in their rural primary school until they reach the leaving age, or enrol for tuition in secondary subjects with the Correspondence School in their State.)

On the question of organisation at the secondary level Australia, as a whole, has not given evidence of any very clear-cut policy. The common practice is to provide separate academic and technical schools in the capital cities and large country towns with certain intermediate types of school which may have a bias in one direction and may act primarily as 'feeders' to schools giving more advanced courses. Except in Tasmania the "modern school" has not emerged very explicitly. In many of the smaller country centres, however, we find dual or multi-purpose schools. It is not easy to say whether these are more of the multilateral or of the comprehensive type. Methods of selection for secondary schools vary from State to State or may even vary within a given State.

It is hoped that the following outline of the present discussions in England, which has been compiled by a member of the A.C.E.R. staff, will be of interest to those who have not had available the time or the necessary periodical literature, to follow the discussions.

(1) Tripartite - the traditional system with separate grammar, technical and modern schools.

Multilateral - a school which provides all three types of curriculum in the one institution but keeps the 'sides' separate.

Comprehensive - similar to multilateral but without distinct organisation into three sides.
A. The Age of Transfer to Secondary School

One of the problems which the general acceptance of the Hadow Report seemed to have been settled, but which has come to the fore again during the past five years, is the question of the most suitable age for transferring children from primary to secondary school. In recent years a group of educational administrators and psychologists, led by Sir Cyril Burt, have repeatedly doubted whether the special abilities, aptitudes and interests which should determine the allocation of children to grammar, technical or modern schools are measurable with sufficient exactitude at the age of 11 plus, or whether the transfer should be deferred until a year or two later. A significant feature of discussions during 1947 has been the increasing attention devoted to the problem in the public utterances of educational administrators, the increasing amount of space devoted to it in the educational, as distinct from the psychological, journals, and the growing doubt of the desirability of selection at 11 plus.

Before 1926 about 90 per cent of English children had received all their formal education (i.e., until they left at 13 or 14 years) in the elementary schools; a small minority were transferred to secondary or central schools at the age of 11 plus. In its recommendation that primary education should be regarded as ending at about the age of 11 plus, the Hadow Report reflected the growing opinion that, before leaving school, the majority of pupils should receive a broader type of education; by the provision of more varied courses it was hoped that each child would receive the kind of education best suited to cultivate his powers. The Committee referred to the views of teachers, psychologists and administrators but, from the statements quoted, including that of Sir Percy Nunn, it seems that the opinions were based on reasons of general policy or administrative convenience (1) rather than on psychological principles.

When the English system of secondary education was examined by the Spens Committee twelve years later it seems to have been generally accepted (2) that secondary education should commence at the age of 11 plus. However, in the discussion of "The mental development of children between the ages of 11 plus and 16 plus", a chapter based on a memorandum by Professor Burt, there is the warning that intellectual growth is not spasmodic, that mental development is a continuous process and that the apparent emergence of special aptitudes and interests which become noticeable after the age of 11 may probably be attributed more to temporary and environmental causes than to any spontaneous ripening of fresh capacities." (P.123)

The publication of the Norwood Report, Curriculum and

(1) The representative of the Association of Headmistresses stated that the age of 11 plus was chosen as "the age at which the free place scholar will pass into the secondary school". This view is supported by an article by Sir Percy Nunn (Yearbook of Education, 1932, p.158) who states: "Though psychological considerations entered little into the question in the first instance, psychology confirms the soundness of a decision reached mainly upon other grounds."

(2) The Hadow recommendations had not been accepted by the private schools and the Public Schools continued to receive their pupils at the age of 13 plus. In Scotland the average age of transfer was about 12½ years.
Examinations in Secondary Schools (1943) seems to have precipitated the current discussions. The Report states:

"The evidence placed before us . . . convinces us that special interests and abilities do in fact often reveal themselves clearly by the age of 10 plus or 11 plus." (P.16)

However, after this emphatic declaration the Report continues:

"But this is not true of all children; in many instances the cast of mind, not sufficiently manifested by 11, gradually reveals itself in the next two years or possibly later."

So that mistakes may be rectified it is recommended that, though transferring a secondary education at 11, for the next two years pupils should belong to a "lower school" in either a grammar, technical or modern school, in each case the curricula would contain a large content but, for example, the secondary school child would begin to study a foreign language.

At the end of two years he would be promoted to a higher form in the same school or could be transferred elsewhere if his school record and interests made it seem desirable.

In a consideration of the psychological implications of the Norwood Report, Professor Burt posed the question which has since been raised by educationists.

"Why is it to be assumed," he asked, "that adolescence commences at eleven rather than at twelve (the age envisaged by the Board’s Regulations of 1904 and 1935) or at thirteen (the age most preparatory and public schools fix for the transition) or even later still." (3)

He found that the transfer at 11 plus seemed to be based on two psychological reasons:

1. The sound reason that by the age of twelve or thirteen the differences in mental ages are so wide that any system of ability grouping would involve the imprudent steps of placing bright young children and older dullards side by side.

2. The discredited belief that mental growth increases in spurts, one of which occurs at twelve years.

To Professor Burt it seemed that the reasons for the early age of transfer were administrative rather than psychological and that it was favoured by the secondary school teachers who wished to have children for as long as possible to prepare them for the School Certificate.

A basic criticism was that the Norwood Committee seemed to have been guided by the belief that individual differences among children were less due to an innate all-round capacity entering into every form of mental work than to qualitatively different aptitudes possessed by different types of people. Professor Burt suggested that such a view had been disproved by modern analyses of mental measurement; before adolescence the influence of qualitative factors had proved so slight that their existence was very difficult to establish. At the age of twelve the general factor of intelligence was more than twice as important.

(3) "The Education of the Adolescent" British Journal of Educational Psychology, November, 1943.
as the special verbal or arithmetical factors and the manual factor
was of slight importance.

Professor Burt closed his criticism of the Norwood
proposals for the division of pupils at 11 plus in this way:-

"If we are to abandon a classification according to
general intelligence as our primary basis and choose
instead a classification according to group factors
or 'mental types' we shall be reversing the practical
implications of those well-established psychological
conclusions."

Although Professor Burt acted as a specialist adviser
on educational psychology to the British Government, his views
seem to have had little effect on the policy of the now Ministry
of Education. In Pamphlet No.1 "The Nation's Schools: Their
Plan and Purpose" issued by the Ministry in 1945 occurs this
statement (P.12).

"The general transfer from primary to secondary education
between the age of 11 and 12, now the almost universal
practice, is confirmed by the definition of junior and
senior pupil in Section 114 (1) of the Education Act,
1944."

Although The Nation's Schools was subsequently
attacked from many quarters it seems to have been a "coalition"
product for Mr. Ed. of the Labour Party admitted (Parl. Debates
Vol. 411, No.91, 11th Juno, 1945) that he shared, with Mr. Butler
the Conservative Minister, the responsibility for the views
expressed. However within the last two years, the Ministry has
ceased to advocate some of the recommendations given in the
pamphlet, and has acknowledged alternative proposals.

Some English psychologists, the leader of whom is Dr.
Alexander, the author of the Performance Scale and Secretary of the
Association of Education Committees, disagree with Professor
Burt's views. In the paper read before the North of England
Education Conference (Education, 10th January, 1947), Dr. Alexander
contended that it was possible to allocate children to grammar or
technical schools at the age of 11 plus. By this age it was
possible to determine whether the child had the necessary
techniques in reading and counting; group verbal tests were
sufficiently reliable and accurate to predict academic success
and the individual performance scale was an appropriate instrument
for determining technical aptitude. (5) The character and
personality factors, such as persistence and stability, which are of
greater importance cannot be measured objectively but would be
determined by ratings.

(4) "Junior Pupil" means a child who has not attained the age of
twelve years. "Senior Pupil" means a person who has attained
the age of twelve years but has not attained the age of
nineteen years (The Education Act, 1944 an annotated edition
by A.E. Ikon.)

(5) This view was expressed by J.D. Drew who had worked for many
years with Dr. Alexander. In an article in "Occupational
Psychology", Jan. 1947, he claims that,

"Selection of boys for technical education can be facilitated
at 11 plus by using the performance scale as a measure of
technical aptitude, in addition to tests of general and
verbal ability."

He supports his claims by the results of a factor analysis of
data obtained from the application of an extensive battery of
tests to boys aged 11-15 years in modern and technical schools.
In an article of the July issue of the same journal, Patrick
Slater has questioned the basis of the figures used and doubted
the conclusion reached.
During the discussion which followed, replies from Sir F. Clarke, Professor Fleming and Professor Godfrey Thompson were quoted in opposition to the views of Dr. Alexander.

Professor Thompson replied:

"Although I think some indication of special aptitudes can be discovered at 11, I am certain that the indicators at that age are so slight and elusive that no great reliance can be placed upon them."

During 1947 the English educational journals in their editorial paragraphs, articles and letters from correspondents have more frequently expressed the view that any final or scientific selection of pupils for the special branches of secondary education is impossible at the age of 11 years; but though some L.E.A. recognise that the present selection methods are provisional and that further experimentation with tests, record cards and interview techniques is necessary "too many education authorities appear complacent about their selection arrangements" (Journal of Education, March, 1947).

The most trenchant attack on the system of division at 11 plus made by an educationist was delivered in a speech to the members and officials of local authorities by Sir Fred Mander, retiring general secretary of the National Union of Teachers and now Chairman of the Bedfordshire Education Committee.

He stated:

"If I were to choose just one other example (of trying to enunciate philosophies to fit the facts) I would say that this process reached the height of absurdity in the Hadow Report. Turn your minds back to it. For some years before the Hadow Committee was brought into existence, certain forward-looking and enterprising local authorities in the country had started to divide their children at the age of 11, quite openly and frankly because it was administratively convenient to do so; and then certain enterprising head teachers and their staffs had done a good job of work, and had produced educational results in the senior schools that were quite pleasing.

The Committee surveyed the existing body of practice and adopted it as their own - the break at 11 and the organisation of a new secondary education in the senior schools - and then invented a beautiful philosophy to fit the facts, a philosophy of the marvellous uniqueness of the individual child, the unlimited differences between child and child, the theory that children differ much more in kind than they do in degree. One was led to expect that you would almost need one teacher to every child in order to get a unique education to suit the uniqueness of the child.

The theory was so beautiful, so overwhelming, that we were all swept off our feet at the time. I was myself, but later I woke up, because, having read the first part of that Report, which enunciated in flowing literary language this amazing philosophy of uniqueness and variety, I then turned to the second part, which dealt with curricula. But instead of finding, when the Committee came down to the job of linking the theory with school practice, that they were recommending a choice of many different kinds of courses for children, they recommended the same course for the lot up to the age of 13. It was a dreadful anti-climax.

I, for one, reject completely the theory that at the age
of an amazing uniqueness of a child, indicative of some
distinctive aptitude, interest or ability, suddenly
manifests itself so that it can be visible to the naked
eye or assessed by the tape-measure of those who crave
so much for measurement today, and made to form a basis
for the classification of children for secondary education.
I would like to see us review this position now. I am
not convinced that we are yet sure of the right age at
which to divide children for secondary education.

There is something rather menacing in the story that I
have told you - this story of the philosophic rationalisa-
tion of a situation - because, although there are doubts
in the minds of many as to whether the separation at 11 is
sound, as to whether we ought not to think of some other
basis, the general Hadwisch thesis is even now in most areas,
being carried over into the new Act, and as I see it,
in many an area, the Butler Act is being launched in a
sea of philosophic insincerity."

Although the picturesque phrases may, to some extent, be
discounted, it seems evident that the doubts of the psychologists
are now shared by some educational administrators; whether or
not this speech caused others to reason in a similar way, or whether
it was merely a more vivid expression of a widely held view, it has
been the forerunner of similar expressions of opposition to
transfer at 11 plus.

This change in view is reflected in several recent
Development Plans of the Education Authorities. In its issues of
22/29 August "Education" published a report of the Northumberlard
Education Committee on the approach of the Authority to the
problem of assessment of children at 11 plus for the purpose of
transfer to the most suitable type of secondary school. The
Report states:

"It is clearly impossible to forecast at the pre-adolescent
stage of 11-12 years the changes which will take place
during the next few years. It is clear also that the
testing programme carried out at the age of 11 plus can
only be limited as there is insufficient evidence to show
that special abilities and interests which may be of the
greatest importance in adolescent and adult life, have
developed sufficiently at this early age to be capable
of being measured with any validity."

In spite of these views it is apparently impossible to change the
existing practices for the present time, for the Report continues,

"The situation, however, remains that the stage when this
decision has to be made is between the ages of 11 and 12
years, and however easy is made the process of transfer
between schools at a later stage, it is obvious that it is
in the best interests of the child to be transferred to
the most appropriate school at the recognised stage of
transfer."

In other reports which recognise this problem a compromise is
found through the Norwood suggestion that the first two years of
all secondary courses should contain a common core of basic
subjects so that transfers could be made from one type of school
to another if special abilities were revealed. It seems that the
administrative difficulties have prevented the more radical proposal
of raising the age of transfer. However, though such a change
would involve difficulties at present the position will be more
complicated once the new schools have been built; if a change
is not made soon, it may be deferred for a generation.
B. THE ORGANISATION OF SECONDARY EDUCATION

In its report of secondary education the Norwood Committee envisaged three types of school, the grammar, the technical and the modern, a tripartite division which has been favoured by the Ministry of Education in its official reports. The functions of these schools are best described in Pamphlet 9 of the Ministry of Education, *The New Secondary Education*.

The Modern School will cater for the majority of children who learn most easily when dealing with concrete things and following a course rooted in their own day-to-day experience. At the age of 11 few of these children will have disclosed particular interests and aptitudes well enough marked for them to require any other course. The majority of such children will do best in a school which provides a good all round education in an atmosphere which enables them to develop freely along their own lines.

The Technical School will cater for those who at an early age have decided to make their careers in branches of industry or agriculture requiring a special kind of aptitude in science or mathematics. Others may need a course longer and more specialized than that provided in the modern school, with a particular emphasis on commercial subjects or art.

The Grammar School will cater for those whose ability and aptitude require the kind of course with the emphasis on books and ideas. Such students who are attracted by the abstract approach to learning will normally stay at school long enough to benefit by the sixth form work and a high proportion may be expected to go on to the university.

The Norwood Committee considered combinations of these types. The idea of a multilateral school combining three types of education was rejected, as it was held that the success of the technical school depended on its close association with local industry, a liaison which would be difficult to maintain unless the school were an independent unity. Limited approval was given to a combination of grammar and modern schools but it was held that larger schools of this nature prevented the personal contact between headmaster and each boy.

Although the Norwood tripartite division was criticized by those who feared that a 'class' system of education was being preserved, the accession to office of the Labour Government in 1945 did not alter the implicit approval of this division by the Ministry of Education; only after a number of L.E.A had declined to accept the Norwood recommendations did the Ministry in Circular 144 (June, 1947) recognise the other types of organisation.

This pamphlet succinctly defined terms which had been loosely used in controversy. In view of the general approval accorded to these definitions they are reproduced here.

**Bilateral School** means one which is intended to provide for any two of the main elements of secondary education, i.e. modern, technical or grammar, organised in clearly defined sides.

**Multilateral School** means one which is intended to cater for all secondary education of all the children in a given area and includes all three elements in clearly defined sides.

**Comprehensive School** means one which is intended to cater for all the secondary education of all children in a given area without an organisation into three sides.
The suggested advantages of the multilateral schools have been well summarized by W.T. Stevenson in the Journal of Education, November 1946. He suggests that they are:

(a) The child would not be 'labelled' at the age of 11 years and requirements for examinations at the end of the primary school stage would disappear.

(b) Special abilities at 13 and 14 years would be known and provided for.

(c) Transfers of pupils would be easy at any stage.

(d) Each block would have facilities for the highest achievements in its sphere.

(e) Each child, however poorly endowed, would mix at times with pupils of higher capacity. "Any social activities would be common to all.

(f) The staff would be large enough to cover all child interests and abilities.

(g) The work of the teachers would be more varied and interesting.

(h) Special education for all children would find its rightful place.

A survey of other statements indicates that the demand for multilateral and comprehensive schools seems to rest on social grounds and administrative expediency as much as on purely educational grounds. Though a system of scholarships opened the schools to all classes to a limited extent the existence of fees closed them to some section of the community but left them open to less able children of wealthier families. Many feared that the tripartite division would continue that system; the best alternative seemed to be a non-selective secondary school, which, while preserving a common core, curriculum for all, would, at appropriate stages, provide a variety of choices for those of widely differing abilities. This view has been expressed in a resolution (6) carried at a Labour Party Conference as early as 1942 and similar resolutions were agreed to in subsequent years.

Multilateral schools have been favoured on administrative grounds by those L.E.A. which have been faced with the need for extensive rebuilding programmes. Swansea (7) which has decided to build six large multilateral schools, gives as its main reason for doing so, the need to start from scratch, the desire to experiment and its ability to find the sites (50 acres for each school of 1,500 pupils). London, the prime advocate of large comprehensive high schools (8) advances the reason that from them, "will flow in time a healthy mutual regard and understanding between persons of different kinds of ability." (T.E.S. 10/5/47)

but it is equally possible that the demand for large new schools is, in part, due to the extensive bomb damage to London schools.

(6) "All schools for children over 11 to be brought under a common code of regulations for secondary schools, with common standards of accommodation, staffing etc. and for the Board to encourage as a general policy, the development of a new type of multilateral school which would provide a variety of courses suited to children of all normal types." (T.E.S. 1/2/47.)

(7) "The existing buildings of the four secondary grammar schools are such as to necessitate their replacement whatever form of organisation is adopted ... Secondly, there are no new secondary modern schools, while the junior technical school is housed in temporary buildings." (T.E.S. 16/1/47)

(8) The plan includes 67 comprehensive high schools, which when the school age is raised to 16 years, will house up to 2,000 pupils each.
In the published reports varying reasons (10) are adduced to support the tripartite system but usually these L.E.A. feel that their existing grammar schools are adequate; where there are secondary school buildings too good to be scrapped, yet unsuitable for multilateral schools or where there is not the room for the large sites required, the existing organisation has been retained.

During the controversy in the early months of this year, the Times Educational Supplement declared itself very plainly. The editor wrote, (15/2/47):

"what we have supported and continue to support is the long overdue rebellion against the emphasis, almost exclusive emphasis . . . . on intellectualism in the education of the young."

"We see no reason for thinking that the common secondary school inevitably leads to grave social, educational and cultural evils. We are convinced that it is merely a matter of organisation . . . . to secure that the scope and pace of education are adapted to the individual, that there is denial of opportunity to no one, nor any retardation of the intellectually ablest. Positively, we see real and substantial advantages ensuing from the common secondary school."

The charges and counter blasts which filled the columns of the journals in the early months of this year have now faded away; it seems to be realized that the opponents and advocates of the multilateral and comprehensive schools have few facts on which to base their arguments and that the next step will be to build schools of those varying types and to examine the results. The present position is that the shortage of buildings seems to have forced the L.E.A. to base their policies on non-educational grounds to a greater degree than they would probably admit. Most have realistically faced the present situation, and, in accordance with the English tradition of working on an empirical basis rather than to a rigid plan, in different parts of the same county, different systems of organisation will be used.

(10) The Nottinghamshire education committee's belief in the importance of the head teacher's influence led them to regard a total roll of 500-600 as a desirable minimum for any one school (T.E.S.5/7/47.) The decisive argument in Warwickshire has been apparently that it would be unwise to tamper with the grammar schools. This means that the multilateral experiment must be confined to areas where there is as yet no grammar school. (T.E.S. 12/4/47) In Devon, the largest single administrative unit in the country, the education committee believes that there is scope for schools of more than one type and has planned for one multilateral and several bilateral schools. (T.E.S. 24/5/47).
Bibliography

Those references marked x are cited in the text.

Times Educational Supplement (T.E.S.)

Most of the quoted references are to short reports; the following are longer statements.

4. 1. 47. The Grammar School: (L. Hollingworth)

10. 1. 47. Development Proposals: Wiltshire and Swansea

1. 2. 47. The Challenge to Grammar Schools: (E. James)

10. 5. 47. Developmental Plans: Secondary Education (A summary of proposals submitted to the Ministry)

13. 9. 47. Tripartitism's Weakness: (J. Hill)

The Journal of Education

November, 1946. The Multilateral School: (W. T. Stevenson, Chief Inspector of Schools, Manchester.)

Education

10. 1. 47. Methods of Selection for Different Types of Secondary Education: (W. P. Alexander)

7. 2. 47. Secondary and Technical education under the 1944 Act: (A. L. Binns, Chief Education Officer, Lancashire.)

14. 2. 47. The Northampton Development Plan.

7. 3. 47. The London Development Plan.

x8. 4. 47. Address by Sir F. Mander to the L.E.A.


12. 9. 47. Allocation of Children for Secondary Education: (L. Smith)

The British Journal of Educational Psychology

November, 1943, The Education of the Adolescent (C. Burt)

Occupational Psychology


October, 1947. Significance of Ability Differences at 11 plus.

(F.M. Earle)

Dr. Earle, principal of Kirkcaldy High School and formerly head of the N.I.P. Vocational Guidance Department, discusses the practical implications of his own investigations into the classification of secondary school pupils.

Ministry of Education

Circular 144 : Organisation of Secondary Education.

Pamphlet 1 : The Nation's Schools.

Pamphlet 9 : The New Secondary Education.