AS Level Sociology: Education: Comprehensivisation

COMPREHENSIVISATION

Introduction

From its inception in 1944, dissatisfaction with the Tripartite system grew. Discontent centred on the way in which the system tended to channel students into the different schools based on their social background rather than their ability - thus effectively reproducing the class system and limiting social mobility. This situation was seen as unacceptable for two main reasons:

* The system was, for some at least, morally wrong - limiting the life-chances of some members of society, simply because of the social background of their parents.
* It was an inefficient way of organising labour. If the primary “sorting principle” was social background and not ability, then talent was obviously being wasted.

Discontent over the tripartite system came to a head in the 1960s - spurring a grassroots revolution in the education system. The manifold problems of the tripartite system seemed to stem from its selective nature - and from the unequal quality and status of the three types of school. The solution therefore seemed simple; abolish selection, and educate all student in the same school - providing a “grammar school education for all”. The comprehensive school was consequently born.

Key Term: Egalitarianism

Underpinning the comprehensive movement was the notion that education could be used to engineer a free, fair and equal society - an ideal which is called egalitarianism

Comprehensives were organised so that, rather than selecting students on the basis of examination results, each was assigned a catchment area - a geographical region surrounding the school. All children living within this area, regardless of social class or ability, would then attend the local comprehensive. The motivation behind the reform was to realise equality of opportunity in its most literal form - every student would receive exactly the same opportunities throughout their educational careers, thus dispelling existing class biases.

Furthermore, it was hoped that by ensuring that children of different backgrounds mixed within school, social barriers would be broken down. Advocates of the comprehensive movement argued that, for instance, aspirations amongst the working-class would rise - with a university education not seen to be the sole preserve of the middle-classes.

In addition to these changes to the structure of the school system, the 1960s also saw important reforms of the qualification system. Prior to this period, only the most able students were able to sit some examinations, and leave alongside the existing GCE. These, slightly modified in 1965 with the introduction of the Certificate of Secondary Education (CSE), expanded, however, in the late 1960s. This provision expanded, however, in the late 1960s. It was an innovation that almost every student would aspire to middle-class jobs, and to build up useful social contacts and networks for the future.

The Growth of Comprehensives

As noted earlier, the initial move towards a comprehensive system began at the grassroots. From its very beginnings, some LEAs (including Anglesey and parts of London) refused to implement the Tripartite system; instead creating mixed-ability, mixed-background schools. Towards the end of the 1950s and during early 1960s, increasing numbers of LEAs rebelled, and followed this lead - dismantling their Grammar and Secondary Modern schools to create comprehensive systems.

The movement finally gained government backing when, in a White Paper circulated in 1965, the ruling Labour Party “strongly encouraged” LEAs to reorganise their school systems along comprehensive lines. Despite this initial encouragement, however, the progress towards a fully comprehensive system was punctuated in the years that followed by changes in the political party governing the country. In general:

* The Labour Party - with an underlying concern for social justice and equality - pushed for expansion of comprehensivisation, whilst
* The Conservative Party were more concerned with providing an “appropriate” education for all - recognising that everybody has different talents and abilities, and providing an education system which allows them to fully develop these aptitudes.

By 1979 - and after stop-start expansion - over 80% of secondary school pupils were educated in comprehensives. However, it is important to note that the Conservative governments which were in power during this expansion implemented policies which, for instance, resulted in a system which could never be truly comprehensive. In 1970, for instance, a circular was issued which gave permission for LEAs to allow selective Grammar schools to co-exist with their comprehensives.

Evaluating Comprehensivisation

✓ Comprehensivisation brought with it a number of important strengths. Most importantly, equality of opportunity was indubitably widened by the abolition of selection under comprehensivisation. In particular, the new system avoided the culturally-specific eleven-plus, and consequently did not inherently discriminate against the working class. Furthermore, it did not disadvantage late-bloomers, as any developing talents could be built-upon without the difficult process of changing between different schools.

✓ The introduction of the CSE was also ensured that almost every student had the opportunity to leave school with a qualification - a considerable improvement on the previous system.

✓ Finally, the attempt to break-down social barriers by enabling students of different backgrounds to mix in one school was also a laudable (if optimistic) aim - as it would encourage students to take on each other’s aspirations (for instance, working class students would aspire to middle-class jobs), and to build up useful social contacts and networks for the future.
However, there were also serious flaws to the system. Supporters of the tripartite system - for instance - argued that attempting to educate students of all abilities in one school helped nobody. Rather, the brightest students were not able to develop their full potential, whilst the less able were left struggling to keep up. Furthermore, comprehensives were typically very large. Consequently, they were extremely impersonal - and students could easily become alienated and disenchanted with education. Teachers, on the other hand, found it very difficult to get to know the students sufficiently well to cater for their individual needs.

One of the most damaging criticisms of the comprehensive movement was that it never really attained its main aims - and simply “recreated the tripartite system under one roof”. Within Comprehensives, teachers often struggled to cope with mixed ability classes. The result of this was that many such schools implemented setting and streaming, splitting students by ability. As tends to be the case in any measure whilst divides students by “ability”, this resulted in the working-class being overly represented in lower sets - taking the less prestigious CSE examinations and being filtered into working class jobs.

Furthermore, the notion that comprehensives would bring together people of different social backgrounds was somewhat idealistic - as catchment areas themselves were not mixed. Furthermore, the competition to get into the catchment of “good” comprehensives distorted the housing market in the surrounding areas; affectively pricing less affluent families out. This notion is known as “selection by mortgage”.

The weighting of social backgrounds within comprehensives had a knock-on effect on their reputations. Schools with predominately middle-class demographics were perceived to be the “best” schools - and they consequently attracted better teachers, and thus higher standards of teaching. Students within these more prestigious schools also developed a higher self-esteem and self-confidence which, in turn, was translated into better results.

Finally - and perhaps most damagingly - the comprehensive ideal was undermined by the continued existence of both private and grammar schools (which were allowed to coexist by the Conservatives). This situation allowed the brightest students to be “creamed” from the rest - ensuring that standards in comprehensives were kept artificially low. Effectively, this meant that comprehensives simply became large secondary modern schools with a different name.

Key Terms: Setting and Streaming
Setting is the term used when this students are grouped by ability in individual subjects, whilst streaming (or banding) occurs across the entire curriculum (e.g. setting by form).

Summary of the Nature and Effect of the Comprehensive Movement