

Educational social policy: part 3- The 1960s

The 1960s were an important period with regard to educational social policy for **three** reasons;

- (1) As we saw on the previous guide, the tripartite secondary education system introduced by the 1944 Education Act was considered **problematic**. This eventually led to **the Labour government of 1964-70 instructing local education authorities to replace grammar/secondary modern schools with a new type of secondary school known as the 'comprehensive school'**. **Selection at the age of 11 years was abolished**. Instead all children living in a particular area, known as a **'catchment'** area, and regardless of social class background, would **go to the same type of school**. The comprehensive system was based on the **social democratic ideal of 'equality of opportunity'** – regardless of both background and ability, all children would have access to **the same standards of education and qualifications**. This was seen as a truly **meritocratic system that would benefit all sections of society**.

On the plus side, comprehensive schools scored some successes. For example, they resulted in **more working-class pupils, especially females attaining qualifications such as A-levels and entering university**. There is some evidence too that **less bright pupils performed better than their peers in secondary moderns because of the greater range of courses and qualifications**.

- (a) **Feminist** analyses of comprehensive schools are generally positive. Liberal feminists, in particular, saw comprehensive schools as a good thing for female pupils because they worked hard to **reduce gender stereotyping**. Consequently **in the 1970s, we see females beginning to achieve better exam results than males for the first time**.

However the comprehensive system was not an unqualified success for a number of reasons;

- (b) Often comprehensive schools were so large, especially in inner city areas, that **they suffered high levels of truancy and indiscipline and poorer standards of teaching**.
- (c) Those schools whose catchment areas were mainly inner city areas and/or council estates found that they had **disproportionate numbers of working-class pupils whose parents found it difficult to educationally support them because of unemployment and poverty**.

- (d) **Comprehensive schools in the suburbs which attracted more middle-class children achieved better exam results than inner city comprehensives.** Middle-class parents tended to make this situation worse by buying houses in the catchment areas of these 'good' schools in order to ensure their children would go to these schools. However, this had the unfortunate consequence of increasing house prices in those areas. Working-class people were '**priced-out**' of similar opportunities because they could not afford these increased house prices. This process is sometimes called '**selection by mortgage**'.
- (e) Sociologists such as **David Hargreaves (1967)** and **Stephen Ball (1981)** observed that the comprehensive ideals of equality of opportunity and meritocracy were **undermined by an educational practice known as streaming by ability**. In some schools, it was known as '**banding**' or '**setting**'. **The allocation of children to bands or sets or streams often reflected social class divisions and inequalities in that middle-class pupils tended to disproportionately monopolise top ability groups whilst working-class or children from poorer families tended to dominate lower-ability groupings.** (This class division by ability was probably due to **the economic, social and cultural supports offered by middle-class parents** which were often missing, **through no fault of their own** in working-class families and households, **although interactionist sociologists see teacher bias as partly responsible too** – see later notes on the cause of social class differences in educational attainment). **Streaming, therefore, undermined the comprehensive ideal of educating all children in the same way under one roof.** The reality of many comprehensives is that middle-class and working-class children often received different quality education under the same roof. Some sociologists argued that **middle-class children in top streams were educated whilst those in bottom streams were socially controlled.**
- (f) Many local education authorities especially in Conservative rural areas **refused to abolish the tripartite system** or the 11 plus. Sometimes the comprehensive and tripartite systems operated alongside each other, and consequently the grammar schools '**creamed-off**' the more academic children in the neighbourhood.
- (2) Another important educational social policy which was introduced in the 1960s was **COMPENSATORY EDUCATION**. This set of policies aimed to tackle the educational inequalities caused by socio-economic disadvantages- for example, living in poverty-stricken areas. In the UK, compensatory education mainly took the form of '**Educational Priority Areas**' (EPAs)- areas which suffered extreme economic and social deprivation were identified by

the Labour government. These included inner city London areas such as Hackney, parts of Birmingham, Liverpool and West Yorkshire. **Schools in these areas were provided with extra funding, teachers and resources in an attempt to raise poor children's achievement and to encourage working-class parents to take more interest in their children's education.** EPAs (which were inspired by a sociological theory known as '**cultural deprivation theory**' – see later notes) aimed to **compensate for poverty** but they were eventually abandoned when sociologists such as **Basil Bernstein** pointed out that '**schools cannot compensate for society**'. (Note that the EPA system is not dissimilar to the Sure Start scheme that the Labour Government of 1997-2010 introduced).

- (3) The third big educational initiative of the 1960s was the **transformation of higher education which was also inspired by the social democratic ideals of equality of opportunity and meritocracy.** There were three elements to this expansion;
- (i) The existing universities were given funding to expand their campuses so they could take more students, ideally from working-class backgrounds;
 - (ii) A new type of higher education establishment -**the polytechnic** – came into being. As their name suggests, these quasi-universities were supposed to specialise in many (poly) technical subjects such as engineering, architecture, business and accounting, health and social care. Again, the idea was to attract talented working-class people who were not academically-inclined to study classic subjects which were seen to be the responsibility of the traditional redbrick universities. **Most of these polytechnics were given university status in the 1980s.**
 - (iii) The greatest achievement of the Labour government was probably the setting up of the **Open University** which **gave older working people, especially working-class people, the opportunity to study a degree subject at their own pace and in their own homes.** This was particularly welcomed by those whose academic talents had blossomed later in their lives.