COMPREHENSIVE EDUCATION

By C.H.R. Hansen

OLD IDEA:

BEFORE commenting at any length upon the practicality of Comprehensive Education, I feel that a brief recapitulation of the Educational scene before and immediately after the last war would perhaps be helpful.

At the outbreak of war, public education in England had a clear tripartite organisation: Infants, Elementary and Secondary. From the first to the second there was automatic transfer, but parents had a reasonably free choice as between one elementary school and another in their neighbourhood. Entry into the third form of education, however, depended upon what was known as 'The Scholarship Examination'. If a child were successful, the parents were given a short list of secondary schools serving their area, and they were free to state their preference, though this did not necessarily ensure entry to a particular school. That depended on the number of applications as against the number of places available. Hence some secondary schools were able further to select their entrants. This happened at the tender age of eleven years.

But already the process of selection had been, in some cases, started at the age of seven, when, because an elementary school had acquired a reputation for good scholarship results, or go-ahead methods, it became sufficiently popular to need a waiting-list of names of children whose parents sought entry to the elementary school for their children, as soon as they entered the infants' school. In fact, in London, provision was made officially for this in the Admission Register of the Elementary Schools.

Those children who did not succeed in gaining entry to a secondary school remained in their elementary school until the age of fourteen. In some Authorities, however, there were what were called Higher-Top Schools where children remained until they were fifteen or sixteen.

In London, on the other hand, there were two further avenues of more advanced education, to wit the Central Schools and the Trade Schools. This, indeed, applied to certain other Authorities; but London was the pioneer of the Central Schools. The means of entry to these last two types of school was different. To the Central School, the child could go at eleven, as second best to the secondary school. This often resulted in a Central School acquiring such a reputation that it could attract most of the 'near-misses' from the local secondary field, and so produce public results examination of a high order. The writer knew one, for instance, which

included Latin, French and Spanish in its curriculum. The second avenue, other than a Secondary School, the Trade School recruited its entry at the age of thirteen, by what was known as a Trade Scholarship, and offered a three years' vocational course in, for example, building, or engineering or garment-making, or instrument-making etcetera. The aim of these courses was apprenticeship into Industry at the age of sixteen, as opposed to the Central Schools whose products tended to go into Commerce or the lower ranks of the Civil Service.

This, then, was the general pattern at the outbreak of World War Two. But for years there had been developing plans for modifying this system, plans which were postponed until the end of the war. The 1944 Act, however, advertised the shape of things to come. So, with the creation of two forms of education, Primary and Secondary, and with the break remaining at eleven, the sub-divisions of 'Modern' and 'Grammar' were created to distinguish between the old Elementary and Secondary. In those Authorities which had developed Central and Trade Schools, the Trade School was re-named Technical, and the term Central disappeared, though such schools retained their reputation in their neighbourhood while bearing the title 'Modern', a name which early began to fall into desuetude.

This dichotomy of Secondary education led in many cases to the unfortunate situation where Modern schools copied the grammar schools' type of organisation; that is to say that a child entering a Modern school was allocated to a form, IA or IE as the case might be according to the marks he had obtained in the general examination for transfer from the Primary schools, an examination known as 'the eleven-plus'. These poor creatures were subjected to a full specialisation system, which of course, produced negligible results; added to this was the impact of acute teacher-shortage, which led to the most extraordinary positions; and for little people whose I.Q.s spread from barely 100 down to 70, the whirligig of being subjected to having their lessons from a series of untrained and unskilled teachers resulted in disaster. The writer recalls an instance where really backward pupils followed a time-table something like this:

Period 1: English – from a really broad Scotsman.

Period 2: Science – from a Pakistani, who did try, but had not the faintest notion how to make contact with the children.

Period 3: History – from a Viennese who taught English History after the school of prewar Vienna on the Danube. Again a hard-worker, but backward boys had some difficulty in reading notes written on the blackboard in German script.

Period 4: Religious Knowledge – from a Chinese, who was sincere enough, but in talk almost incomprehensible.

Period 5: Mathematics – from an Indian gentleman, whose idiom in English was, to say the least, quaint.

Add to all this a 'resting' actor or two, an out-of-work television cameraman, an Arab whose main qualification to teach English was a translation of the Koran, and an assortment of people who thought that to teach meant standing, or preferably sitting, before a group of children, and doing very little else.

Small wonder that later some schools were faced with delinquency and misbehaviour.

Side by side with this sad development from the 1944 Act was the steady working out by the then London County Council of their London Plan which envisaged over the years the creation of large 'neighbourhood' schools by amalgamating existing smaller secondary schools. The development of this imaginative conception had had to be modified from time to time by restrictions imposed as a result of British financial crises. Nevertheless, in spite of financial stringencies, great schools like Kidbrooke, Mayfield, Holland Park, all with *ad hoc* buildings, have come into being, and ranging in size from 1,000 to 2,000 pupils. And these great schools, by their enterprise, vision and energy have conferred upon the term 'Comprehensive' a dignity and prestige which will permanently endure in Education in England.

NEW CONCEPTS:

As experience grew, it became clear to many people that the old system of specialisation after the pattern of the Grammar School was completely ineffective for backward children; and in this connection let it be said, except where the large schools, as they were called, had a substantial 'grammar' stream, or had incorporated a well-established grammar school, the number of backward children tended to predominate.

In theory the Comprehensive, or Large School, was by regulation obliged to admit as nearly as possible an equal number of pupils from each of the five grades of ability from the top 20% to the bottom 20% of mental ability among the population. In some areas this worked well; in others there were no top 20% and no second 20%.

London broke down its child population into seven ability groups, not five, in order to try to get a more balanced spread; but the writer knew of one large school of 1,250 boys and girls, where in one year the poor Head was faced with an entry of 60% from grade 7! What sense does 'streaming' make in a situation like that? What use would specialisation be to those children? Even the rest of the entry did not rise above low average intelligence. This school was of course, in a particularly difficult neighbourhood, where problems of immigration were added to those of the general

depression of the district. On the other hand, and in another area quite close to the above school, yet an area also beset with dire social problems, two well-known schools were to be united; one an old-established grammar school, called secondary before 1944, and the other, a Central School with a high reputation for the last sixty years. This latter had diversified its curriculum after 1944 and had included some technical work. The combination of these two well-established and high-standard schools should make the heart of the new Headmaster rejoice. Even so, the new school will technically be obliged to recruit a 'balanced' intake; but the demand will be so great from the better quality that the lowest category of ability will no doubt be represented by its minimum possible number. In theory, the absorption of the grammar school into the Comprehensives should mean, because of the condition of balanced intake, that there should be a release of a number of more able pupils to be absorbed by the other large schools of the neighbourhood, whose lumps will thereby be leavened. Here again, however, a problem will be created in that the more able will be hopelessly outnumbered by the backward; and the Heads will have the almost hopeless task of finding adequate staff for a minority of able children, whose distant future might well be adversely affected.

In this matter, we are brought up against one of the serious difficulties of Comprehensive education. With the operation of the regulation that schools must, as far as possible, recruit a balanced intake of ability range, very popular schools have to face the odium of rejecting able pupils, purely on numbers. This can cause serious nervous reactions in some cases both in pupils and parents, and may even affect the relations between a primary school Head and the large school Head. Always, however, the parent has the right of choice, and can, if he or she is sufficiently determined, insist on the child's going to the school of the parents' first choice Naturally, such a situation can cause a great deal of embarrassment all round; but the writer has had experience of parents exercising this right both to his advantage and disadvantage!

One of the problems which has come to be clearly recognised is that of the young child of eleven who has come from the intimate and very personal atmosphere of a small primary school, and finds himself suddenly in a huge, strange world of violent giants. If, in addition, he is suddenly subjected to a kaleidoscopic changing of teachers at the end of every period, and has to move along long and unfamiliar corridors, with streams of large children, all apparently knowing what to do and where to go, he may tend to lose all his self-confidence and courage, and often fails to benefit from the stimulus of his new environment.

Modern thought, therefore, in secondary education leans strongly to the abolition of specialisation in the first year, and rather to the creation of

groups such as the child had in his primary school, where there was frequently a wide range of ability within the class of which he was a member. If this situation can approximately be reproduced in the secondary school, the child benefits from the increased sense of security in that he feels he has a familiar person, in the leader of the group, who will, in general, always be in the same place and who has a personal and steady interest in him. As it was attempted in the writer's school the first year tutor groups were larger than the normal form of thirty, and this gave more flexibility of teaching staff.

Since the groups were of mixed ability, those in the highest or next to highest ability grade hived off to academic lessons with specialists timetabled for the work. The bottom ability grades viz. 6 and 7 stayed with their tutor, or leader, whose business it was to see that, with as varied a scheme as could be devised, he or she worked to improve the reading ability upon which all else in education hangs. Here, of course, the Head of the Remedial Department gave constant and detailed help. The middle or average grades also moved out to lessons with other teachers, but here the work had no special examination aim, and the children were encouraged to do as much individual work as they were capable of. When all were together for certain periods of the day, the tutor's duty was to assist the children from the specialist classes with their work, or to conduct certain group activities, or to continue coaching the backward children as might be most expedient.

From this system flowed certain clear advantages: first, the backward pupils had an anchor and a steady firm environment; secondly the bright ones had the stimulation of varied environment; thirdly, most of the group frequently met members of the school outside their own group, and this tended to give a stronger sense of 'belonging'; fourthly, the less able were stimulated by having the brighter ones doing their work around them; and lastly all had a 'father' or 'mother' figure in their tutor.

With the advent of the large schools, this need for the smooth absorption of the youngest children is more and more coming to be recognised.