

Finding balance for academic and vocational



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THERE are a number of dilemmas within the UK Education system that we have never resolved...

- Providing specialist provision for children while, at the same time, maintaining equal access for all children to a broad and balanced curriculum.
- Supporting the "comprehensive ideal" and also ensuring choice and diversity.
- Ensuring equality of esteem between vocational and academic qualifications.
- Properly engaging business with education.

The specialist school and colleges programmes of the 1980s and 1990s highlighted many of these dilemmas.

The years 1993 to 1995 saw the launch and development of the Specialist Schools Programme (SSP). The City Technology Colleges (CTC) initiative, established in 1988, had attracted a disappointing level of business sponsorship and, in the five years following the introduction of the programme, just 15 new schools had opened. The initiative was transformed into the Technology College Programme in 1993 and subsequently into the Specialist Schools Programme. The scope was widened to include specialisms in modern foreign languages from 1994, and sports and arts from 1996.

Rather than aiming to establish new schools, the Specialist Schools Programme was aimed at high-performing existing schools. It was originally restricted to grant-maintained and voluntary aided schools - not local authority maintained schools.

The Specialist Schools Programme was later characterised by the House of Commons Select Committee as an embodiment of Conservative aspirations for secondary education, combining, as it did, "promises of raised achievement with significant investment from business, institutional autonomy, competition between providers and choice for consumers".

The Education Secretary John Patten argued that specialisms in UK schools were already emerging and that we should not treat children "like identical vegetables". The 1993 report, *Learning to Succeed*, produced by the independent National Commission on Education, chaired by Lord Walton of Detchant (no rela-



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tion), considered that the aim of creating greater choice and diversity was not compatible with giving all children equal access to "high-quality" schooling.

Patten, however, disagreed and his 1992 white paper, *Choice and Diversity: A new framework for schools*, formed the basis of the 1993 Education Act. He argued the provision of education should be geared to individual needs.

Many on the political left considered that Patten and the then Prime Minister, John Major, were keen to undermine the comprehensive system and that this white paper simply aimed to break up the comprehensive system by encouraging specialisation.

In 1994, Patten went further and announced that the government would encourage the setting up of new grammar schools and would allow grant-maintained schools to select more of their intake. The opposition argued that Patten's strategy was to convert "selection" into "specialisation".

Supported by leading employers, including Rolls-Royce, a number of headteachers made a case for the programme to be extended to local authority maintained schools. When we outlined our strategy at a conference in Brighton, attended by the new Secretary of State Gillian Shepherd, there was a resounding cheer from the headteachers in the hall. In 1995, the opportunity was then opened up to all maintained secondary schools.

In July 1995, Robin Squire, Conservative Under Secretary of State for Education, announced the first schools designated to operate as technology colleges from September 1994. Each school would receive a one-off capital grant of £100,000, plus additional recurrent annual funding of £100 per pupil to help implement its development plans. Across the UK, 85 schools were identified, including my own school, Norham Community High School in North Tyneside, as well as Prudhoe County High School, Northumber-

land, St Thomas More School, Gateshead and Walbottle High School, Newcastle.

A key priority of the newly named Norham Community Technology College was to change the learning environment, founded on the national curriculum with a "technological and vocational focus". This new focus was enhanced by new facilities in technology and science. Our sponsors included the Rolls-Royce Power Group and Procter & Gamble, as well as numerous local companies. Furthering the life chances and "employability" of children was central.

In 1997, the incoming New Labour government announced it would continue and expand the SSP, introducing the "community role" for specialist schools. New Labour also introduced the power to select 10% of pupils on the basis of aptitude.

I considered the Specialist College Programme an opportunity to redress the inequality between vocational and academic qualifications. Our curriculum was designed in partnership with local employers. The new technology college would also have a focus on community regeneration, including an employability strategy with local parents. The community comprehensive principle was also maintained. The new name said it all - Norham Community Technology College. When the school eventually became oversubscribed we ensured first choice came from our local community, rejecting our right to select up to 10% of our pupils.

Surprisingly, at the time, the idea of a specialist school was not central to our parents' views of the school. When we commissioned independent research as to why parents chose our school, at the top of the list was "academically well-qualified staff and standards of work achieved". Technology hardly got a mention.

In October 2010, with over 95% of secondary schools becoming specialist schools, the direct government funding for specialism was removed by the Coalition Government. Specialism was no longer special.

Today, the debate about comprehensive provision versus specialisation is less heated. There is now more focus on autonomous schools delivering a nationally prescribed "academic" curriculum.

However, the issues remain. Many of us continue to fight for equality of esteem between vocational and academic qualifications by properly engaging with the business world. Governing boards and headteachers persist in maintaining their pupil and community-centred comprehensive principles, while ensuring unique and special identities within a competitive environment.

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