

Our education system was born in 1945 – has it grown up yet?



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LAST week was my 70th birthday. I was born on June 8, 1945. Three days before my birth, on June 5, the Allied Control Council, the military occupation governing body of Germany, formally took power.

My birth was 'smack bang' between the suicide of Adolf Hitler on April 30 and August 9 when a United States B-29 bomber, the 'Bockscar' dropped an atomic bomb, codenamed 'Fat Man' on Nagasaki, Japan. The 1944 Education Act also came into force on April 1, 1945.

The victory in Europe, the dawn of the nuclear age and the 1944 Education Act all had a great impact on my life. The legacy of the 1944 Act was to provide a fertile battleground for the educational arguments, which would pursue me throughout the rest of my life.

At God's Departure Lounge in the pub, we continue to discuss school structures, curriculum and testing. I hear colleagues say...

"Ukip's preferred model the Grammar School was set up by the Labour Party."

"We have never managed to spread technical education in the UK."

"We used to love teaching more than testing."

"Our curriculum design is still based on the idea there are academic and practical children"

"Primary children should specialise as well as focus on the basics."

"The South East's reaction to education change is always very different from the North East."

"Academies are comprehensive schools."

Of course, we grumpy old men say these things to create discussion – honestly. The scary thing is our arguments have their genesis in an Education Act introduced 70 years ago.

After the war, the incoming Labour education ministers, Ellen Wilkinson, and after her death, George Tomlinson, together with the civil servants, were adamant about establishing a tripartite system, recommending that 70-75% of places "should be of the modern type" and 25-20% being allocated to grammar and technical places.

Whilst the possibility of other systems was available by 1951 only 0.7% of state secondary school pupils



➤ A different world – schoolboys greet the arrival of a new football in 1946. Is the education system still a bit of a football today?

were in comprehensive schools.

The system was actually 'bipartite' with grammar schools taking, on average, the 'top 20% of the children and secondary modern schools taking most of the rest. Selection for grammar schools was made largely on the basis of the 'eleven plus' examination, consisting of tests of intelligence and tests of attainment in English and arithmetic. In the eyes of the public children either passed or failed.

Technical Schools in the middle of the last century intended to have an intake of 10-15% of all pupils. They never catered for much more than about 3% - mainly boys. It will be interesting to observe the development of University Technology Colleges today and how many young people will be attending them over the next few years.

In the late 1940s there were even arguments over whether there should be examinations for 15 and 16-year-olds. In May 1946 'Circular 103 Examinations in Secondary Schools' was issued, which advocated abolishing the external examination at 15 or 16, saying that as grammar school pupils should be staying on until 17 or 18, an earlier examination would not be necessary.

It was also announced that there would be regulations preventing schools other than grammar schools entering pupils for any external examination under the age of 17, and even the grammar schools doing this would require special permission from the Ministry of Education.

This approach to preventing the majority of children from taking examinations continued right up to my first year of teaching in 1966 when the examinations for secondary modern were introduced. I still remember my first headteacher and his deputy having heated arguments about the merits of having or not having examinations for our children.

Today we almost have a belief that

if it moves we test it. It was very clear in the 1940s that there should be a distinction between designing a curriculum for the more and less able. In the secondary moderns it was left to teachers to design their own curriculum whilst for the grammar schools there was a much more prescriptive 'academic curriculum'.

In the 1940s new primary schools continued with the class teaching approach used in the former elementary schools, with its emphasis on basic literacy and numeracy - not much change since the 19th century.

In the 1940s there was big a difference between the North East and the south of England. The north of England had a much lower proportion of grammar school places than in the south east. We still see this difference today over the distribution of academies and the distribution of Grant Maintained Schools in the 1990s.

Today, the vast majority of academies are what we would term comprehensive schools. Whilst there has been some attempt to introduce 'Grammar Academies' so far Conservative Ministers have not encouraged 'Selective Grammar Academies'

I can hear what you are all saying... call yourself an educationalist. Your continual arguments suggest you have learned nothing in 70 years. As Confucius said, "Real knowledge is to know the extent of one's ignorance." So there! At least I know I don't know.

For me, I am driven by two philosophies: know more today about the world than I knew yesterday and know more about yesterday so I can understand today, in order to improve the lives of children.

Reflecting on the birth of our modern education system in 1945 will help us to more properly improve our present education system today.

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