

Conclusions

PART VI CONCLUSIONS

Four hundred years ago, a small minority of people in England had a depth and breadth of culture that almost no-one can rival today, but the great majority were illiterate. That structure could sustain itself because the skills and knowledge needed for most farming and craft jobs could be passed on as tradition, and there was little need for book learning or consciously cultivated intellectual skills either in work or in most social relations. Now the most simple jobs, requiring no knowledge or intellectual skills, have almost disappeared, and the mechanics of everyday social relations demand an increasing level of mental accomplishment. Consequently, education and culture are a necessity, not just for the modern equivalent of Henry VIII's courtiers, but for everyone. Since unskilled manual labour (replaced by more efficient machines) is now worth so little, individuals need education to be able to sell their services for enough to live on. They also need increasing educational equipment to enable them to take part in all sorts of social activities outside of work. At the collective level, the economy cannot prosper unless educational standards are transformed. Methods of working will continue to change rapidly, so people need to be equipped with the language, reasoning and number skills that will enable them to absorb new information and thereby adapt to change.

There is evidence that the proportion of school leavers who have attained a modest standard of basic number skills is considerably lower in Britain than in some other European countries. Thus, there is a growing need for more and better education both at the individual and at the collective levels, but a failure by the educational system to provide it. Making schools more effective must, therefore, be a high priority for any present-day government.

Increasing school effectiveness

Until recently, the strongest tradition of thinking about schooling has not been primarily concerned with improving personal development and economic performance. Instead, it has concentrated on inequality of attainment between individuals and between groups. This focus of thinking and research was a response to political programmes that saw education as a means of achieving greater equality; the two best examples of such programmes are the abolition of selection at 11+ and the Educational Priority Areas, an attempt to use extra educational resources to compensate for multiple deprivations in particular localities. Two decades of research have shown that individual differences in attainment cannot be substantially reduced by educational policies. For a time, this result was wrongly interpreted as showing that schooling has little effect. The logic of this argument seemed impeccable. The objective of schooling was to reduce inequality (or perhaps to raise the attainment of the lower-achieving children towards the standard of the

higher-achieving ones). Various kinds of research suggested that it did not achieve that objective. Therefore schooling was ineffective.

Of course, the argument falls if schools are not seen primarily as agents of social equality. Research and analysis showed that schooling is not effective as a means of reducing individual inequality. It did not show that schooling has little effect on whether or not children can read, write and do arithmetic.

Over the past ten years there has been a new focus on the level of achievement of children at different schools. This is a way of assessing the effect of schooling in helping children to achieve, and a way of exploring the styles of management, structures and school processes that lead to success. Within this new tradition, a development that is of central importance is the use of new statistical methods through which it is possible to make valid comparisons between schools that are widely different in terms of the attainment and social background of the children entering them. These methods consider a child's attainment at one time after taking account of attainment at an earlier time, which is similar to assessing progress; and they show how far the individual's progress varies depending on which school he or she belongs to.

The results of the present study show that there are very important differences between urban comprehensive schools in these terms. The level of achievement is radically higher in some schools than in others. The findings show that the same child would get a CSE grade 3 in English at one school, but an O level grade B in English at another. There are equally large differences in maths and in exam results in total across all subjects. For a long time, the importance of such differences has been obscured by inappropriately comparing them with the much larger differences between individuals. There are wide differences in individual performance, and considerable stability in the performance of individuals over time. The result of going to an effective school can be seen as an increment on the performance of each individual child that goes to it. This increment may be large enough to be very important for its effect on what each individual is actually capable of doing, yet small in comparison with the differences between individuals. An increment of skill in mental arithmetic may be enough to take a large number of people across the threshold of skill needed to add up a grocery bill or retain a score at darts. Nevertheless, this increment may be small compared to the difference between an individual with a special gift for doing lightning calculations and one who cannot do arithmetic at all. Differences between schools are large in absolute terms, but small compared with the enormous differences between individuals.

The present study uses a more refined method than has previously been available to quantify the extent of variation in the results achieved by different schools. For certain groups, the variation in exam results between individuals in different schools is as much as one-quarter of the total variation between individuals, while for certain other groups it is as little as 2 per cent. Given that individual differences are very large and strongly tend to persist, these findings show that the differences in performance between schools are very substantial.

Of course, it would never be possible to equalise the performance of schools, any more than the performance of individuals. The result is, however, significant, because the better schools do not enjoy any special advantages, so there is room for a radical improvement in the performance of the poorer ones. In fact, if schools were improved only within the current range of performance of urban comprehensive schools, this would be enough to transform the standards of secondary education. Even that would be a relatively modest aim, since there is no reason why the best of the current schools should not also improve.

These conclusions are strengthened by a study of the choice of subjects and course levels to be studied in the fourth and fifth years. The pattern of these findings shows that the academic level at which a child is expected to compete is more a function of school policies and practices than of the individual qualities of the child. For example, the level of prior attainment thought appropriate for children entering O level courses varied substantially between schools, largely according to the mix of attainment. It follows that the same child, with the same history of attainment, would be placed on O level courses in one school but not in another. This suggests that a higher proportion of children could be required or expected to compete at a higher academic level.

Twenty years ago, an objection that would routinely have been made to this kind of analysis is that scholastic attainment is not the whole of education. Children in the schools that achieve badly in scholastic terms might be receiving other benefits. Today, that argument seems far-fetched. The various objectives of education are all related to the central enterprise of acquiring skills and knowledge. Schools are hardly likely to achieve the various related objectives by neglecting the central one. Children who are ignorant, poor at reasoning and unable to express themselves clearly are unlikely to be creative, constructive, spiritual, or good at team work. It seems likely that poor scholastic achievement is accompanied by further disadvantages. Hence we find, for example, that children who make good progress in scholastic terms also tend to participate in a range of school activities outside the classroom, whereas those who do not make good progress do not take part in activities outside the classroom either. In any case, it is a matter of common observation that the schools with high academic standards (especially in the private sector) are ones that also offer a broad curriculum and a wide range of activities outside the curriculum.

The present findings also show radical differences between urban comprehensives in what they do and how they do it. For example, there were large differences between schools in the subjects they offered for the fourth and fifth years (1985 and 1986): in fact, two schools next door to each other might have entirely different curricula. The requirement of a balanced curriculum, set out in the government's publication *Better Schools*, was generally not met. There were also large differences between schools in the course levels that they offered to pupils who had reached the same level of attainment, and in the examinations for which they were entered (before the introduction of the GCSE).

An objective of the National Curriculum introduced by the Education Reform Act 1988 is, of course, to reduce these extreme variations between schools and to give effect to the ideal of balance. However, there are equally large differences between what the schools do in matters unconnected with the curriculum. For example, the amount and nature of contact with parents varies radically between schools, after allowing for differences associated with the characteristics of the parents. There are wide variations in the extent to which children take part in activities outside the classroom, and in the extent to which children are subject to reproof and criticism.

This research project, like others in this field, has been successful in measuring the extent of school differences, but much less successful in explaining how and why they arise. The theory that we would have liked to test is that these differences are related to methods and styles of management at the level of the school and subject department. It was not possible to provide good evidence for or against this theory. The findings do, however, show that the rate of progress may differ widely within the same school between English and maths. This suggests that explanations of school success cannot be confined to management or organisational factors that involve the whole school, but must take

account of management at the departmental level. This was also a finding of the most important previous study.

In the fourth and fifth years, all of the schools studied effectively taught children in different groups corresponding to different levels of study and leading to different exams, though some left the decision about exam entries later than others. Overall, there was a tendency to allocate children to course levels partly on the basis of social class (after taking account of attainment). There are wide variations between the schools in the extent to which they make the allocation on the basis of attainment, rather than on the basis of other (generally irrelevant) factors. This seems an important difference, in principle, in school policy. There is no hard evidence, at this stage, as to whether it is related to pupil progress, but if children are to be taught in sets at different levels, then in principle it seems more efficient to allocate them to the sets on the basis of attainment.

At the level of the individual child, there is a clear link between progress in reading and maths and participation in school activities; also, children who are not criticised or reprimanded are more likely to progress. We have not been able to establish a link at the level of the school - that the schools with the higher levels of participation and the lower levels of teacher criticism are the ones that achieve the better results. This may be because the sample of schools is too small to demonstrate such an effect.

The requirement of the Education Reform Act 1988 that all children should be tested at specified ages is clearly addressed to the need, emphasised by our findings, to improve the standards of many schools. However, these findings also show that a comparison of the raw test results between schools would be highly misleading. A school having a low balance of intake could appear to be doing badly, when in fact it was doing well; while a school with a high intake balance could be flattered by the raw test results. If the results of the tests are to be made publicly available, it is essential that they should be analysed by methods akin to those used in the present study. This would not necessarily have to be done by an official body. An alternative would be for the government to facilitate and fund the development of analysis and evaluation of school results on the basis of the test data.

The other main plank of the provisions of the Education Reform Act 1988 is the measures to increase parental choice. There is a large body of evidence to support the theory that parental influence is central to the educational process. As parents have a central influence, it is important that they should be committed to the school, and that commitment is more likely to be achieved if they feel they have chosen the school and have some opportunity to influence its policies.

These general arguments suggest that parental choice may be important to the extent that it is linked with parental commitment and involvement. On the other hand, the provisions of the Education Reform Act may also embody the hope that parental decisions can be used to impose a kind of market discipline which will drive out ineffective schools and favour effective ones. There is no support in the findings of this study for the idea that increasing parental choice will improve school standards in that way. Parents' attitudes and views about the schools do vary widely from one school to another, but they are surprisingly little related to the attainment of their own child, and they are not related at all to their child's progress. From the whole pattern of findings, it is quite clear that currently parents cannot identify the schools that are doing well in terms of pupil progress. This is hardly surprising, since it takes a complex analysis to identify those schools. It is likely that increasing parental choice will bring greater pressure to bear on head teachers, but that this pressure will bear little relation to objective standards of performance. Of course, this could change if good information about pupil progress were to become

available through proper analysis of the results of the regular tests. Without that analysis, however, the testing and parental choice proposals in combination would have the effect of putting more pressure on schools in socially disadvantaged areas which have intakes with a low balance of attainment. These would not generally be the least successful schools.

Ethnic minorities in comprehensive schools

There are large differences in economic well-being between ethnic minorities and white people. It is a common racist tactic to ascribe these differences to differences in educational background. In fact, while there are some important differences in educational background, among adults, between people of Asian or West Indian origin and white people, these differences are generally not large, and they are much smaller than the differences in circumstances of life between the three groups. Also, contrasts between age groups in educational background are much greater than between ethnic groups. Thus, the extent of educational disadvantage among ethnic minorities, and its implications, should not be exaggerated. Nevertheless, any differences between black and white children in their performance within the British school system are important in themselves, even if they do not explain economic differences to any significant extent.

Among young people leaving school, differences in educational attainment between the racial minorities and whites are not very large. With the exception of some specific groups, Asians are now obtaining similar results to whites. West Indians are obtaining poorer results, but there is evidence of improvement over a three-year period from 1978.

There is, however, an important difference between West Indians and white people in terms of higher education. A much smaller proportion of West Indians than of whites have degree level qualifications, and according to the most recent information available (1981/82) the proportion of young West Indians going onto degree level courses is still much lower than for young white people (or Asians).

There is evidence that, from the late 1970s, children of West Indian and Asian origin are not already behind white children when they start school at the age of five. However, with the exception of girls of West Indian origin, both groups have fallen behind by the age of seven. There is recent evidence that West Indian boys progress more slowly than other groups in reading between the ages of 7 and 10. For Asian children, rates of progress over the junior school years are probably slower than for white children overall, but they differ widely between particular groups (defined, for example, in terms of language). It is clear that on entry to secondary school at 11, both Asian and West Indian children tend to be achieving at a lower level than white children, even if comparisons are made with children from comparable social backgrounds. There is some conflict of evidence as to whether West Indian children tend to fall further behind in the secondary school years, in terms of test results. Because of higher motivation and a tendency to stay on at school and take examinations, they obtain better qualifications than would have been expected from their attainment at the age of 11. Asian children catch up during the secondary school years in terms of test scores, and in spite of scoring much lower than white children at the age of 11, they obtain similar examination results.

Both Asians and West Indians are substantially more likely than white people to pursue further study, both full-time and part-time, after leaving school. To a great extent, this reflects a greater motivation towards self-improvement and achievement. It may also reflect the special difficulties that young Asians and West Indians encounter in finding a job, because of continuing racial discrimination.

The findings from the present study fit in with this background of information from previous research, but clarify certain points. At the point of entry to secondary school, certain categories of south Asian children scored substantially lower in reading and maths than the average for the children tested. The low-scoring groups were Moslems originating from Bangladesh and from Pakistan, whereas Sikhs and Hindus achieved average or above-average scores. Children of West Indian origin also scored below average at the point of entry, but considerably higher than the low-scoring south Asian groups.

By the end of the second year, the relative position of the different ethnic groups in maths and reading was much the same as at the point of entry, but the gap had grown wider. Progress in reading was slower over the first two years of secondary school for ethnic minorities than for white children. In the case of maths, the progress of south Asian children, from a substantially lower baseline, was about the same as that of white children, but progress of other ethnic minorities (including West Indians) again from a lower starting point than white children was considerably slower.

In the fourth and fifth years, children belonging to ethnic minority groups tended to be allocated to lower course levels than children of UK origin, but this is because they tended on average to have lower assessed attainment in the third year when the decisions were taken, and because they tended to belong to lower social classes: it is not because ethnic group was itself used as a criterion in the allocation to course levels.

At the end of the fifth year, children belonging to ethnic minority groups obtained rather poorer results in absolute terms than those originating from the UK. However, these results were significantly better than would have been predicted from their second-year test scores. In greater detail, the results show that south Asian children were tending to catch up both in maths and in English and also across all subjects over the three years leading up to the public examinations. Children belonging to other minority groups (West Indians being the largest proportion of them) were tending to catch up in English and across all subjects, but not in maths. As a result of this faster progress, the English exam results of children of West Indian origin were rather better than the results of those originating from the UK, but their maths exam results were much poorer.

The differences in exam results attributable to ethnic group are very much smaller than those attributable to the school. In other words, what school a child goes to makes far more difference (in terms of exam results) than what ethnic group he or she belongs to. The relative performance of different ethnic groups varies somewhat between schools, but such variations are trivial compared with the very large school differences across all ethnic groups. In other words, some schools are much better than others, and the ones that are good for white people tend to be about equally good for black people.

In spite of a tendency towards low attainment and slow progress in the first two years, children from ethnic minority groups seem to have more positive feelings about school in the second year than white children. They seem to face fewer difficulties at school that are manifest to them, and there is no evidence that racial hostility at school is an important factor for 12 and 13-year old children. This is strongly confirmed by the views of parents. When asked in what ways they were dissatisfied with the school, parents rarely mentioned racial prejudice or hostility of any kind. Just one per cent of parents mentioned racial attacks, or that black and white children don't get on. Eight out of 2,075 parents interviewed mentioned racial prejudice among teachers. The level of satisfaction with the school expressed by parents does not vary sharply between ethnic groups: West Indian parents tend to be a bit less satisfied than whites, while south Asian parents, with the exception of Bangladeshis, tend to be a bit more satisfied.

Although a number of other reports, such as the Burnage High School Inquiry, have created the impression that overt racism is a serious problem in multi-ethnic schools, on closer examination they provide little hard evidence on this matter, and no evidence at all of the size and extent of any such problem. The present findings are not, therefore, in conflict with any substantial body of evidence from elsewhere.

The most important conclusion to be drawn is that school effectiveness is an issue for racial minorities in much the same way that it is for everyone else. It is a more urgent issue for racial minorities, because they start secondary school at a substantial disadvantage. But the measures that will best promote the interests of racial minorities in secondary schools are the same as those that will raise the standards of secondary education generally.

This does not mean that racial and cultural differences have no importance in secondary education. On the contrary, there are clear indications that at some levels race is a more important category than social class for the structure of relationships within schools. For example, children tend strongly to choose friends of the same sex and from among their own racial group, but tend much less strongly to choose friends belonging to the same social class. Also, schools vary substantially in the extent to which friendships cross racial boundaries.

Furthermore, the findings clearly support the argument that schools should give more attention to the needs and expectations of cultural minorities. Children of south Asian origin tend to participate less in school activities than other groups, probably because some of the activities are unsuitable. South Asian parents have considerably less contact with school than other groups; the proportion who have gone to plays or concerts is particularly low, probably because these events are within a tradition that is alien to them. Such findings point to a partial failure by many schools to adapt to the presence of cultural minorities, a failure which is important in itself, though it may not be directly related to problems of attainment.

The great majority of children originating from the Indian sub-continent are bilingual, and about half are literate in a minority language. However, children tend to prefer high-status languages such as English, Urdu and Hindi, even when they speak some other language better. Attitudes will continue to shift against minority languages unless action is taken to give them recognition. Currently, most children cannot study minority languages at school, but there is a strong potential demand, since more than one-third of bilingual pupils were taking lessons in a minority language outside school.

One of the most important steps that schools can take towards a multi-cultural education policy is to develop the teaching of Asian languages and literatures. This they can now do within the framework of the National Curriculum, which provides that Asian languages may be offered as foundation subjects if at least one modern European language is offered as well. It is most important that schools should take advantage of these provisions.

A more recalcitrant problem is the teaching of religion. Upwards of one-third of Hindus, Moslems, Sikhs and members of the Pentecostal Church and of the Church of God, are unhappy about the way religion is taught. Different schools have had widely varying degrees of success in gaining acceptance for their religious teaching both overall and among particular religious groups. The whole pattern of findings shows that among parents belonging to religious minorities in Britain there is a strong demand for more teaching of their own religion. These demands do not sit comfortably with the idea of multi-faith religious education as it has developed since the Education Act 1944. Probably what many of these parents would like is something closer to instruction in the tenets of their faith. These demands cannot be met through broadly based religious education classes taken by

teachers who do not share the faiths of families belonging to religious minorities, and in most cases have only a superficial understanding of them.

The Education Reform Act 1988 creates a new framework both for collective worship and for religious education at school, which may in time allow schools to develop new responses to these problems. It gives continued support to religious education conceived as a focused study of religious ideas and practices, with some degree of emphasis on Christianity. Our findings suggest that this will be acceptable to the majority of Christian or agnostic families. At the same time, it allows schools to respond positively to the demands from religious minorities that this study reveals. For example, where parents have withdrawn their children from collective worship of a broadly Christian character, or from non-denominational religious education which gives a degree of emphasis to Christianity, a school may arrange collective worship or provide religious education according to a particular faith or denomination. It remains to be seen how religious education will develop within this new framework. The path may be difficult for schools having substantial numbers of children from contrasting traditions, but the Education Reform Act opens up the possibility that they may develop options to meet conflicting needs and demands.

There is much to be done in secondary schools to make what they offer more acceptable and attractive to children and parents belonging to a number of different cultures. There is also much to be done to make secondary education reflect the broader outlook that is needed in a multi-cultural society. This would be valuable in itself, and especially because of the benefits it would bring to the majority of children whose families originate from Britain. Multi-cultural education should not be seen as a method of improving the performance of racial minority groups, but as an aspect of good education for all pupils.

The most important implication of the findings of this research project, however, is that action is needed to improve standards for all children in the poorer schools. The measures that will most help the racial minorities are the same as those that will raise the standards of secondary education generally.