

Setting the scene

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This is the historian as Greek chorus. Or, to switch metaphors, this is a brief, highly schematic sketch of the social and political context within which these studies have been conducted over the last half-century or so. The period in the United Kingdom since the end of the Second World War has seen major changes in social and economic structures and in health and education policies and practices. They have had and are having impacts which take time to emerge and are often difficult if not impossible to quantify or in any sense measure, yet cannot be left out of account. All the historian can do is to remind authors and readers of these long-run shifts. Perhaps the greatest use of this overview is the suggestions for additional reading which the references represent.

A first caveat must be to note the artificiality of generalising about 'Britain'. The regimes in Scotland and in Northern Ireland should be distinguished from those in England and Wales. The financial and economic structures of Northern Ireland continued to have colonial dimensions for much of the period. Three central decades, from the beginning of the 1970s to the end of the 1990s, were marked by sectarian strife and the renewal of the 'dirty war'. It was only at the end of the 1990s that selective secondary schooling and the continuance of the 11+ examination began seriously to be called into question.

Scotland presents a very sharp contrast. Its educational structures had been distinctive throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Sutherland 1990) and patterns of mobility were more 'open' and less 'structured' than elsewhere in the United Kingdom (Hope 1984). Around Godfrey Thomson and the Scottish Council for Research into Education, a cluster of research workers and specialists had already begun to form in the decade immediately preceding the Second World War. The Scottish Mental Surveys of 1932 and 1947 were *the*

pioneer large-scale studies. Ian Deary, Lawrence Whalley, John Starr and the groups they lead, have already built on these surveys and developed longitudinal studies from their baselines (Deary et al 2004). This overview, however, is confined to England and Wales. Although the cohort studies include Scotland and most recently Northern Ireland, the different histories and financial and economic structures severely limit the use of even the broad generalizations attempted here. Moreover since devolution in 1998-9, Wales has begun to diverge from England more and more. Within England, a North-South divide continues to have reality in some aspects of life, showing up, for example, in different patterns of mortality in older age groups (Le Grand and Vizard 1998). London, too, has a distinctive character and problems all its own (White 2001). These are qualifications which may need to be born in mind particularly when generalizing from ALSPAC (Avon Longitudinal Study of Parents and Children) data.

In one respect at least, the period immediately following 1945 offered the children in England and Wales an uncommon unity of experience. As far as nutrition was concerned, the society came closer to providing a level playing field for its young than it ever had before – or has since. Food rationing, which had been in existence since the beginning of the War, did not finally disappear till 1954 (Clarke 1996; Hennessy 2006). Meanwhile the 1944 Education Act had made it a duty of Local Education Authorities (LEAs) to provide school milk and meals (Gosden 1976). School milk was made free in 1946, to complement the introduction of family allowances.

Historians have found the death rate of infants under one year per thousand live births a reliable if rough guide to family living standards: between 1938 and 1965 it fell more or less steadily, from 53 to 19 (Mitchell and Jones 1971). By the early 1970s,

the School Medical Service could comment in its valedictory report that the 'nutrition of children has greatly improved'; there was, however, a warning sign of another kind: 'some children are now malnourished from excess of food, especially carbohydrate foods' (Chief Medical Officer 1975). Free milk for children over seven had been withdrawn in 1971-2 and the subsidy to school meals sharply reduced. The battle lines are now drawn differently, concerned more with dietary value than absolute levels of provision, but school meals and what they might contribute to the nutrition of children continue to be a contested area.

Mention of family living standards broadens the discussion into a consideration of inequalities of income and the incidence of poverty, whether defined in absolute or in relative terms. In the broadest terms, there appears to have been a gentle but persistent decline in such inequality until the end of the 1970s, which had begun to show itself as early as the beginning of the 1920s. Thereafter the pattern changed and inequality increased again through the 1980s and into the 1990s (Feinstein 1996; Jenkins 1996; Hills Report 2010). To sharpen the focus once more to look at the experience of children, governments since 1997 have succeeded only in flattening the trend. A 2006 survey for the Institute for Fiscal Studies showed 3.6m children still living in families taking home less than 60% of average income – the official poverty line. In this respect Britain ranked fifth from bottom in Europe (Brewer et al 2006; Brewer et al 2009); and as one of the leading economic analysts of patterns of educational provision concludes, 'There remains a striking link between child poverty and school performance.' (Glennerster 1998).

The importance of these patterns is acknowledged by a number of contributors. Schoon, Ross, Hope and Duckworth make the point that a serious housing deficit was almost certainly a counter-weight to the positive impacts of rationing and school-feeding in the early years of the period. These authors write of the 'corrosive effect' of family hardship and conclude that the case for the eradication of child poverty remains strong (Schoon et al 2010; see also Hills 1998).

It is difficult to get far in discussion of inequality and poverty without some consideration of social class and mobility. Over the twentieth century as a whole the structures of social class, and thus the

parameters for any measurement of mobility, have been affected by the absolute shrinkage of occupations requiring manual labour and the expansion of white-collar employment and the so-called 'service class'. As Halsey has commented, while the social structure at the beginning of the twentieth century was pyramidal in shape, by its last quarter it looked much more like a light-bulb (Halsey 1995). From mid-century, far more women also worked, for far more of their adult life. By 2000, 69% of working-age women were in employment – only 10% less than the proportion for men of working age. Far more of these women were working part-time – 43%, compared to 8% of the men (Gales and Marks 1974; EOC 2001). However, a small proportion of women found their way into high-status occupations, opening up a widening gap between themselves and their sisters on the periphery of the labour market (Dex et al 1996). There are some signs, too, that a similar gap is emerging between male unskilled and professional/managerial workers (Brewer et al 2009). The emergence of the small group of high status women employees also complicates the measurement of social mobility, in which women have seldom if ever been treated as independent actors: for so long, the key trajectory has been that between father's occupation and husband's occupation (Heath and Payne 1999).

Factoring in such variables has presented contributors with difficulties. Gregg and Macmillan go furthest in their acknowledgement that social class in the second half of the twentieth century is not a stable or unproblematic variable. They note the work commissioned by Alan Milburn, including the Hills Report, the consensus that the UK has a low level of mobility, rivalled only by the USA, and that inter-generational mobility has declined over the period under consideration. Their finding that the gradient of educational attainment at age 16 by family background, has lessened between generations born in the 1970s and those born in the 1980s and early 1990s, thus appears to move counter to this. They note, however, the changes in the measurement of attainment, and the recurring question as to whether improvements in measured attainments reflect changes in real attainment. They are also hampered in establishing robust measures of social class, having to fall back at times on the crude proxy of free school meals (Schoon et al 2010). These authors are persistently and

properly worried about the extent to which the patterns they discern are gendered. There is also the likelihood that gender and social class interact with each other, to produce a whole which is larger than the sum of the parts. Schoon in this issue has begun an engagement with this problem, by combining father's occupation with mother's level of education, in her measurement of Parental Social Status (SES). But much more might be done.

Such major socio-economic shifts form the backdrop against which health and education policies and practices must be set. The creation of the National Health Service (NHS) in 1948 could be said to contribute to more equal experience for both children and adults. For children, some groundwork had already been laid by the School Medical Service, first created in 1908. And there were many health professionals working with children, including the then Chief Medical Officer, Henry Yellowlees, who lamented the dissolution of this service with its particular expertise in 1974 (Chief Medical Officer 1975). The interface between paediatric and adult health care services remains a difficult one in which to find oneself, as either patient or parent.

However to acknowledge that the creation of the NHS marks a major change, is not to suggest that there was from then onwards either consistency of policy or of patterns of investment. The swings and roundabouts of successive policy and governmental changes over the first fifty years have been brilliantly, if polemically, analysed by Charles Webster, official historian of its creation (Webster 1998). More prosaically, the fluctuations in investment and in some measures of outcomes over the final quarter-century, have been charted, suggesting that 'Although spending on the NHS has risen more than demographic need factors alone would warrant, spending on the NHS (at least in volume terms) has risen significantly less than personal income, and public expectations, buoyed by technological advance, have not been fulfilled.' (Le Grand and Vizard 1998).

Changes in educational spending, structural provision and policies are amongst the factors having the most immediate impact on children and young people growing up. In the period since the Second World War, these exhibit a high degree of turbulence, and indicate a recurrent slowness amongst policy-makers to appreciate the

importance of demographic shifts and their capacity to subvert the best-laid plans (Glennister 1998).

Turbulence was less obvious in the third quarter of the twentieth century than it subsequently became. In the first three post-war decades, educational spending had been growing in real terms, by about 4% per annum. The period immediately following the end of the Second World War saw LEAs working to develop plans for 'secondary education for all', as required by the 1944 Education Act. Several gave some consideration to the common or comprehensive school option; but in the end, all but one, Anglesey, opted for selection at 11+. Some expansion of provision had already been begun by some authorities after 1936, in preparation for the raising of the school leaving age to 15, on 1 September 1939 - in the event, postponed until after the War. A much larger expansion got underway in the late 40s and early 50s; and for many this has been seen as the golden age of school building (Saint 1987). However the expansion of the elite-track, selective secondary schools, most often known as grammar schools, proved insufficient to keep pace with the post-war baby boom. The supply of children grew even faster than the supply of grammar school places; and the cohort born 1943-52 were to find their chances of getting to grammar schools less good than those of the cohort born 1933-42 had been (Halsey et al 1980; Sanderson 1987). A challenge to selection at 11+ gathered pace through the 1950s; and in 1965 Circular 10/65 invited LEAs to re-consider. Ironically, many of the schemes for comprehensive schools developed in response to this, did not take their final form till 1970-74, when Margaret Thatcher was Secretary of State for Education. It was also Thatcher and the Heath Government who raised the school-leaving age to 16 in 1972.

The break in the upward trend of spending came in the middle 1970s, hardly unconnected with broader economic problems and an increasing questioning across parties of existing provision. Between 1975-6 and 1988-9, the share of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) allocated to publicly-funded education, fell from 6.5% to 4.7%. In the 1990s, there was some recovery to just above 5%, where it has bumped along (Johnson 2004). The bleakness of this picture can be qualified by a rise in private spending on education; by the changing distribution of the resources that were available;

and by a fall in the child population. However what emerges has been characterised as a picture of ‘a quite extraordinary plateau in the volume of resources available to education for two decades, with a dip in the 1980s’, a pattern unlike that in any other developed country in the period. (Glennerster 1998).

As has been noted, a fall in the child population 1975-85 gave primary and secondary schools some protection from the worst consequences of such resource pressure; the main sufferers, as we shall see, were those developing aspirations for some higher education. Maintained primary and secondary schools, however, had other pressures to deal with. Although the comprehensive model of secondary schooling spread, selection never disappeared entirely. Over 150 selective grammar schools remained, and remain, with the largest cluster in Kent, which has retained grammar schools and secondary modern schools throughout the entire period. In addition, the final decade of the twentieth century saw a return to selection at 11+ more generally. The 1988 Education Act allowed the creation of grant-maintained schools, now ‘foundation’ schools. Voluntary-aided denominational schools, in which the Governing Body controls admissions, have begun to expand. Academies, each of which has a separate agreement with central government on its admissions policy, were first devised as a means of replacing ‘failing’ inner city schools.¹ Since the 2007 election however, they are beginning to be perceived by politicians as a more general tool. Symptomatic of the changed attitude towards academies has been the authorisation of a mixed academy in Hackney, sponsored by the Skinners’ Company and HSBC, due to open in September 2010, replacing the Skinners’ Girls School; although amongst the factors also playing a part here appear to be the problems of governmental structures for education in London since the abolition of the Inner London Education Authority (ILEA) at the end of the 1980s.

In the last quarter of the century, intense activity in modifying the structures of governance of schools was matched by intense activity on the curriculum front. The Education Act of 1988 introduced a National Curriculum for maintained primary and secondary schools, a move which commanded a fair degree of support. What proved much more controversial was the development of a

national framework for its assessment, with externally prescribed and moderated tests at ages 7, 11 and 14, Key Stages One, Two and Three. The 16+ examinations, the General Certificate of Education (GCE), were simultaneously being re-shaped into the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE), intended to be accessible to a much wider ability range and containing a significant amount of course work. The modularisation of A Levels in 2000 was to some degree a logical corollary of this. However a situation in which there has been tinkering with curriculum and examination requirements on an annual basis, and what has amounted to a governmental obsession with assessment, has generated dissension, fatigue – and teaching to the test. As several contributors recognise, this climate may seriously affect the robustness of their findings on attainment levels (Duckworth and Schoon 2010; Gregg and Macmillan 2010).

For almost the first three quarters of the twentieth century, entry at age 11+ to the elite track of a selective secondary school was *the* crucial gateway to upward mobility and to access to those expanding ‘service class’ occupations. Entry to the even more elite track of higher education was confined to so few during this period that it mattered less. In 1938 fewer than 2% of the 18+ age group entered university; by 1961 this proportion had crept up to just over 4%. In the last quarter of the century, however, the picture began to change and the crucial gateway to shift away from 11+ towards the ages of 16-19. The spread of comprehensive schools made some contribution to this, as did the raising of the school-leaving age to 16. Least well understood but undoubtedly important, were shifts in the aspirations of young people.

The provision of places in higher education was only intermittently responsive. In the late fifties and through the sixties, existing universities had begun a modest expansion and several new universities were founded. Anthony Crosland, the Secretary of State who had promulgated Circular 10/65, also attempted to diversify the provision of higher education, encouraging the creation of polytechnics, intended to offer a larger component of practical and applied work and with a closer relationship to the local and regional communities within which they were situated. In parallel went some enhancement of the status of teacher training

colleges. By 1970 not quite 14% of the relevant age group were in some form of higher education.

The financial down-turn which began in the mid-1970s bit hard, however. By 1980, the proportion of the relevant age group in higher education had actually fallen, to 12.8%; and it did not begin to rise again until the second half of the eighties. The second half of the seventies and the eighties were especially lean times for the older universities, as, despite pressure of numbers, budgets were cut and unit costs forced down by government. Other institutions of higher education suffered relatively less because – and this undoubtedly was one of their attractions – they were cheaper. In 1992 the formal position was transformed by the re-designation of almost all polytechnics as universities.

The combined effect of this, a reversal of policy on student numbers and some slight financial easement, meant that by 1994, John Major's Conservative government could boast that 30% of the age group was in higher education. From 1997 on, it was the declared objective of the Labour government to achieve entry to higher education for 50% of the age group; although economic recession since 2007 has prompted a major reconsideration. Such ambitions are not quite 'higher education for all'. But just as the secondary schools developed in the years after 1944 did not enjoy parity of esteem one with another, however loudly 'secondary education for all' was proclaimed, so it would be difficult to contend that all universities enjoy parity of esteem. What analysis of the student bodies there has been, suggests that students from social classes D and E, and part-time and mature students, are heavily clustered in post-1992 institutions; although the absolute shrinkage of the manual working class in the population as a whole has done something to modify the dominance of upper and upper middle class students among university entrants (*Oxford Review of Education* 1993; Glennerster 1998). Overall, too, expansion combined with declining resources, has brought a greater variability in degree quality and its perceived status in the last quarter of the century and beyond, than was the case earlier.

For those less likely to achieve advanced or higher educational qualifications, skills and vocational training eased transition into the labour force; these also underwent important changes during the relevant years of the adult British birth

cohorts. The gold standard had been represented by apprenticeships for skilled manual workers. These were traditionally employer-based, but they came increasingly under central government control with the successive impacts of the 1964 Industrial Training Act, the Youth Opportunity Programme (YOP) of 1978 and the Youth Training Scheme (YTS) of 1983. These last two aimed at universal provision of training for those not in full-time education or employment, but were widely perceived as little more than an alternative to unemployment (Dolton 1993). Such perceptions gained in strength and indeed in reality as governments moved away from a commitment to full employment as a policy goal in the fourth quarter of the century (Johnson 1991; O'Mahony 2004).

The second half of the twentieth century has thus seen major changes in the economic and social structure of the society and major shifts in policies, practices and investment in both health and education. The studies which follow in this issue of *LLCS*, have made determined efforts to grapple with these, as they locate their analyses. We should not, however, underestimate the problems of dealing with a context like a kaleidoscope, the patterns rearranged at each shake.

Finally, the kaleidoscopic patterns include the complex relationships between scholarly analysis and the perceptions and actions of policy-makers, which those scholars wishing to influence policy, neglect at their peril. While specialist work on the measurement of performance has continued to develop in sophistication, understanding and perceptions of this among the public at large and among policy-makers, has remained remarkably crude and almost static. Alison Wolf has in sharply polemical fashion drawn attention to the crudity of most policy-makers' notions of the relationship between education and economic growth (Wolf 2002, 2004). A similar polemic might be developed about policy-makers' understanding of work on the structures of the mind, cognitive skills and cognitive attainments. Two snapshots might illustrate this, one from the 1930s, the other from the end of the 1980s. The 1930s snapshot is taken from the discussions of the International Examinations Inquiry meetings, which were, exceptionally, recorded and transcribed *verbatim*. Centre stage were Spearman, Godfrey Thomson and EL Thorndike, giving in effect a 'psychometric master-

class', exploring their own thinking about the processes involved and how far they differed from each other. Thomson in particular reflected on policy implications, of special interest to a mixed international audience of practitioners. The sophistication was immense – but there is a yawning gulf between this and the use of and powers attributed to group verbal reasoning tests in that decade and indeed in the ones that follow (Deary et al 2008; Sutherland 1984).

The 1980s snapshot – or perhaps it is a jerky bit of newsreel – concerns the fortunes of TEGAT, the report of the Task Group headed by Paul Black, on Assessment and Testing, commissioned by Kenneth Baker, as Secretary of State for Education, and submitted in December 1987. Baker and Thatcher had determined not only on the institution of a national curriculum but also of national testing. Black and his group had made a deliberate decision to try to respond in as sophisticated a fashion as possible, perhaps 'to educate our masters'. At the time, the late and much-missed Desmond Nuttall suggested that this was a mis-conceived strategy. Dealing with an administration which took the view that anyone who had been to school knew about education, he argued that the Group might have done better to go for minimalism, for a handful of

very simple tests, which politicians could recognise. As English – if not Welsh or Scottish - primary and secondary schools still cope with the hybrid outcomes of the TEGAT report, who is to say that Nuttall was wrong?

To this, one might add the operation of something which at times looks like a 'law of unintended consequences' in dealing with large, complex and long-term pieces of social engineering – which health and education policies undoubtedly are. As Howard Glennerster, the analyst of the economics of education in the last quarter of the twentieth century, has commented, 'The results of the educational changes of the 1980s and 1990s will take a long time to come to harvest, for good or ill, just as did the changes of the 1960s and 1970s.' In March 2010 Nicholas Timmins, public policy editor of the *Financial Times*, analysed the mechanisms in play in the reduction of waiting times in the NHS, and offered the next government, whoever they might be, some advice: 'Whitehall is littered with policy failures. But it also has a fair number of unsung successes. Go back and examine them. Forget your prejudices, and learn from the experience.' (Timmins 2010). Perhaps history has its uses after all.

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Endnotes

ⁱ For a snapshot on the eve of the 2007 election, see *The Guardian* Thursday March 16, 2006 p 13. (In voluntary-controlled schools LEAs set the admissions policies.)

