

## 'The middle school cometh' . . . and goeth: Alec Clegg and the rise and fall of the English middle school

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### Abstract

This article identifies Alec Clegg as the leading figure behind the English middle-school movement from the late 1960s. It is argued that the rise of middle schools was sustained by Clegg's astute understanding, which he transmitted to other local education authorities (LEAs), that the political imperative of comprehensive reorganisation need not necessarily be at odds with the educational interests of 'middle years' children. The article supports the view of Gosden and Sharp (1978) that the middle-school model 'was probably the West Riding's single greatest contribution to national education in the post-war period'.

### Introduction

In early 1967 Alec Clegg, Chief Education Officer (CEO) for the West Riding, contributed an article to the *Teacher*, the weekly journal of the National Union of Teachers, entitled 'The middle school cometh'. The piece subsequently reached a wider audience in a symposium volume which saw head teachers and chief education officers present both sides of the argument (Clegg et al, 1967). Clegg set out a clear position: the three-tier reorganisation of local schooling presented an opportunity for LEAs to constructively respond

to the Labour government's Circular 10/65, which had requested them to draw up and submit plans for comprehensive education, and to abolish 11-plus selection without becoming wrangled in bitter disputes about the destruction of grammar schools. The business of the grammars – pursuing academic excellence and preparing young people for public examinations, white-collar employment and sometimes university – would go on once these schools were re-designated high or upper schools. The West Riding of Yorkshire was poised to lead by example. In September 1968 the authority's Hemsworth division experienced a three-tier reorganisation that created England's first middle school.

This remainder of this article is divided into four parts. The next section analyses the post-war situation in the West Riding that led Alec Clegg to support the three-tier model of school reorganisation. It is then argued that Clegg's thinking was a catalyst for Edward Boyle's 1964 Education Act. The penultimate section discusses a range of factors behind the rise and fall of middle schools and the conclusion addresses the enduring appeal of Clegg's middle-school vision, notwithstanding the significant decline of this sector since the early 1980s.

### **The limitations of small schools and transfer at 11**

At the end of the Second World War politicians were – as they are today - divided about the merit of the grammar school, with views that did not always slavishly present a party political line. Winning a grammar-school place had provided many leading Socialists with a route from the pit or factory

to a better life, yet while Clement Attlee's post-war Labour government created a universal National Health Service, freely available to all, it stopped short of endorsing non-selective schooling (Kerckhoff et al, 1996, pp. 18-19). This was a disappointment to the most vocal supporters of the comprehensive school in the Labour movement, but it also thwarted the ambitious post-war plans of the Conservative West Riding Committee (Clegg, 1965, p. 75). Not yet in his 40s, its CEO, Alec Clegg, had served under two great directors of education of the early-twentieth century - Sir Peter Innes in Birmingham and F.F. Potter in Cheshire - prior to becoming deputy CEO in Worcestershire and then A.L. Binns' deputy in the West Riding.

A cautious ministerial approach during the 1950s sanctioned the development of largely unnoticed 'experimental' comprehensive schools, often on urban sites in Labour authorities affected by Luftwaffe bombing. Nominally, these catered for the full 11-18 secondary age range, but they typically lacked a significant grammar stream and accommodated children who mostly entered employment at 15. Just 46 such 'comprehensives' were operating by 1958, by which time a body of significant educational research (e.g. by Vernon, 1957; Yates & Pidgeon, 1957) confirmed Clegg's own view that 11-plus selection processes were flawed. The next wave of comprehensive schools, in the early 1960s, were the results of authority-wide planning in the northern industrial Labour heartlands of Bradford, Lancashire, Liverpool, Manchester and Sheffield, geographically close to the West Riding. But a more important initiative for Clegg's authority was the so-called 'Leicestershire experiment', which, from 1957, saw the East Midlands Conservative-

controlled county move in piecemeal fashion towards a system whereby all children in a locality transferred at age 11 to a three-year 'junior high' school. At 14, the brightest and best moved again to two-year Ordinary Level courses in a grammar school while the majority completed one final year of compulsory schooling in the junior high (Mason, 1965).

In 1957 the national political climate seemed to change, with an unlikely *rapprochement* between Labour's Alice Bacon and the Conservative Minister of Education, Sir David Eccles, both of whom saw possibilities for comprehensive secondary education being offered in consecutive stages, rather than in a single school (Pedley, 1957). The emphasis upon local initiative in *Secondary Education for All: A New Drive* (Ministry of Education, 1958), the Conservative White Paper of 1958, was also encouraging to Clegg, but he disliked three particular aspects of the Leicestershire experiment. First, he opposed the retention of a 'fast stream', which, as a sop to grammar school conservatism, permitted a small percentage of pupils to transfer from the primary to high school at the age of ten, rather than 11. Second, Clegg opposed the process of 'guided parental choice' as the sole method of allocating children to upper schools. To his mind, this risked discriminating against working-class children. Third, he believed that two years in the upper school was an insufficiently long period of preparation for public examinations (Kerckhoff et al, 1996: p. 123).

The West Riding's structure of 20 divisional executives in seven county divisions, plus the excepted district of Keighley, complicated policy-making in

the West Riding and placed constraints upon Clegg that did not hinder Stewart Mason, his counterpart in Leicestershire. As a personality, too, Clegg was more cautious than Mason: in 1958 he came under attack from Labour councillors for questioning a proposal – subsequently turned down by the Ministry of Education – to reorganise the Ecclesfield division along comprehensive lines (Kerckhoff et al, 1996: pp. 123-4). At this point, several rural districts pressed ahead with all-through comprehensive reorganisations, but Clegg was now moving to the conclusion that tiered schemes offered better prospects to ditch selection. The biggest single barrier standing in the way of secondary reorganisation for the remainder of the West Riding, he concluded, was the questionable view, set out in the 1926 Hadow Report and subsequently legislated for in the 1944 Education Act, that children should transfer to a secondary school at age 11. Was this best for children? After all, the independent preparatory schools could make a strong claim for success over many years, catering for the eight-to-13 age range before their charges entered public schools. On this matter, Clegg opted to consult a number of West Riding heads, inspectors and training college personnel, who reported their overwhelming support for a break at 13 (Clegg, 1965, p. 76). This evidence seemed to point towards a *three-tier* system, such as Clegg had seen in operation in the United States (Gannon & Whalley, 1975, p. 102). Without demonstrating any firm commitment at this stage, Clegg decided to float the idea of children transferring schools at nine and 13 in a letter to the Ministry of Education, dated May 1963 (Gosden & Sharp, 1978, pp. 187-8).

The Ministry's response led Clegg to believe that Sir Edward Boyle, the Minister of Education, might be persuaded to change the law relating to the age of secondary transfer. He therefore approached several comprehensive-minded divisions and, in October 1963, published a widely circulated memorandum, ensuring maximum press coverage. This reported that the Castleford, Hemsworth and Normanton districts all favoured reorganisation involving 5-9, 9-13 and 13-18 schools, and that two further districts, Craven and Keighley, were also considering such a scheme. The three-tier proposal had its origins in administrative convenience, but the document also presented a vision of the middle school that bore Clegg's unmistakable fingerprints: middle schools would be schools for a modern age, with large classrooms, plenty of space for group activities, movable tables and generous library space. The *Yorkshire Post* headline of 9 October 1963, "Buffer" School to Stop Exam Fear: Plan would be "illegal", highlighted the potential of middle schools to protect children from the backwash of public examination pressures, while also underlining the need for Boyle's personal approval to amend the 1944 Act. On this latter point, Walter James, the anti-comprehensive editor of the *Times Educational Supplement (TES)*, immediately counselled Boyle against 'chopping and changing' to accommodate the West Riding request (*TES*, 11 October 1963).

### **Clegg, Boyle and the 1964 Education Act**

One week after the West Riding plan was announced came the sudden resignation of Prime Minister Harold Macmillan and the temporary destabilisation of the Conservative government. Macmillan's successor, Sir Alec

Douglas-Home, retained Boyle as Minister, but he was dropped from the Cabinet in the summer of the following year to the position of second education minister. This demotion, which Boyle accepted philosophically, accommodated the appointment of Quintin Hogg as Secretary of State at the newly formed Department of Education and Science. Hogg, who had renounced his peerage in the hope of becoming Prime Minister himself, moved the second reading of the Education Bill at the beginning of July 1964, announcing that 'There was nothing sacrosanct in the age of 11 for transfer', that 'Local authorities and voluntary bodies should be given the option to experiment', and that, in the fullness of time, the government inquiry into primary education, chaired by Lady Bridget Plowden, would make recommendations on the age of transfer (*The Times*, 2 July 1964).

Though Hogg took the spotlight, the political architect of the 1964 Education Act was Boyle, who had been impressed by the case that Alec Clegg had made for three-tier comprehensive education solutions. Boyle later reflected on this period, telling Maurice Kogan in 1971 that

We felt at the Ministry in 1963 that we must be in a position not to tell authorities what plan to go for, but give them some kind of broad guidance about certain kinds of plans. It became perfectly clear that we would have to have some changes in the law to allow middle schools so that you didn't have to change from primary to secondary at the age of ten or 11. In fact, as soon as the 1964 general election was announced, I got on to the Prime Minister and

asked if we could please have that Bill which would legalize middle schools? This was arranged without much difficulty and I suppose you might call the 1964 Act my parting gift to the Ministry. (Boyle & Crosland, 1971, p. 78)

The 1964 Education Act may be seen as 'a modest measure which authorised for experimental purposes the establishment of a small unspecified number of schools straddling the junior and secondary age ranges' (Burrows, 1978, p. 30), but it also marked the high point of consensual post-war educational policy-making. As well as Boyle, local education officials and supporters of comprehensive education also saw benefits in the thinking that the West Riding's CEO had originated: the three-tier reorganisation model, now sanctioned for experiment, was an authentic non-selective solution and an alternative to the creation of too-large, all-through comprehensives. The model was more satisfactory than the Leicestershire plan, moreover, which delayed selection to age 14 without abolishing it.

The complex mechanics of local government in the West Riding determined that the Act precipitated no sudden changes. Initially, a large-scale consultation exercise of heads and teachers in the Hemsworth divisional executive revealed significant support for middle schools, with a small minority from grammar and secondary modern schools and senior staff of combined infant/junior schools opposing them on such grounds as fears of diminished status and pay, unsuitable buildings, too-early specialisation and the likelihood of children travelling outside their immediate locality (Edwards,



1967; Gannon and Whalley, 1975, p. 103). The criticism of 'Americanization' was also levelled. While this was denied, Clegg was undoubtedly influenced by American developments in mixed-ability school grouping, the utilisation of classroom space and remedial teaching (Gannon and Whalley, 1975, p. 105-7). Other divisional executives showed interest in the scheme, but only began to consider school reorganisation in the wake of Tony Crosland's Circular 10/65. The three-tier preference of Clegg was well known across the county, but it was left to the divisions to put forward their own proposals, which reflected the diverse industrial, geographical and, increasingly, ethnic variations of the county. Uniformity in comprehensive schooling across the West Riding was never likely: by the mid-1960s there were already 14 well-established 11-18 comprehensive schools operating. In the decade that followed, however, only the Harrogate division moved to introduce the all-through model. Elsewhere, systems incorporating middle schools of the 8-12, 9-13 or 10-13 variant were introduced.

When it came to the details of implementing school change in the divisions, Clegg mostly left it to his coterie of highly able deputies – Peter Newsam, a contributor to this special issue, among them – and assistants to support and execute the divisional plans. 'Following Innes's example', Clegg recalled after his retirement, 'I only went to a sub-committee meeting if there was something important I wanted to see through' (Clegg, 1974, 30). Meanwhile, he focused on presenting what Hargreaves (1986) termed 'the middle school vision'. The schools were to be places where examination pressure would not be felt and where, unlike the lower end of the traditional

secondary school, pupils would continue to have 'their teacher' and be supported in their growth, development and learning (Clegg, 1967: pp. 1, 9):

Middle schools as we envisage them in the West Riding are a new departure. It would be unfortunate if they came to be regarded simply as the last two years of what we now know as primary education joined to the first two years of the secondary school. The main educational justification for this kind of school is a belief, shared by many primary and secondary school teachers, that there is a similarity in the kinds of interests and needs and ways of learning of children within this age group which could be better catered for if they could be brought into the same school, where forms of organisation and ways of working might be developed which would enable these needs to be satisfied more effectively than is at present possible in a system which has a break of school at about the age of eleven (Clegg, 1967, pp. 2-3).

For Edward Boyle, restored to the Conservative front bench in opposition after 1964, three-tier reorganisations offered the possibility of dispensing with the 11-plus without forcing secondary grammar schools into mergers. Boyle's papers, deposited at the University of Leeds, show how, from 1967, such Conservative LEAs as Merton, Northumberland, Oxford and Southampton, each of which had drawn up plans for tiered schemes, offered examples designed to 'put more realistic thinking into the Tory views on education'

(University of Leeds, Boyle Papers [BP], MS 60/25744, Vincent Talbot to Boyle, 17 January 1967; Crook, 1993, pp. 55-8).

Boyle had special reason to be grateful to Clegg, not only as the originator of the three-tier solution, but also for setting an example in terms of consulting widely and avoiding confrontation. 'In my opinion', he wrote to a correspondent in January 1969, 'the West Riding, under successive changes of political control, has adopted a very sensible approach – largely under the influence of their Chief Education Officer, Sir Alec Clegg, who is one of the finest men in educational administration today' (BP MS 60/26038, Boyle to R.A. Doyle, 7 January 1969). The authority's approach was also praised in *Launching Middle Schools*, one of two simultaneously published government pamphlets on such schools in 1970 (DES, 1970a). Inspectors reported that the reorganisation and full implementation of the 5-9, 9-13 and 13-18 scheme in the Hemsworth division from 1968-69 had benefited from meticulous planning. The children in the schools were adjudged to have settled quickly and displayed 'a most noticeable pride in their schools' (DES, 1970a: 13).

### **Middle schools: their rise and fall**

The 1964 Education Act had not simply been an expedient measure for the West Riding. It was of national significance in two important ways. First, it presented a new contextual question – that of the most desirable age of transfer - for the Plowden inquiry into the future of primary schooling. Second, the possibility of developing three-tier school systems excited LEAs seeking to dispense with the 11-plus without creating over-large 'all-through'

comprehensives. Wilson's Labour government, elected with a narrow majority in October 1964, remained officially committed to 11-18 schools, but Circular 10/65 provisionally included the three-tier system as one of six models that might deliver the perceived benefits of comprehensive education. It was initially indicated that the Secretary of State wished only to approve a small number of middle schools, but within nine months of the appearance of Circular 10/65 so many LEAs had submitted schemes for their introduction that a further circular, 13/66, announced general consent (Gannon and Whalley, 1975, p. 2).

In 1964 the Act had empowered the Secretary of State to deem middle schools either 'primary' or 'secondary', a decision that was bound up with the question of whether eight or nine should be the age for transfer from a first to a middle school. On this matter, the much-anticipated Plowden Report pronounced at the beginning of 1967 that a 5-8, 8-12 and 12-plus pattern was marginally to be preferred to the system pioneered in the West Riding. It was accompanied by a rather stronger recommendation 'that the Department [of Education and Science] should announce as soon as possible a national policy on the structure of nursery and primary education and that it should fix a date by which new ages of entry and transfer should become binding' (DES, 1967, para 395).

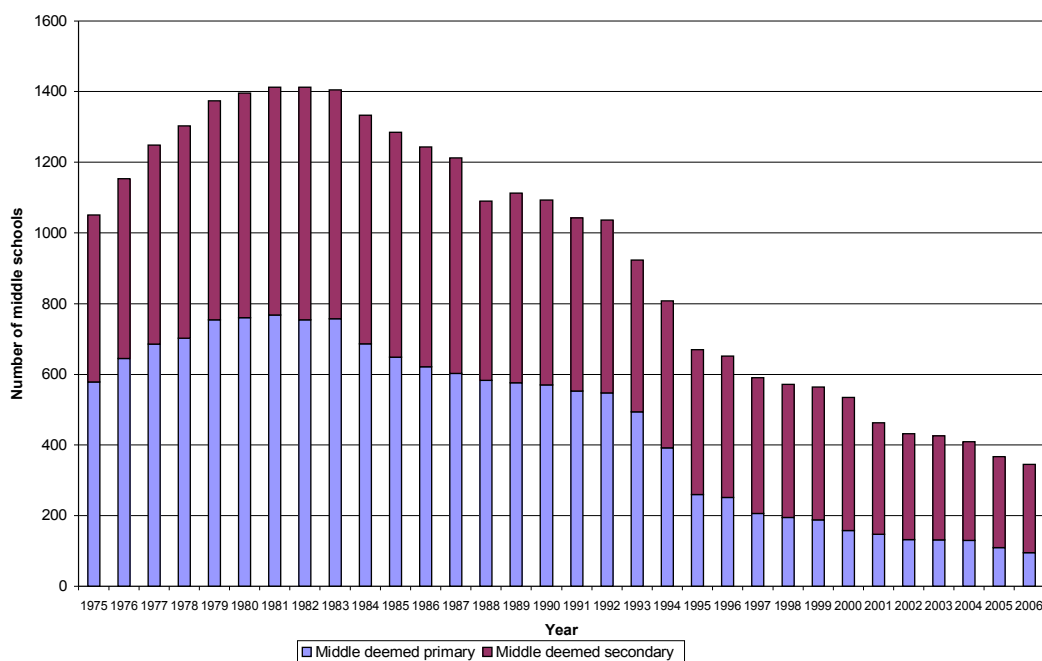
Against a backdrop of mid- to late-1960s optimism that educational expenditure was beginning to be seen by governments as investment, rather than purely a cost, this was fertile period for innovation in British education,

though middle school foundations were confined to England. The Plowden Report initiated new discussion and thinking about teacher training, school design, classroom layouts and furniture, curricula and pedagogies, each of which was to the fore of *Towards the Middle School* (DES, 1970b). This recorded the consensus of psychologists and child development experts that middle schools could provide supportive pastoral environments for girls and early-maturing boys to experience the physiological changes of adolescence. Academically, too, such schools could be places where children's creativity in language and the expressive arts could thrive, and where the public examination pressures upon older children would not be witnessed (DES, 1970b, p. 9).

What happened next has been described as 'one of the strangest stories in the history of English education' (Blyth, 1980, p. 20). In the space of a decade, from 1968, the number of English middle schools rocketed from zero to exceed one thousand, with 526 being established in 1973 alone (Hargreaves and Tickle, 1980, p. 1). Figures from the beginning of the decade showed that that some 14 LEAs had undertaken authority-wide three-tier reorganisations to create 9-13 middle schools, 12 LEAs had opted for the 8-12 model, while the Lancashire towns of Rochdale and Wigan had introduced 10-13 arrangements. The West Riding, like several other LEAs, presented a hybrid system, with all-through comprehensives operating in some divisions and tiered systems - incorporating 8-12, 9-13 or 10-13 middle schools – in others. Nationally, a further 20 LEAs had at least one middle school by 1970 (DES, 1970b, p. 60).

By the time of Sir Alec Clegg's retirement in 1974, which coincided with the disappearance of the West Riding County Council as a result of local government reorganisation, middle schools still seemed to have a bright future. Many more LEAs, particularly shire counties, were developing plans for three-tier reorganisations and, as Figure 1 shows, the overall number of English middle schools continued to rise until a peak was reached at the beginning of the 1980s, around the time Hargreaves and Tickle warned – prophetically, as it turned out – that 'the middle school may, in the absence of . . . explicit party political support, turn out to be no more than it was initially intended to be, an experiment, and a failed one at that' (Hargreaves and Tickle, 1980, pp. 12-13).

**Figure 1:** *The rise and fall of the English middle school, 1975-2006*



Source: DfES/<http://middleschoolresearch.org.uk/nomidschls.xls>

Apart from the absence of sustained party political support, four further factors explain the significant and steady decline from the high point of the 1982. First, the graph very clearly represents the identity problem of the English middle school. Neither Labour nor Conservative governments responded to the Plowden recommendation that a national policy should be developed in respect of the ages of school transfer. With hindsight, it might be argued that this is a matter that the Schools Council should have taken up with central government following publication of pamphlets about the 'middle years' of schooling from eight to 13 (Schools Council 1969; 1972). Moreover, the inflexibility of Department of Education and Science data collection systems undermined the distinctiveness of middle schools: those recruiting their youngest pupils at age eight, in line with the Plowden recommendations, were deemed 'primary', while variants taking pupils from nine and above were 'secondary'. Second, within the middle schools themselves, as Hargreaves highlighted more than 20 years ago, two cultures were to be found. Teachers who had been secondary-trained tended to emphasise 'an academic-elementary inheritance of subject specialism, setting by ability, basic skills and disciplinary firmness' and were more likely to be assigned to teach classes in the upper years. By contrast, infant- or lower junior-trained teachers from a developmental, generalist tradition colonised classes in the earlier years (Hargreaves, 1986, pp. 197-8). A third explanation is that the hopes and expectations invested in middle schools during the 1970s occurred at a time when the national economy was failing, school rolls were falling and budgets were stretched. Within a decade of their introduction, some of the same

politicians who had praised tiered comprehensive systems as an alternative to monster comprehensives were questioning the financial viability of middle schools. Finally, from the 1990s, it was widely asserted that middle schools were inconsistent with the National Curriculum and its attendant testing arrangements. Under pressure from the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) to explain middle-school pupils' underperformance at Key Stage Three, as reported in a range of official documents, a succession of LEAs moved to restore post-1944 arrangements, with transfer from primary to secondary school at age 11. The chair of Northamptonshire's Education Committee told the BBC in 2001 that, 'after spending a lot of time and effort, we have concluded the three-tier system is the problem', adding 'The system has had its day. Nobody is being trained to be a middle school teacher anymore' (BBC News online, 27 June 2001, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/education/1410022.stm>). In similar vein, a former Chief Inspector of Schools, Sir Mike Tomlinson, has argued that moving schools midway between the Key Stages disrupts children's learning and is an impediment to standards of performance. The endurance of three-tier structures had also, Tomlinson added, 'exposed fault lines between middle-school heads defending their turf and upper-school heads keen to expand' (*Guardian*, 5 September 2006, p. 6).

## **Conclusion**

In 2008 it is, perhaps, difficult to dispute that middle schools are an anachronism, out of step with the organisation of the National Curriculum and Key Stage testing. With declining middle school numbers and the retreat of



teacher training institutions and school broadcasting interests from the 'middle years' arena, teachers in these schools may feel increasingly isolated and constrained in respect of promotion opportunities. Out of this sense of 'otherness', however, has grown a professional association, the National Middle Schools' Forum, with a voice as strong as any comparable body in the primary or secondary education sectors.

The recent strong parental campaigns to preserve middle schools in Northumberland (unsuccessfully) and Bedfordshire (successfully) provide a useful reminder that three-tier systems have an enduring appeal to those wishing to keep the size of upper schools in check (see *Independent*, 30 January 1997: p. E8; *Teachers TV News*, 22 September 2006). This was a desire that was firmly understood and shared by Sir Alec Clegg 45 years ago. But Clegg's vision for middle schools went far beyond utilitarianism. He saw middle schools as places of hope, where strong pupil-teacher bonds would last beyond the traditional primary years, where pupils could experience teachers of specialist subjects earlier than in the secondary phase, and where pupils could be best supported as they experienced early adolescence. Something of this vision has been lost in the past quarter of a century, but, in the words of Gosden and Sharp, Clegg's development of a middle-school model that took account of children's interests while also addressing the political imperative of comprehensive reorganisation 'was probably the West Riding's single greatest contribution to national education in the post-war period' (Gosden and Sharp, 1978, p. 189).

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