

## The private troubles and public issue of selective schooling on the basis of aptitude: lessons from lifelong learning stories.

This project is based on the lifelong learning stories of a group of people who lived through a period of very significant change to state funded schooling in England, following the Education Act of 1944. This period of change in education, in the years after the Second World War, is considered by many as a 'watershed' (Crook, 2002) and its shadows still pervade contemporary education policy in England as well as the minds and bodies of those who lived through it. The 1944 Education Act resulted in a schooling system which separated children at age 11 (with the so called 11+ eleven plus test) by aptitude into grammar schools, secondary modern schools and technical schools. This tripartite system was relatively short lived as the evidence of socially divisive and inequitable nature of the system was soon identified (Crook, Power and Whitty, 1999).

There continues to be debate around the world about the benefits and disadvantages of such aptitude based selection systems not least through the regular publications by PISA, PIRLS, TIMSS and other such international comparisons of the impact of school systems and structures. There have been recent calls from the current government in England to debate (again) a revival of Grammar Schools, which would require overturning legislation set in 1981 which deemed that there would be no new grammar schools in England, (DFE, 2016). So it is perhaps ironic, or fortuitous, that this study, looking at the lifelong learning journeys of a group of people who were going to school through the 1940s and 1950s in England's is overshadowed by the ongoing debate in a contemporary education context, about a segregatory school system based on aptitude developed at that time. As Fielding (2014) argues, an example of the absolute importance of history and, in particular, the history of education as a vision of the future from the past. It is perhaps sobering to note that in 2010 Sumner (p. 101) wrote 'Opponents of academic selection should, though, 'take solace from the fact that the arguments that won-over in 1965 are still convincing enough that in 2010 no mainstream British political party will publicly endorse a return to the eleven-plus examination' and that now, only 7 years later, the Conservative Party in England are consulting on such a move. Having history inform these fast moving contemporary policy developments could not be more important.

This project began in research work that is looking at changing patterns of children's journeys between home and school. As part of a contextualising of this study we began a study on lifelong journeys through education. This study involved a group of volunteers with an interest in education who were all members of a local University of the Third Age (U3A)

group . As such, all the participants in the project were over 60 and the majority were retired professional people. As U3A members, all the participants saw themselves as lifelong learners in one way or another. Some were still engaged in formal study, others were learning new skills, interests and so on, socially and informally.

The study has been done with a ‘sociological imagination’, linking history, biography and the relations between the two within society (Wright Mills, 1959 p6). Using this triad, we have engaged with the participants' memories of education (mainly schooling), together with the historical social and cultural contexts of the time. This has given us an opportunity to hear how ‘private troubles’ might help us develop understanding of the ‘public issue’ of segregation in education on the basis of aptitude and the contingent issues of equity and social justice in education.

## METHOD

This project has used a narrative inquiry approach informed by the work of Peter Clough, who hopes that researchers will use narrative inquiry for progressive and political purposes (Clough, 2002).

Volunteers from the U3A were recruited for the project through an open invitation to a local U3A group who were invited to share stories of their own education journeys through one to one conversations with one of the researchers. 18 volunteers accepted the invitation and seemed excited by the prospect of being involved in research. Being members of a group supporting the idea of lifelong learning the volunteers were already primed and thinking about their learning lives. Lifelong learning journey was used in the project as a metaphor as this metaphor of the ‘journey’ is found throughout education policy, research and pedagogy Midgely et al (201)3. The 'journey' was also referred to in its physical form, with consideration of journeys to and from sites of education.

The interviews were very lightly structured with a general, linear approach to generating the narrative data. (Hyvarinen, 2008)., People were encouraged where necessary to move through sites of education in a generally chronological way but this was not insisted upon. Some narratives became quite circular and iterative as the interview wandered around particular events and memories rather than from one time period to the next. Some of the participants had not attended school or other sites of formal education at any stage of their lives. We listened out for talk about periods of formal education in schools, college, higher education

and so on but also at work, formal and otherwise. These 18 conversations were carried recorded and then transcribed. In our analysis, which linked the narratives with time and place (Georgakopoulou, 2003) we listened to the 'private troubles' (Wright Mills, 1959) of these individuals as they told their learning stories and linked these to their own local and national historical and social contexts.

### **Findings from the data**

Listening to the lifelong learning stories revealed a number of issues of interest to those with an interest in developing socially just education systems. These include:

- The juxtaposition of homes and schools in communities and the resulting journeys from home to school for children.
- The education and career opportunities open to men and women and to different socio-economic groups through the life course.
- The impact of the 11+ on schooling, access to Higher Education and career opportunities.

It is the third of these findings that is of interest in this paper what the data tells us about access to education through the life course through the 'filter' of a segregatory school system based on aptitude testing.

Our very initial analysis of some of the findings from this project would seem to confirm that the 11+ exam had a pivotal role to play in the lifelong learning lives of the participants. Traditionally, to access higher education (HE), students require Advanced levels qualifications (A levels). To achieve A levels in the post war period in England, students would need to be able to go to a grammar school. To get to a grammar school, students needed to pass the 11+ (or use Access programmes or have prior learning, professional experience and qualifications). For secondary school students in the post war period, the 11+ was therefore a gateway into Higher Education and 'the professions'. The data gathered in this project seems to confirm segregatory nature of the grammar school system: the majority of the participants who passed the 11+ exam and went onto grammar schools were successful in achieving A levels and went onto Higher Education and those who did not pass, did not.



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