

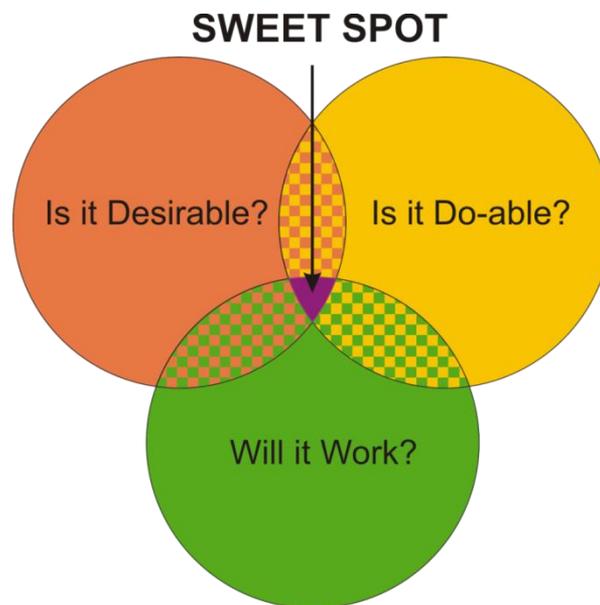
Selection in Education¹: Is There a ‘Sweet Spot’?

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A little while ago I had the privilege of hearing Jon Coles, until recently Director General for Schools in the Department for Education, outlining his approach to policy implementation. He said that he had to consider three groups of issues:

- What does the government want?
- Is it do-able?
- Will it work?

The ‘sweet spot’ is where all three intersect.



In his excellent book, *Education, Education, Education*², Andrew Adonis describes much the same process from the ministerial side of the fence in his struggles to get academies off the ground. The ‘sweet spot’ for him was to find that the policy could be presented as the solution to intractably difficult schools.

I want to apply these same considerations - suitably modified since I am not in government nor a civil servant - to the thorny question of selection in education:

¹ Debate at the HMC Annual Conference, Belfast, 2 October 2012.

² Andrew Adonis (September 2012). *Education, Education, Education: Reforming England's Schools*. London: Biteback Publishing, Chapters 3-6.

- Is it desirable?
- What is the evidence that it works?
- Is it politically acceptable?

Is it Desirable?

Here is the first snag to finding the ‘sweet spot’. Selection in education is highly charged emotionally, particularly the old 11-plus. Even today, grammar schools sharply divide opinion.

On the one hand, there are the advocates like my fellow panellist Graham Brady³, who see grammar schools as engines of social mobility, the route for bright children from whatever background to achieve their full potential. Since it is readily accepted that to succeed as a country in the Olympics or on the football field we need to identify and develop the most talented from an early age, the advocates of selection at age 11 argue the same goes for the intellectually gifted.

On the other, there are those who argue that academic selection is intrinsically unfair and divisive. Educating for a just and cohesive society, in their view, demands that children be taught together to at least the age of 16. Selecting and fast tracking the highly able, they point out, will inevitably widen the gap between the high achievers and those who struggle, and lead to disparity rather than equality of outcomes.

Will it Work?

Politicians are often frustrated with educational research. It rarely provides the clear and decisive answers for which they are looking. They assume that this is because of the poor quality of the research or of the people doing it. But actually it is something more fundamental. It is possible to show that, whatever the evidence, it is in a weak position in relation to beliefs strongly held on other grounds. There are always ways of making the evidence fit prior conceptions.

Research on education is not like that in the physical sciences. While it is obvious that the Earth is flat, fixed and at the centre of the universe, something our experience confirms every day, the evidence is such that we cannot hold on to this comfortable picture. We have to accept that the Earth is a very small spheroid hurtling round and round and through space, totally insignificant on a cosmic scale.

I know of no evidence in education that is sufficiently powerful to overturn beliefs in this way. Indeed, the same evidence can often be used to support diametrically opposed positions. Such is the case with selection in education.

In 1980 Auriol Stevens⁴ reviewed the evidence on the outcomes of the re-organisation to comprehensive education in most local authorities. She concluded:

The cleverest group are no longer reaching the same level of detailed, disciplined academic work at the age they reached it before. At the same time, the middle range of

³ MP for Altrincham and Sale West, and Chairman of the 1922 Committee.

⁴ Then education correspondent of *The Observer*; later editor of the *Times Higher Education Supplement*.

children have gained self-confidence and certificated success in a whole range of courses, conventional and unconventional.⁵

Both sides have claimed her as vindication.

The results of the OECD's PISA studies are often cited as a commentary on the effectiveness of our education system compared to those of other countries. The OECD, in the guise of Andreas Schleicher⁶, has developed a narrative, based on average scores of 15-year-olds on tests of reading, maths and science, claiming that non-selective school systems are better than selective ones. This is repeated at seminars around the world. Kevin Brennan⁷, in a debate in parliament, said:

Andreas Schleicher, the OECD statisticianpointed out at a meeting that I attended that the best school systems in the world are non-selective. That is the clear conclusion of the OECD's research.⁸

Melissa Benn, arch opponent of academic selection, in her speech to the Comprehensive Future AGM in November 2011 was delighted to be able to say:

One of Gove's favourite international figures, OECD head, Andreas Schleicher has unequivocally stated that the best education systems in the world are non selective.⁹

Indeed, countries with non-selective systems to the age of 16, like Finland, do tend to do better in terms of *average* scores. But if countries are compared on the percentage of 15-year-olds reaching the *highest levels*¹⁰ it is the selective education systems which do better. In maths, for example, Switzerland, Flemish Belgium, Germany and the Netherlands star among European countries. Even so, they are some way behind the selective Asian systems in Shanghai, Singapore, Hong Kong and South Korea. The OECD recognises this, but only makes a highly qualified reference to it on page 35 of Volume IV of the 2009 PISA results¹¹.

The PISA scores can be prayed in aid by both camps.

Is it Do-able?

I cannot claim much of a pointer to a 'sweet spot' from 'desirability' or 'evidence'. But it is 'do-ability' that appears to be the clincher. No government is likely to propose an education system that advantages a quarter of the population. The sheer electoral arithmetic is against it, and the 11-plus carries too much emotional baggage.

The weakness of the 1944 Education Act was that it did not provide a good education for the majority of children. Those who got into grammar schools had available to them an excellent start to their lives. But there was no real alternative. Some very good technical schools were established, but at their height they only catered for about seven per cent of the age cohort.

⁵ Auriol Stevens (March 1980). *Clever Children in Comprehensive Schools*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, page 159.

⁶ Deputy Director for Education and Special Advisor on Education Policy to the OECD's Secretary-General.

⁷ MP for Cardiff West.

⁸ *Hansard*, 8 November 2011, Column 43WH.

⁹ Melissa Benn (15th November 2011). *Education – The Current Political Landscape*. Comprehensive Future AGM.

¹⁰ Alan Smithers and Pamela Robinson (June 2012). *Educating the Highly Able*. London: The Sutton Trust, Chapter 6.

¹¹ OECD (2010). PISA 2009 Results Volume IV: *What Makes a School Successful?* p35: 'While highly selective schoolstend to perform better than non selective schools in many countries'

Secondary modern schools were the places the 11-plus failures went to and the educational philosophy of the time thought it a kindness not to trouble them further with exams.

The 1944 Act offered essentially a good academic education or nothing. No attempt to provide an alternative has so far succeeded. Harold Wilson presented comprehensive schools as a grammar school education for all¹². There have been succession of attempts, all abortive, to provide a good technical/practical education. Lord Young wanted to create new technical schools, but ended up with the diffuse Technical and Vocational Initiative (TVEI) spread through schools¹³. The De Ville Committee (1986) led to the introduction of NVQs and GNVQs¹⁴. GNVQs did not last long before being replaced in 2000 by Advanced Certificates in Vocational Education (dubbed vocational A-levels). The latest attempt, the overly complex Diploma, was doomed to failure from the outset¹⁵.

If there is to be academic selection it has to be balanced by other desirable forms of education that take young people forward in their lives and will be freely chosen by parents as being better suited to their son or daughter than abstruse academic study.

Is there a ‘Sweet Spot’

A return to academic selection at age 11 is almost certainly out of the question. A grammar school in every town was offered by John Major in the 1997 election, but did nothing to rescue him from heavy defeat. UKIP has recently revived the slogan and it will be interesting to see how far it takes them. The existing grammar schools are extremely popular with ten or more applicants for every place¹⁶. But they are only a very small part of the system (164 schools taking 4.8% of pupils). Parents are prepared to chance their arm knowing that if they do not succeed there will be a comprehensive or academy nearby to which their children can go, even if it means crossing a local authority boundary.

While selection at 11 seems a remote possibility, selection is generally accepted at ages 16 and 18. Whether or not young people can progress to a sixth form or college, and the subjects open to them, depend on GCSE performance. Which university and what courses young people can go on to are largely determined by performance in the exams at 18. The present government seems content with this. Indeed, through the introduction of the EBacc it seems to be trying to apply ‘nudge’ theory¹⁷ to keep as many young people as possible in academic study to the age of 16, postponing different routes till later.

But age 16 is probably too late. George Osborne has found the money for specialist maths schools from the age of 16, but it is well known that talent in maths flowers early. In other countries the different pathways following on from a common curriculum normally last three or four years depending on where they are headed. In our system we attempt to keep

¹² Alan Smithers and Pamela Robinson (1991). *Beyond Compulsory Schooling*. London: Council for Industry and Higher Education, p19.

¹³ Lord David Young (1990). *The Enterprise Years*. London: Headline Book Publishing, Chapter 7.

¹⁴ Alan Smithers (1997). A critique of NVQs and GNVQs. In *Education 14-19 Critical Perspectives*. (Ed Sally Tomlinson), London: The Athlone Press, page 55 *et seq*.

¹⁵ Alan Smithers and Pamela Robinson (2008). *The Diploma: A Disaster Waiting to Happen?* London: CEER for The Gatsby Foundation.

¹⁶ Graeme Paton and Lucy Kinder (26 October 2012). More pupils sitting grammar school entrance exams. *The Daily Telegraph*.

¹⁷ Richard Thaler and Cass Sunstein (2009). *Nudge: Improving Decisions About Health Wealth and Happiness*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

everyone together to age 16 then squeeze what follows into just two years. Young people literally vote with their feet with 10 per cent of 15 year-olds persistently truanting¹⁸.

This leads me to wonder whether the ‘sweet spot’ is at age 14. At this age young people could make guided choices across an array of equivalent but different pathways. Some would be academic as now, but there would also have to be excellent practical and technical programmes which incorporated the core subjects. England has so far failed to devise these pathways, but they are not impossible. They are long established in Germany and the Netherlands. Sig Prais in an early study demonstrated that a higher percentage of German children did well in basic maths across their range of pathways than did ours fed on exclusively academic diet¹⁹. In the Netherlands motor vehicle maintenance teachers regard it as a perk to get their cars serviced by their pupils, but when I mentioned the possibility in this country it was greeted with alarm – “I would not let that lot anywhere near mine!”²⁰.

My proposal for finding a way through the maze of academic selection is that the government should encourage the system to move towards offering a choice of academic and practical pathways from the age of 14²¹. With the raising of the participation age to 18, the GCSE is no longer needed as a school leaving examination at age 16. It could be replaced by national assessment at age 14 to underpin choice among different pathways. The first year of those pathways could be an orientation year during or after which those who found they had made the wrong choice could switch.

It need not involve massive upheaval. Within the system there are already high schools which admit at age 13 or 14. The government is supporting university technical colleges and studio schools where again entry is at 13 or 14. Further education colleges, including the sixth form colleges, are to be enabled admit 14 year-olds. Schools could be allowed to set their own age of admission in a system of participation to 18.

Entry at age 13 will not come as news to you. Many of you are the heads of senior schools that admit at that age. Some time ago I was speaking about these ideas with the head master of a leading former direct grant school. He said he would gladly have the school rejoin the state sector if it could be academically selective from the age of 14. It may be that others of you feel the same.

Not only would an education system reshaped along these lines provide greater opportunity to develop talents of all kinds and improve the quality of life of us all as we drew on them, but it could also provide an opportunity to bridge the divide between independent and state schools.

Yes, there is a sweet spot for selection in education and it is at age 14.

¹⁸ DfE (October 2012). *Pupil Absence in Schools in England, Autumn Term 2011 and Spring Term 2012*. SFR 22/2012, Table 4b; persistent absentees (missed 15% or more of possible sessions) rose from 3.9% in Year 7 to 9.8% in Year 11.

¹⁹ Sig Prais and Karin Wagner (May 1985). Schooling Standards in England and Germany: Some Summary Comparisons Bearing on Economic Performance. *National Institute Economic Review* 112, 53-76.

²⁰ Alan Smithers (1993). *All Our Futures: Britain's Education Revolution*. London: Channel Four Television.

²¹ I outline this in more detail in a chapter in Lord Kenneth Baker's book, *14-18 – A New Vision for Secondary Education*, to be brought out early in 2013 by Bloomsbury Publishing .