

# Comprehensive schools and social mobility

**Vikki Boliver and Adam Swift**

**As any casual reader of the nation's newspapers knows, or thinks she knows, Britain has become a less socially mobile society in recent decades, and much of the blame lies with the comprehensive school system.**

But has social mobility in Britain really declined? And is it really true that comprehensive schools are worse for social mobility than the selective grammar and secondary modern schools they have largely replaced?

## **The debate on social mobility**

The answer to the first of these questions is far from clear cut and is, in fact, a matter of continuing academic dispute. On the one hand, a group of economists at the London School of Economics assert that, yes, social mobility in Britain has declined, and on the other, a collection of sociologists at the University of Oxford insist that, no, it hasn't. The economists cite in support of their claim evidence that the incomes of people born in 1970 were more strongly correlated with the incomes of their parents than had been the case for people born in 1958 (Blanden, Gregg and Machin, 2005). The sociologists, using the same data source, cite contrary evidence that people's occupational class destinations were no more and no less strongly linked to their class origins for those born in 1970 as compared to those born in 1958 (Goldthorpe and Jackson, 2008).

The sociologists' claim that the extent of class mobility has remained the same has not been disputed by economists. In contrast, the economists' claim that income mobility has declined has been strongly contested by sociologists, who have argued that the economists' findings may simply reflect the unreliable nature of one-shot measures of income (Erikson and Goldthorpe, 2010). Nevertheless, it has been the economists' rather than the sociologists' account of things that the national newspapers have run with, perhaps because stories about things having got worse are considered more newsworthy than stories about things having stayed much the same (see Goodhart, 2008, for a more balanced review of the evidence offered up by both camps).

Many journalists reporting the economists' verdict on social mobility have, however, gone one step further to claim not only that social mobility has declined but also that the demonstrated cause of the reduction was the introduction of a comprehensive school system. According to *The Times*:

A Sutton Trust study for the London School of Economics proves that comprehensives damage social mobility. (*The Times*, 9.08.2005)

Similarly, according to *The Sunday Times*, *The Daily Mail*, and *The Observer*, respectively:

A report from the London School of Economics (LSE) published last month showed that the decline of grammar schools had helped deepen class divisions, effectively kicking the ladder away from bright children. (*The Sunday Times*, 31.07.2005)

The end of the grammar school system has helped widen class divisions, say researchers. (*The Daily Mail*, 25.04.2005)

40 years of comprehensives have left Britain a sclerotic society where parents' money matters more than a child's talent. (*The Observer*, 31.07.2005)

What is most striking about these newspaper articles is that in actual fact the economists' findings say nothing at all about the impact of comprehensive schools on social mobility. The period in which income mobility is reported to have declined does indeed coincide with the long and as yet still incomplete process of comprehensivisation, but the economists don't claim to have shown that the former caused the latter, nor do they even attempt to explore such a hypothesis. In fact, these news stories appeared before there was any published research concerning the implications for social mobility of the shift to a comprehensive education system in Britain. In short, the claim that comprehensive schools have been shown to be a bad thing for social mobility was invented by newspaper journalists.

The only research to our knowledge which speaks to the question of whether or not comprehensive schools compare unfavourably to selective schools with regard to social mobility in the UK was published recently in the *British Journal of Sociology* (Boliver and Swift, 2011). In this study we examine the social mobility outcomes of several thousand people born in 1958 who entered secondary schools in 1969 some four years into the transition from a selective to a comprehensive system. At this time, newly established comprehensive schools coexisted alongside the grammar and secondary modern schools of the old selective system, making it possible to compare the mobility outcomes of people who were educated simultaneously in these different types of school. We outline the details of our results below, but our headline finding is easily summed up: comprehensive schools were *not* worse for social mobility than the selective system schools they were intended to replace.

### **Comprehensives and social mobility: some preliminaries**

It is crucial before going any further to spell out that by the term 'selective system schools' we mean grammar schools and secondary modern schools combined. This may seem an unnecessary clarification, but very often advocates of selective education sing loudly in praise of grammar schools while remaining silent on the subject of secondary moderns even though they in fact constituted by far the larger part of the selective school system. In the same vein, when the comprehensive system is held to be worse than the selective system for social mobility, the contrast usually made is between comprehensive schools and grammar schools alone; secondary modern schools are effectively forgotten,

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presumably because they aren't considered engines of social mobility. It is a worthwhile exercise to compare comprehensive schools to grammar schools alone. But of course the real measure of whether or not comprehensive schools are bad for mobility lies in their comparison with the selective system considered in its entirety, that is, with grammar schools and secondary modern schools in combination.

It's also crucial that we do not conceptualise social mobility as being solely about upward mobility on the part of those from low social origins. Claims made about the harmful impact of comprehensivisation on social mobility have typically focused on the idea that comprehensive schools offer people from lower social origins fewer opportunities for upward movement than grammar schools. But an equally important consideration is how different types of school affect the chances that those from higher origins will succeed in avoiding downward mobility. In other words, to get a complete picture we need to look at mobility outcomes for those from low-origin groups relative to those for higher-origin groups – we need to consider *relative* mobility chances, that is, the *distribution* of mobility chances across those from all social origins.

A final point should be obvious but is worth stating explicitly. If we want to determine to what extent social mobility outcomes depend on the type of school people attend, we need to take into account the fact that people's personal attributes influence what type of school they attend as well as their mobility outcomes. Most obviously, a person's intellectual ability is likely to influence whether they attend a comprehensive, grammar or secondary modern school, and can also be expected to influence their income and class position later in life. Other attributes such as a person's gender, their social origins, and the region in which they live are likely to impact in similar ways. Clearly it is important to control statistically for these attributes if we want to hone in on any effect on mobility outcomes of the type of school attended. Otherwise we may attribute to school types what are actually differences between the children attending them.

### **Comprehensive schools are as good for social mobility as selective schools**

With the foregoing in mind, our study compares comprehensives with grammar schools *and* with secondary moderns; it examines mobility outcomes in absolute *and* relative terms; and it adjusts for differences in the personal attributes of people attending different types of school, including intellectual ability as measured at age 11. And, in order to address the issue in terms congenial both to economists and sociologists, we examine patterns of social mobility both between income bands and between occupational class categories.

Focusing first on the contrast between comprehensive and grammar schools alone, we found that those from low origins were no more likely to be upwardly mobile, in terms of either income band or occupational class category, if they attended a grammar school rather than a comprehensive. Those who originated in the lowest income quartile were no more likely to move up out of that quartile by going to a grammar school rather than a comprehensive. Likewise, those from working-class origins were no more likely to move up out of the working class by virtue of having attended a grammar rather than a comprehensive school. A child's chances of 'escaping' the working class, or the bottom

25 per cent of the income distribution, were not increased by going to a grammar school.

That said, those from low-income and working-class origins who *were* upwardly mobile did tend to climb higher if they had attended a grammar school rather than a comprehensive. Attending a grammar school (rather than a comprehensive) made those people from low-income backgrounds who were upwardly mobile more likely to end up with incomes in the third rather than the second quartile of the income distribution (that is, in the 51-75 per cent range rather than the 26-50 per cent range). They were not, however, more likely to gain access to the *top* income quartile. Similarly, going to a grammar school (rather than to a comprehensive) made those from working-class backgrounds who were upwardly mobile more likely to end up in a professional or managerial job, rather than a lower level white collar job.

Summarising to this point, then, we might say that low-income and working-class children who attended grammar schools were just as likely to be *immobile* as otherwise similar children who went to comprehensives. The effect of grammar schools seems to have been specifically to increase somewhat the *extent* of the mobility enjoyed by those who did move up (though even here they did not increase people's chances of moving from the bottom quarter to the top quarter of the income distribution). If, like so much of the media, we were interested solely in the upward mobility of the kind of children who went, or might have gone, to grammar schools, that would be the end of the story.

But *overall* social mobility involves a lot more than that. Those who value social mobility because of its relation to social justice want a society in which mobility chances are more equitably distributed between those born into different social origins. In sociologists' jargon, they are interested in *relative* chances. Clearly one can't assess the distribution of mobility chances by looking at children from lowly origins alone. If grammar schools helped protect children from more advantaged origins against downward mobility more than they helped those from lowly origins achieve upward mobility, then grammar schools would be enemies of social justice. So what happens when we consider the effect of school type on children from the full range of origins?

For income mobility, we find that going to a grammar school helps children from low income families who are upwardly mobile move up more than it helps those from high income origins avoid moving down. But this relative advantage is only with respect to outcomes in the middle of the income range; grammar schools do not help low-income children more than they help others as far as chances of reaching the top and avoiding the bottom quartiles are concerned.

With respect to class mobility, we find no difference between grammar schools and comprehensives in terms of the relative mobility chances of children from different class origins. Going to a grammar school helps working-class children climb higher in the event that they are mobile at all, but going to a grammar school does just as much to protect those from professional and managerial backgrounds against downward mobility.

Of course, the findings reported so far are less than half the story. All compare the effects on social mobility of grammar schools and comprehensives; there has been no mention yet of secondary moderns. Clearly any proper assessment of the effects of comprehensivisation on social mobility must look at *all* children, comparing comprehensives not with grammar schools but with *selective system* schools as a whole. Once we

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factor in the children who went to secondary moderns, our findings are clear and simple. Comparing relevantly similar children, selective system schools were no more conducive to mobility, whether upward or downward, whether between income quartiles or class categories, than were comprehensives. Some kinds of mobility advantage were enjoyed by children from low-income or working-class families who went to grammar schools, but these advantages, specific and modest in the first place, were in any case cancelled out by equivalent mobility *disadvantages* suffered by those who went to secondary moderns.

Overall, then, and whatever you may have read in the newspapers, the comprehensive school system was as good for social mobility as the selective system it replaced.

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