

VOICE OF THE ICONO CLASS ROOM

“We will allow people to set up new schools,” announced Nick Clegg at his party’s 2010 autumn conference – as if Libdem permission had been sought for the continued rolling of that particular snowball, let alone required – “but,” he continued impressively, “we will not allow them to pick and choose the brightest.” Ha. Take that, Tories!

“As long as the coalition lasts I don’t think there is any room for manoeuvre,” confirmed Michael Gove in an interview for *Standpoint* magazine two years later, neatly dodging the question of how a wholly Conservative government might approach the issue of admissions. “Selection is an incendiary subject in England.”

And, much as it pains me to type these words, I think Gove is right. As soon as the S-word is mentioned in the context of educational debate, it automatically attracts notions of elitism, exclusion and divisiveness, apparently through some kind of conceptual magnetism. A fair system should give equal opportunities to all children; and so allocating places in the best schools according to the results of compulsory academic assessment is therefore, by definition, not a fair system. Which makes ‘selection’ a bad thing. Full stop, next policy, please (£50m for ‘catch-up tuition’ after the end of Y6, apparently, so absolutely everyone is nicely set up to fly through the newly rigorous GCSE replacement exams, which absolutely everyone will take).

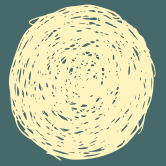
But hang on a minute; aren’t we missing something here? It is, I would suggest, a fundamental misconception to assume that the debate about academic selection is all about how best to ensure that bright children from less than privileged backgrounds are able to complete fairly with their more affluent and well-connected peers. That strikes me as frustratingly backward thinking; focused on keeping the elite institutions, but filling them with socially diverse cohorts. Surely, what every right-thinking person wants to see in

this country is an educational system of a universally high standard, that values and nurtures every child for the unique individual he or she is? And is it not unreasonable to assume that this might involve a range of pathways from 11-18, not all of them leading towards traditional academic qualifications or indeed, a career in politics, or at the BBC? And leading on from that, is it so very terrible, then, to suggest that it might be more effective for students to follow those various pathways in specifically tailored environments, than to expect every school to cater for every learning journey?

To clarify, I am not suggesting that we instantly and entirely drop the current restrictions regarding selective admissions. There’s a lot of groundwork that needs to be done before this could result in anything other than hideous retrogression – not least in terms of forcing a shift in social attitudes. For example, talk of how selection risks ‘relegating children to the scrap heap at 14’ says much more about society’s attitude to certain ways of earning a living than it does about the validity of a multi-stranded education system that takes into account the fact that some young people could be significantly disadvantaged (not to mention bored and unhappy) in an educational setting that is entirely focused on them achieving standardised targets in narrow and specific areas of learning. We’d have to come up with a better, less playable system of assessment than the 11+, too.

However, I’m starting to get just a little tired of tiptoeing around the undeniable fact that some children are naturally more academically able than others – and ignoring the equally valid talents of those ‘others’ in the process. In my ideal world, ‘academic selection’ would be encouraged as just one way of identifying as early as possible the best outcome for each young person... and the only thing ‘relegated to the scrapheap’ would be the nonsensical idea that the doctor is necessarily more ‘successful’ than the guy who mends her car.

We may have our differences, but everyone agrees that academic selection has no place in state education, right? Well, not entirely...



WHAT DO YOU THINK?

Do you have a point to make about the state of secondary education today that perhaps couldn’t safely be raised at the next staff meeting? Email editor@teachsecondary.com with an outline of your argument, and we’ll consider it for a future Voice of the Iconoclassroom rant...