

“Eleven-plus” Failure and Delinquency

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I BLAME the “eleven-plus”. Like some of my generation and length of service I have been baffled as to why so many young people get into trouble (and have increasingly done so since 1950) in this affluent society of ours when one would think the reverse would be the case. Pre-war, when social conditions were just shocking, one expected a high proportion of young people to get into trouble and of course we regarded the numbers coming into our borstals as a high proportion. With a solid bank of three million unemployed, when “love on the dole” was the norm, the chances of obtaining employment on leaving school were slim and even those who did obtain employment knew that as soon as they reached the age of 18 years, the chances were that they would be put out in favour of a 14 year-old who could be employed for the next four years at a low rate of wage. In the event, however, and in contrast with today’s figures, that “high” rate was low indeed.

We had our borstal boys of course, but so many of them were, to quote the report on the work of the Prison Department quoting one open borstal Governor: “vivid, really able youngsters”.

The numbers who came to borstal were considerably less and the success rate on release considerably greater. Not so many coming in, more succeeding on release in an age when jobs and money were hard to come by. We used to congratulate ourselves on the success of our methods. Now I am not so sure that we had the right to do so. With those figures at the back of our minds we have been guilty of blaming today’s methods for the dwindling success rate but so far have been unable to find out why so many young people get into trouble now that the age of the common man is a golden one. The “Johnny come latelys” of the Borstal Service suggest that the better use of probation and the remand and detention centres have creamed off those “vivid” youngsters but even that point, which I accept as valid, does not explain why so many more are getting into trouble in the first place. I repeat, I blame the eleven-plus.

Pre-war, the secondary school was the grammar school and little else. An examination was held yearly at elementary schools for a few places at these grammar schools. If you did not pass you did not go to a secondary school at

all but left the elementary school at the age of 14 years and to have reached "standard seven" was the highest goal one could achieve in a school career. If you won a scholarship you went to the grammar school providing your parents could afford the extra cost of school uniform and books, and to keep you at school for an extra year or so. As I remember, rather less than half of those who won the scholarship were able to take advantage of the accomplishment; their parents just could not afford it. So that in after years when asked the question: "What school did you go to?" and the answer was this or that elementary school, leaving at the age of 14 years, there was no sense of shame at not going to a grammar school, no sense of being less clever or less well educated than the majority. It was just that you had been unfortunate in your choice of parents. There was no high mountain of cleverness raised by the eleven-plus where the "kids" of today graze the slopes according to their mental nimble-footedness, there was only the flat plain with the occasional bump in the landscape that grew a more nourishing educational pasture and if in the distance there were hills, they were the hills of the public school and although you knew that there was "gold in them there hills" you knew also it needed gold to get you there.

Nowadays things have changed. Most parents are well able to afford the cost of their children

going to secondary schools and all children do in fact go to secondary schools whether they be grammar or modern (or clever and less-clever) and they all wear uniforms paid for by the family allowance and a reduction in income tax and maintained at those schools by the same "perks". So the youngster of today has no one to blame except himself for not going to a grammar school . . . and there comes the rub. Finding himself less clever and being indelibly stamped as such by the segregation of the eleven-plus without at the same time coming from less affluent parents than those who have made it, he becomes bitter and is determined to show them i.e. society, that he is just as good as they are. He cannot beat them with his brains so he tries to beat them with his fists.

The case for having comprehensive schools is a good one if only to reduce the crime rate. When children are able to switch from one educational stream to another under the same roof and wearing the same dress without loss of self-esteem, when children are no longer stigmatized for life by an eleven-plus failing, when late developers always have the chance to make up loss of ground, then I believe will come the much needed drop in juvenile delinquency. The quality of those who then get into trouble will of course be even lower than it is at present but by then the methods of dealing with them will have improved. The quantity will be much less.