

# Comprehensives

Solution to the ills of selective  
education?

## Late 1950s – mid-1960s

- Growing sense that tripartite system was reproducing class divisions
- Middle class children at “risk” of ending up in secondary moderns
- Some local authorities experimented with comprehensive schooling

# 1965

- Government circular instructing LEAs to move towards comprehensive system
  - LEAs did not HAVE to introduce comprehensive schools, but many chose to scrap the tripartite system in favour of comprehensives

# Comprehensives

- Gave improved access to further & higher education.
  - Greater opportunity for working class children
- Were associated with ideas of democracy
  - “progressive education”
- Were meant to provide “grammar school education for all”
- Were designed to break down class barriers

# Success?

- Comprehensives have been used as a political tool
  - Politicians regularly use the comprehensive system to support or discredit selective education
- Examination results
  - Have improved since the introduction of comprehensives and more children now gain qualifications
  - However, some would argue that this is because education has been “dumbed down”

## ■ Achievement

### ■ National Children's Bureau longitudinal study

- 1958 onwards
- High ability children were found to achieve as well as they would have done in selective education
- Lower ability children performed better than they would have done in selective education (ie a secondary modern school)

## ■ Competition – “creaming off”

- Private schools or selective state schools often attract the most able students, leaving comprehensive schools with the less able students

- Social class divisions have remained
  - Achievement
    - Middle class children still achieve more highly than working class children
  - Social mix
    - Schools usually draw students from the surrounding area, this often means that all the students come from similar social class backgrounds
- Streaming/setting
  - Children are often divided into classes by ability – some would argue that this merely recreates the tripartite system within one school

# Further Reading

- Sociology in Focus, pp.276-278
- Sociology for AS Level, pp.71-2
- Sociology: Themes & Perspectives, pp.774-777