Comprehensive schools do not reduce social mobility, say researchers

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Claims that children are worse off in socio-economic terms if they go to a comprehensive rather than a selective state-school are disputed by new research.

The study found that those who went to comprehensive schools were not disadvantaged in terms of social mobility compared with those who attended grammar schools and secondary moderns.

The research, published in the British Journal of Sociology, was carried out by Dr Vikki Boliver, from the Department of Social Sciences at Bath Spa University, and Dr Adam Swift, from the Department of Politics and International Relations at the University of Oxford.

The researchers analysed data from the National Child Development Survey, which tracks all children born in Britain in a particular week in 1958.

Some of these children were among the first comprehensive school pupils, during the transition away from a selective system.

Unlike previous researchers Boliver and Swift not only compared the social mobility of children who attended comprehensives with those from grammar schools, but also included secondary modern schools in their analysis.

They looked at children from all social backgrounds, rather than just those from working- class or low-income families, and they compared children of similar measured ability at age 11.

The study measured children’s subsequent progress in terms of income and class and found that overall the selective schools gave no advantage in social mobility.

Going to a grammar school rather than a comprehensive did not make children from poorer backgrounds more likely to be upwardly mobile.

Moreover, any mobility advantage provided by grammar schools was cancelled out by the disadvantage suffered by those who attended secondary moderns.

Looking at the total cohort of children, the findings suggest that comprehensive schools were as good for social mobility as the selective schools they replaced.

Lead author Dr Vikki Boliver explained: ‘Whereas much media discussion focuses exclusively on grammar school pupils, with many bemoaning the introduction of the comprehensive school as depriving academically able children of a crucial ladder of opportunity, our analysis provides a more rounded approach.

’Dr Adam Swift added: ‘We must compare school systems, not merely individual types of school within them.

Looking at the full picture rather than grammar schools alone, we find little to support the idea that comprehensive schools had a negative effect on their pupils’ mobility chances.’

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**Notes for editors**

‘Do comprehensive schools reduce social mobility?’ by Vikki Boliver and Adam Swift is published in the British Journal of Sociology at <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1468-4446.2010.01346.x/abstract>

The sample size for the analysis of class mobility was 4,728. The sample size for the analysis of income mobility was 3,335.

Dr Vikki Boliver is a Lecturer in Sociology at Bath Spa University. Her current research focuses on patterns and processes of intergenerational social mobility in Britain, and on social inequalities of access to higher status universities in the UK.

Dr Adam Swift is a Lecturer in Politics at the University of Oxford and Member of the Centre for the Study of Social Justice. His research interests include the normative aspects of class analysis and social mobility and the morality of school choice.