

The State and Private Education: An Evaluation of the Assisted Places Scheme

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Preface

The research reported in this book is a case-study of a particular policy initiative announced by a newly-elected Conservative Government in 1979. It also considers that policy in relation to earlier attempts to define the place of independent schools in the education system and in the light of recent efforts by the Right to alter radically the traditional balance between public and private educational provision. The case-study follows the Assisted Places Scheme from its origins within the private sector, through the mobilization of political support for it while the Conservative Party was in opposition, to its implementation from 1981 onwards and its subsequent expansion. Overall, the book provides a preliminary evaluation of the Scheme in terms of its benefits and costs for individual pupils and for the education system.

In our efforts to understand the origins and implementation of the Scheme, we were greatly helped by Mark Carlisle and Stuart Sexton (political adviser successively to Norman St John Stevas, Mark Carlisle and Sir Keith Joseph); by James Cobban, formerly head of Abingdon School and a major influence on the Scheme's shaping and promotion within the private sector; and by Clive Saville and Roger Morgan, who were successively Registrars for Independent Schools within the Department of Education and Science. Throughout our collection of evidence about the beneficiaries of the Scheme, we received full cooperation from the Assisted Places 'unit' within the DES and we are especially grateful for the help given to us at various stages of the research by Petra Laidlaw, Graham Kirkpatrick, Cathy Christiesan and Colin Seal. We are also grateful to the many individuals who talked or wrote to us at various times about the Scheme's origins and evolution — for example, Gavin Alexander, John Dancy, David Maland and Peter Mason. In our attempts to understand the political opposition to the Scheme, we were particularly helped by Neil Kinnock, Bert Clough, Clement Freud and Elizabeth Maddison. Our greatest debt though is, of course, to the many headteachers, teachers, pupils and parents from both sectors of education whom we interviewed during the course of the research and who made most of the fieldwork so enjoyable. We hope that their voices come through clearly, if anonymously.

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Council/Economic and Social Research Council (award number C00230036) and it could not have been carried out without that support or that provided by King's College London, Newcastle University and Bristol Polytechnic. Dr Mary Fulbrook was Research Associate for the first year of the project and made a particular contribution to our attempts to locate the Scheme in its historical context. We are also grateful to Geoffrey Cockerill, who was honorary consultant to the project from 1982 to 1985, took a notably active interest in its development, and gave us the benefit of his long experience as a senior civil servant in the DES which had included being Secretary to the Public Schools Commission. Responsibility for the account and assessment of the Scheme offered in this volume nevertheless rests entirely with its three authors.

Tony Edwards
John Fitz
Geoff Whitty
September, 1989

List of Abbreviations

ACC	Association of County Councils
AMA	Association of Metropolitan Authorities
AVIS	Association of Voluntary-aided and Independent Grammar Schools
CSE	Certificate of Secondary Education
DES	Department of Education and Science
DGJC	Direct Grant Joint Committee
ESRC	Economic and Social Research Council
FEVER	Friends of the Education Voucher Experiment in Representative Regions
GBA	Association of Governing Bodies of Public Schools
GBGSA	Association of Governing Bodies of Girls' Public Schools
GCSE	General Certificate of Secondary Education
GPDST	Girls' Public Day School Trust
GSA	Girls' Schools' Association
HMC	Headmasters' Conference
HNC	Higher National Certificate
HND	Higher National Diploma
IAPS	Incorporated Association of Preparatory Schools
IEA	Institute of Economic Affairs
ILEA	Inner London Education Authority
ISIS	Independent Schools' Information Service
ISJAC	Independent Schools Joint Advisory Committee
ISJC	Independent Schools Joint Committee (later Council)
LEA	Local Education Authority
NUT	National Union of Teachers
OPCS	Office of Population Censuses and Surveys
PCS	Public Schools Commission
SHA	Secondary Heads Association
SPSS	Statistical Package for Social Scientists program
SSRC	Social Science Research Council
TVEI	Technical and Vocational Education Initiative

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The Assisted Places Scheme and its Evaluation

Among the provisions of the 1980 Education Act was a scheme for 'enabling pupils who might not otherwise be able to do so to benefit from education at independent schools'. Between 5000 and 6000 means-tested places were to be made available each year to academically able children whose parents could not afford full fees. Participating schools would 'remit fees that would otherwise be chargeable in respect of pupils selected for assisted places', and the Secretary of State would 'reimburse the schools for the fees that are remitted'.¹

An explicit pledge to 'restore the direct-grant principle' for the benefit of 'bright children from modest backgrounds' had been part of the 1979 Conservative election manifesto, and the announcement of an Assisted Places Scheme was the first significant policy initiative by the new Government. From the outset, it was defended and attacked with a fervour quite disproportionate to its modest scale. It was justified as an extension of parental choice, a restoration of academic opportunities to many able children whose local comprehensive schools were inadequate, and as essential protection for those individuals and for the nation's resources of talent against the levelling-down effects attributed to the demise of so many maintained grammar schools. It was strongly opposed as an unwarranted Government declaration that the public sector was incapable of providing an appropriate education for very able children, and as likely to produce a Government-sponsored withdrawal of public support from maintained schools which were being so evidently identified as second-best. As portrayed by the head of a prominent independent school whom we interviewed during our research, assisted places made it possible to 'pluck embers from the ashes' of the comprehensive schools. As portrayed critically but in a similar metaphor, they were intended to 'snatch a few brands from the burning fire'.² To the Labour Party especially, they were part of a broader policy of 'starving the maintained schools of funds, and then rescuing the brightest children from the surrounding wreckage' (Labour Party, 1980, p. 27).

An outline of the Assisted Places Scheme

This particular 'rescue operation' was implemented with a speed which reflected the 'secret elite negotiations', as Tapper and Salter (1986a) describe them, which had already taken place within the private sector and between its leading representatives and some Conservative politicians. It was also implemented against strong opposition from the other Parties, and repeated threats that the next Labour Government would end the Scheme in the year in which it returned to office.³ The coincidence of the Scheme with cuts in public expenditure on education made it politically expedient to reduce its scale considerably. Yet it was a considerable administrative achievement that 4185 of the 5417 places available in September 1981 in 223 English independent schools were actually taken up. Six years later, when the Scheme was almost fully in operation, 26,899 pupils were holding assisted places, at a cost to the Government in 1987-8 of over £48 million.⁴ By that time, the average tuition fee in the participating schools had risen to £2346 (compared with £1323 in 1981).

Below a certain income parents pay no fees at all. When the Scheme began that threshold was £4617. It has since been regularly revised in line with inflation, reaching £6972 for 1987-8. Over that six-year period, about 40 per cent of beneficiaries have held free places, while the Government's average payment per place to compensate schools for the fees remitted has risen from £1038 to £1867.⁵ Initially, there was to be no Government assistance for anything beyond the costs of tuition. The regulations governing the Scheme also allow schools to reclaim from the DES any additional grants made to low-income families to meet some of the incidental costs (on travel, school uniform and school meals) of taking up places. But there are still no Government contributions to the costs of boarding education, despite the large number of boarding schools which offer assisted places and persistent demands from within the private sector to recognize 'boarding need' as deserving assistance.

The Scheme was introduced quickly to give it time to take root before another election could threaten its continuation, and also to encourage more grammar schools to regard independence as a desirable and practicable alternative to comprehensive reorganization by offering them an entry still partly subsidized from public funds. But while many independent schools (especially those formerly on the direct-grant list) co-operated enthusiastically in this revival of the 'direct-grant principle', the new arrangements were not a replication of the direct-grant system which the Labour Government had dismantled in 1975-6. They could not have been so, if only because many schools on the last direct-grant list had already been absorbed into the public sector or had closed. If the Scheme was to provide anything like the national network of academic opportunities which its architects intended, then it was essential to enlist independent schools which had previously had little contact with the public sector. Of the 223 schools offering places in 1981, 107 had never been on the direct-grant list and

twenty-nine were among the 'leading public schools' listed by Honey (1977) in his account of the late-Victorian 'golden age' of elite secondary schooling.

There were also administrative and financial innovations which made the Scheme, as its architects also intended, a 'revised and improved' version of its predecessor rather than a replication. First, all direct assistance to parents is related to an income scale, so avoiding the long-standing criticism that many parents of free-place holders in direct-grant schools had been well able to pay the full fees. Secondly, there are no per capita grants to schools, and so no indirect but equally indiscriminate subsidising of 'full' fee-paying parents. Thirdly, LEAs cannot reserve places for pupils they might wish to sponsor; their involvement was limited to a right (removed in 1983) to veto the allocation of assisted places to 16-year-olds in maintained schools if it could be argued that the transfer would damage their own sixth-form provision. Otherwise, parents apply directly to particular schools. The schools themselves are free to make their academic selection 'in accordance with such methods and procedures as seem to them appropriate', subject only to a general obligation to offer at least 60 per cent of those places to applicants who have attended a maintained school for the previous two years. Fourthly, schools participating in the Scheme remain fully independent. After some initial Conservative uncertainty about whether to restore an intermediate status between 'independent' and 'maintained', it had already been decided by 1979 that each school should make its own contract with the Government, and that its consequent obligations to account to the DES for its assisted-place holders should be extremely light. Schools offering places are under no obligation to appoint LEA or other 'representatives' to their governing bodies as the price of receiving public money.⁶ Finally, the embodiment of the Scheme in an Act of Parliament ensured that it could only be dismantled through a prolonged legislative process, and not by any equivalent to the simple withdrawal of regulations after a four-hour debate which had effectively ended the direct-grant system in 1976.

Despite these administrative differences, the Scheme was intended to reflect the 'direct-grant principle' of offering academic opportunities to talented children whatever their social background. In doing so, it diverged sharply from previous attempts to 'integrate' independent schools in its concentration on academic ability and academic opportunity. From the outset, its main justification was that it 'complemented' the public sector by extending access to a high quality academic education which it was claimed many comprehensive schools could not provide. As stated in the letter which the DES sent to independent schools in December 1979 inviting them to indicate at least a provisional interest in offering assisted places, the overriding purpose of the Scheme was to 'help to meet the academic needs of pupils whose talents might not otherwise be catered for'. As Rhodes Boyson claimed a few months before its first beneficiaries were about to enter their schools: 'Able children from our poorest homes will once again have the opportunity of attending academically excellent schools.'⁷

In sharp contrast to earlier proposals to reduce the social exclusiveness of independent schools by meeting a 'need' for boarding education which extended far beyond those families able to pay for it, this new initiative concentrated entirely on modifying the private sector by reviving academic opportunities for the 'poor but able'. As described by one of its principal architects within the private sector, it

... helps society by giving a wider section of the community a share in the opportunities offered by a group of schools of acknowledged excellence. It helps parents by increasing the degree of parental choice. It helps the country by promoting able children. (Cobban, 1980)

Two years into its implementation the junior minister, Bob Dunn, was looking forward to a time when the Scheme was fully grown and its beneficiaries would represent about 15 per cent of all secondary-age pupils in the private sector and about a third of those in the schools offering assisted places. The beneficiaries would be 'pupils from low-income families who are selected on merit alone' and their schools would be 'among the very best in the country'.⁸

Evaluating the Assisted Places Scheme

From the time of its first announcement, the Assisted Places Scheme was vigorously applauded and as vigorously contested. Alongside the exchange of arguments about the principles on which it was based, confident and contradictory predictions were made about its beneficiaries, benefits and costs. As a research topic, it offered an unusual opportunity to study a specific and controversial policy initiative from its inception to its implementation, and then to assess its early effects against the claims made by its advocates and its critics. It reflected the efforts of a powerful pressure group within the private sector to restore what they saw as the best characteristics of the direct-grant system. It was also an early expression of educational priorities by the incoming Government, to which it offered an inexpensive way of demonstrating simultaneously its commitments to extending parental choice, preserving traditional academic standards, and restoring a traditional 'scholarship ladder' for 'able children from less well-off homes'. From a historical perspective, it could be seen as yet another attempt to define the role of independent schools within the national system. From a sociological perspective, the controversy surrounding it was clearly part of the long debate between those emphasizing the academic costs of egalitarian educational policies, and those emphasizing the socially divisive consequences of academic selection.

It was in these terms that we conceived the research on which this book is based. The grant application which Whitty and Edwards made to the (then) Social Science Research Council in January 1981 placed particular emphasis on testing empirically

some of the competing claims being made for and against the Scheme. We also wished to explore the political and ideological contexts in which it had been framed and was being implemented, and to examine its relationship to other components of contemporary educational and social policy.

Any investigation of such a contentious initiative was likely to be contentious itself. Our own application was made at a time when the SSRC was especially short of funds, and when the usefulness of social research was being subjected to close political scrutiny. These circumstances may have contributed to a delay in reaching a decision which prevented us from beginning the fieldwork when the first assisted-place holders were entering the schools. They certainly led to the imposition of conditions which were unusual for a small grant. We were required not to publish any findings until the fieldwork had been completed so as to avoid contributing to premature judgments about the Scheme's effects. But while our research was also supposed to be monitored by a steering group appointed by the Council, the group met only once and made no written enquiries about the progress of the investigation.⁹ We discuss later how the 'politics' of researching interacted with the politics of education in the course of the investigation itself. That investigation was intended to explore both the contexts within which the Scheme developed and its consequences for pupils, parents and schools. We now outline the evidence collected at the various levels relevant to understanding the Scheme's implementation and how that evidence is reported in the rest of the book.

In trying to locate the Scheme in its historical, political and educational contexts, our immediate task was to construct a detailed account of how it originated within the private sector in response to the threatened abolition of direct-grant schools, emerged as a Conservative policy commitment in 1976-7, and was formulated into workable arrangements within eighteen months of the 1979 election. The narrative presented in chapters 2 and 3 is based on interviews with the main architects of the Scheme within the private sector, the Conservative Party and the Civil Service, and on documentary research which included analysis of an archive of material made available to us in the course of the project. We were also interested in the Scheme's antecedents — how far it evolved as it did in response to the perceived shortcomings of earlier attempts at 'integrating' independent schools, and how far the terms in which the issues were debated had been altered by the virtual disappearance of grammar schools from the public sector. The work of the Public Schools Commission (1966-70) was critical, partly because of the evidence which it gathered about the social exclusiveness of public schools, but mainly because of the polarization of attitudes towards private education which followed the rejection of its proposals for reducing that exclusiveness. It was in response to an increasingly hostile Labour Party that the private sector began to organize itself more effectively, to present its case for public support more strenuously, and to seek out political allies.

From a wider political perspective, our second line of inquiry was to analyze the

Scheme in the context of other policies being pursued by a Conservative Government explicitly committed to reducing the scale and cost of state intervention, expanding the role of the market in the allocation of national resources, and achieving greater efficiency through wider consumer choice. We were therefore interested in the extent to which the Scheme could be read as manifesting some of the main themes in the educational ideology constructed by the 'New Right' during the 1970s. As part of this search for ideological sources, we re-examined *Black Paper* and associated attacks on the 'progressive consensus'. In chapter 4 we indicate continuities and contrasts between leading *Black Paper* contributors and their much more radical New Right successors. While it was initially tempting to interpret the Assisted Places Scheme as an index of the New Right's ascendant influence in educational policy-making, our research failed to reveal any significant contributions to the Scheme's formation and presentation from those (in and around the Institute of Economic Affairs, or the Centre for Policy Studies) who had engaged so actively in reconstructing the Conservative Party's ideological base.¹⁰ Both the origins of the Scheme and its justification seemed to lie elsewhere, in traditional notions of a ladder of opportunity for the academically able from even the 'humblest' social origins.

That could, of course, be true of the Scheme's primary sources of support, and still leave room for it to be treated as a precursor of (or even a trial-run for) more radical initiatives. Throughout the project, and since its funding ended in 1986, we have been interested in whether the structure of the Scheme has contributed to the changing balance of power between the DES (or other agencies of central government), local education authorities, and educational 'consumers' as these are variously defined. We have therefore had to be aware of other policy initiatives, educational vouchers being the obvious example, with which the Scheme might be seen as practically or ideologically aligned. In the final chapter of the book, we look back on the Scheme's objectives and mode of implementation from a position which now has to take account of city technology colleges, grant-maintained schools, and other Government initiatives for which at least some of the advocates of assisted places are unlikely to feel much sympathy.

Before that, in the last section of chapter 4, we illustrate the central claims made for the Scheme by its advocates at the time it was launched, and the counter-claims made with equal confidence in their accuracy by its opponents. From our analysis of these claims we identified predictions about its possible effects and outcomes which could be investigated empirically, and which we put in the form of questions which shaped our decisions about what evidence to collect. In collecting it we worked at three levels — not in a sequence of clearly-marked stages, but as a process of continuous interaction between the general and the particular. The first level is constructed from the national statistics about the allocation and take-up of places which we report and interpret in chapter 5. We then studied the Scheme's implementation in selected geographical areas with high concentrations of assisted places. We describe in