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Documenting an *educational imaginary* – representations of schooling in British documentary films

Reviewing a selection of British documentary films produced between the late 1930's and late 1960's this paper will demonstrate that these documentaries constitute *educational imaginaries* about schooling, and the experiences of children within school. Beginning with a consideration of the meaning of an *educational imaginary* the paper will move on to explore the nature of documentary films and the ways in which they might claim to represent real life. A shifting *educational imaginary* which projects schooling as a vehicle for national renewal and social justice through various forms of schooling is illustrated via a selection of films covering a period of significant change in the provision and organisation of education in pre and post-world war two Britain. The films discussed in this paper have been selected to illustrate the ways in which documentaries represent policy and attitudinal changes in education. It is acknowledged that these films may depart from reality in their attempts to project an *imaginary* about education.

Documentary films about education and schooling constitute audio and visual representations of educational systems. Whilst visual methodologies have extended to exploring the visual culture of schooling, documentary films on education and schooling remain an under-utilised research source (Warmington, Van Gorp and Grosvenor, 2011). Given the continued production of documentaries of schooling, as illustrated in this paper, it is necessary for educational historians and social scientists to consider how these forms of representation contribute to an understanding of education, and how it is viewed. Thus, this paper contributes to claiming this form of audio-visual representation as research data, not for its historical veracity, but so that the images and narratives projected in those films might be utilised in offering an understanding into how film makers wanted schooling to be understood, and why.

Education Imaginary

An educational imaginary draws on the concept of a *social imaginary* as developed by Taylor (2004). A social imaginary refers to “the ways people imagine their social existence”

(Taylor, 2004, p. 23) and is formed by images and stories shared within society. Constituting a form of public or popular culture a *social imaginary* informs our understanding of what are common practices and the expectations we have of each other. Taylor describes how the *social imaginary* is factual in that it provides us with a shared understanding enabling us to partake in common practices, additionally the *social imaginary* is also normative, providing us with a sense of how these practices ought to be. The role of film in contributing to a social imaginary is covered extensively within cultural, film and communication studies literature, as well as anthropology. Given particular attention is the role of cinema in projecting a national imagery (Friedman, 2006; Blaikie, 2011; Anthony and Mansell, 2012).

Building on the concept of a *social imaginary* (Taylor, 2004) an *educational imaginary* may be defined as “a set of broadly disseminated images about what schools and school people within a nation are...like” (Barone and Lash, 2006, p. 22). The *educational imaginary* may be made up from a variety of images generated by popular culture and mass media, both fictional as well as fact based (Weber, 2006). Representations of education, schooling, teachers and pupils in popular films is discussed extensively by Ellsmore (2005), Fisher, Harris and Jarvis (2008), Jones and Davies (2001), Blake and Edwards (2013), Gregory (2007) Glynn (2016). Predominantly however, the material examined by these contributions consists of drama and soaps rather than documentaries, with notable exceptions (Cabeleira, Martins and Lawn, 2011).

Popular culture, and school movies have come under the social science gaze, but the use of documentary films about schools and schooling remains under-researched. Yet, since at least the 1930's a body of documentary films continues to be produced, across the world, commenting on the state of education systems, the experiences of children in schools, as well as projecting ideas for the future of education systems. These documentary films represent a significant resource for social scientists and historians interested in studying the ways in which the realities surrounding educational and childhood has been represented over time.

The significance of these films is complex. As sources of data they are not simply mirrors reflecting the educational realities of the time. As the following section on approaching a definition of the documentary discusses, documentary films are artistic interpretations of reality, so we cannot use them and claim them to be authentic accounts of education.

Capturing Reality through Documentary Films

Defining documentary film is not straightforward and the starting points for definition are problematic, inviting further consideration. On a common-sense level documentary films are concerned with real life. However, this is not a defining feature. Notwithstanding the claim that 'real life' may be seen as a nebulous term, documentary films cannot command a monopoly in concerning themselves with this. Realist dramas would reasonably make the case that they are concerned with representing real life experiences, as could any other genre which does not claim to be capturing real life events. It could be argued that documentary films are focused on the telling of facts in contrast to presenting a narrative that is clearly fiction or a fictionalised account of 'real life'. However, "factuality alone does not define documentary films" (Bernard, 2011, p. 2) and so this too provides a problematic starting point.

Whilst the subject matter of a documentary is real life, a documentary film is not real life (Aufderheide, 2007) but a representation of it. Aufderheide continues with her discussion on the challenges of defining documentaries by observing that "[a] documentary film tells a story about real life, with claims to truthfulness" (2007, p. 2). However, any claims to truthfulness made by or on behalf of documentary films needs to be critically considered as representing reality through film is rarely an objective unbiased process. Technologies of film production may enhance the capabilities of human perception, capturing moving images and audio that would otherwise be missed, thus offering an ability to replay scenes from real life and to see things which, without the camera we would have missed. Alternatively, a hidden camera approach could potentially capture authentic scenes from real life with the subjects unaware of the presence of the camera. Developed and discussed by Soviet film director and theorist, Dziga Vertov's the approach of 'zhizn' vrasplokh' or 'Life caught unawares' (Hicks, 2007) is understood as a form of candid camera where the subjects of the film are unaware of filming, ensuring that 'real life' can be captured. However, as Hicks (2007) discusses, Vertov's approach is better understood as 'life off-guard' where the director is using techniques to reduce performance by the subjects in an attempt to capture authentic moments. Staged, or constructed scenes feature in some of the documentary films discussed here.

In other words, the production of documentary films is rarely, if ever, "uncontrolled and accidental" (Adorno, 1991, p. 179). Rather, documentary films are the result of deliberate

acts to represent real life. They rely on a narrative structure to support the telling of a story and are therefore constructed accounts of real life but which can never provide a complete, unbiased account of reality. As Aufderheide says:

“They are portraits of real life, using real life as their raw material, constructed by artists and technicians who make myriad decisions about what story to tell to whom, and for what purpose.” (2007, p. 2)

Aufderheide goes on to offer a definition from John Grierson, an influential Scottish documentary maker, associated with the British *Documentary Film Movement*. He described documentaries as “artistic representations of actuality” (cited 2007, p. 3) reflecting his aesthetic approach to documentary film making which was more than merely reportage (Aitken, 2013). Therefore, it is important to recognise that documentary films are creative endeavours and as such the form of documentaries, and the style and forms in which reality is represented can and has changed over time. Viewing documentary films should not be seen as a passive experience where one is simply expected to consume the images presented. Rather, they are created in ways which invite a response from audiences:

“At their best, documentaries should do more than help viewers pass the time; they should demand their active engagement, challenging them to think about what they know, how they know it, and what more they might want to learn” (Bernard, 2011, p. 3).

The ways in which documentary films achieve this varies, with some adopting an overtly political and persuasive form, such as *Waiting for Superman* in which the messages concerning the problems of schooling are made explicit. However, Frederick Wiseman’s 1968 *High School* is purely observational, with no narration, yet still invites the viewer to consider the school as an institution where power is exercised by teachers upon pupils. Others, particularly those associated with the British Documentary Movement and the focus of this paper, such as *Children at School* take on the appearance of reportage, presenting ‘facts’ but nevertheless employing an aesthetic which is persuasive about the need for educational reform and the benefits of schooling in a civilised society. In the twenty-first century, several closely observed documentaries have focused on micro settings of education, such as a single school or classroom. Consequently, films such as Nicolas Philibert’s *Être et Avoir* have been described as humanist because of their focus on exploring the relationships between teacher and pupils, rather than being overtly political (Nash, 2011). However, this is not to argue that the focus on the human relations is suggestive that these relationships exist within a socio-political vacuum [REF]. Finally, the term documentary could be arguably be

applied to the recently popular reality TV shows utilising a ‘fixed rig’ approach to observation, such as Channel 4’s *Educating* series in the UK (Littleboy, 2013) though the extent to which these are accepted as authentic observation as opposed to contrived and intrusive entertainment is contested (Nash, 2011; Oswald, James and Nottingham, 2016).

Documentaries of schooling

Documentary films form part of a visual culture and therefore constitute data sources for social and historical researchers utilising developing visual methodologies associated with the study of this form of representation (Prosser, 1998; Banks, 2001). Documentary films and their contribution to a *social imaginary* and, in particular *national imaginary* have already received considerable attention (Friedman, 2006; Blaikie, 2011; Anthony and Mansell, 2012). Though there is limited discussion devoted specifically to education, representations of schooling are acknowledged by these sources to contribute to a national imaginary. A literate population and schooling systems are symbols of national identity, and as such these have featured in documentary films, thus contributing to an *educational imaginary* (Welch, 1983; Smith, 2000; Yücel, 2016). This can clearly be seen in the films associated with the British Documentary Movement from the 1930’s and 1940’s, such as *Village School* as well as in the Nazi propaganda *Jungen Europa* series. However, an *educational imaginary* need not be one that presents a nation’s education system positively. Weber (2006) discusses how the imagined view of what an education system is like will shift over time, and this is the case with the films discussed here, at each stage the *educational imaginary* presents a vision for the future, and in doing so implies inadequacies in existing or previous arrangements for schooling. For example, a dominant *educational imaginary* presented is that of a failing, urban, school system such as in *Waiting for Superman*. More recently, several documentary films have sought to explore the relationships and practices within schools, often focusing on micro-interactions between teachers and pupils. Films adopting this approach, such as *Être et Avoir* emphasise the classroom as a positive, successful and nurturing space, whilst others, for example *Iki bil dir bavul* serve to examine how wider social tensions are manifested, writ small, in classrooms.

Whilst documentaries of schooling have played a “salient role...in depicting schools and schooling since the 1930s” (Warmington, Van Gorp and Grosvenor, 2011, p. 458) they remain under-researched as a source of educational imaginary are not a “regularly consulted resource” (Warmington, Van Gorp and Grosvenor, 2011, p. 470). Nevertheless, this paper

explores a selection of documentary films of schooling from the 1930's to the present day in an attempt to demonstrate that through these films it is possible to trace shifting *educational imaginaries*. The imaginary may be accurate, or it may distort the reality, or it may constitute a myth. This paper is not so much concerned with the veracity of the documentary films as it is with the imaginary that it projects.

Shifting Educational Imaginaries

In their efforts to represent reality, documentary films about education and schooling are a form of communication. They invite audiences to respond to messages about the state of education, presenting a diagnosis of faults within current systems, share the experiences of children and young people within schools, as well as the imagining of future schooling possibilities.

The documentaries discussed in this paper are a selection of British films produced between the 1930's and 1960's. Sponsored by UK governments, the gas industry, the National Union of Teachers (NUT), and the Labour Party these films now form part of an archive of British films and are available through British Film Institute's (BFI) archive with some commercially available on DVD box sets celebrating British documentaries. As historical artefacts they offer an opportunity for researchers to examine the ways in which documentaries presented an *educational imaginary* and how this imaginary shifted alongside changing attitudes and trends in education. It is unclear from viewing these what impact, if any, these films had on public opinion. In fact, in the case of *Educating for the Future*, a film produced in 1967 celebrating the comprehensive school as a progressive form of education could be argued to trail public opinion and trends as a turn towards comprehensivisation was already advanced by this time (Crook, 1993). All the documentary films discussed here claim to present facts, relying heavily on visual imagery observed from everyday school activities. Adding authenticity through observation of everyday scenes these films are, nevertheless, deliberate attempts to convince viewers of the 'facts' being presented. The films can be grouped into three shifting educational imaginaries. First, *Children at School* and *The Children's Story* produced in the 1930's present schools as sites of national renewal and democracy, particularly in the context of threats from other 'dictator nations'. The second educational imaginary is represented in two films, *Children's Charter* and *The Three A's* released in the years immediately post the 2nd world war. These two films focus on the expansion of secondary schooling, presenting an *educational imaginary* where a selective

system is just, and in so doing silences the dissenters of this approach. Finally, three films produced in the 1960's are considered. *Our School*, *Comprehensive School* and *Education for the Future* present an *educational imaginary* where three schools in one, or the comprehensive school is held in high esteem for providing equal opportunities and facilitating a good society. Again, in idealising the comprehensive school these films obscure the more prosaic realities where comprehensive schooling was preferred more for reasons of efficiency than ideologies of social justice and equality.

British Documentary Films – Education and National renewal

The earliest British documentary films that featured representations of schooling were produced in the 1930's and 1940's. Influenced by Soviet documentary films, British documentary makers, such as John Grierson, directed and produced films which may be described as overt propaganda in their call for educational reform. Focused on social observation and capturing an authentic reality of ordinary people in their everyday lives, film makers such as Grierson believed that documentary films served a social purpose, contributing to social democratic agenda. In particular they served as a 'national projection' (Chapman, 2015) using a visual medium to create an image of the nation as it could and should be. From pre-war 1930's through to the immediate post-war period in the 1940's state, as well as industry sponsored documentary films covered the dramatic social changes in Britain during this time. The tone of the documentaries discussed here, both pre-war and post-war is one of optimism. Far from anodyne in their optimism the films imagine a better schooling experience for children in the future, whilst acknowledging, through narration and direct observation those less than adequate experiences currently faced by many children in school at the time.

The contrast of the present against an imagined future is most clearly evident in the 1937 film *Children at School*, produced by John Grierson and directed by Basil Wright. Made by the *Realist Film Unit*, and sponsored by the British Commercial Gas Association *Children at School* presents stark contrasts between the vision for schooling and the reality of schooling for many. This is a political film, but one which, instead presents a sense of objectivity. The narration is scripted by Tom Driberg, then a prominent journalist and member of the Communist Party. The script is narrated by a more 'neutral' personality and Driberg is not credited, and so what might have been signs of political and ideological bias are avoided. Whilst using narration throughout, the film is heavily reliant on observations of happy and

healthy children engaged in a variety of school activities as a means of conveying the message that a nation should maintain the future of its children as a national priority. Yet, these scenes are set against images of the structural decay characteristic of many other schools in England of the time, referred to in the film as 'blacklisted' schools. Showing scenes of children walking along school corridors with cracks in the floors and walls, playing in cracked and uneven playgrounds, cramped into overcrowded and damp, dark classrooms the film declares these schools responsible for thousands of headaches experienced by pupils each year. This use of observation lends the film a sense of authenticity.

Through observation the film can claim to be documenting reality, not staging a scene or intervening in the school day, but presenting facts which are allowed to speak for themselves. However, this use of observation is not merely an exercise in sitting back and capturing reality, but, as previously discussed, is a creative means of representing the realities of school life at the time. The film presents a narrative using observation, so that that the scenes of school life as it should be for all children then cut to observations of those schools that remain in a state of disrepair. Grierson's work, reliant on observation is noted for its explicit social reform agenda, including films such as *Drifters* a silent film observing North Sea fisheries, The visual nature of these films is a claim to authenticity and serves this social reform agenda. As Palmer (2002) observes the descriptive title of the film further suggests objectivity, with the film showing exactly what the title indicates.

The importance of schooling to the future prosperity of the nation, in this case Scotland, is also emphasised in *The Children's Story*, a 1938 documentary produced by Films of Scotland, overseen by Grierson, and directed by Alexander Shaw. The title is similarly as descriptive as *Children at School*. Indicating immediately the subject of the film, the title serves to emphasise that Scotland's education system is focused on children, and that this is a story about them and their future. At the outset the viewer is reminded that Scotland was the first country to achieve universal schooling. However, far from being a retrospective, *The Children's Story* quickly focuses its attention on current educational changes, supporting reform and presenting a vision of the future. As the voiceover explains:

In Scotland today, the first country in the world to have universal education, the focus of attention is the nation's 800,000 children. In schools all over Scotland a revolution is taking place, teachers are discovering new ways to prepare their children for citizenship in the modern world.

Presenting images of children from nursery through to senior school (at this time secondary schooling in Scotland was more developed than in England), as well as services for ‘defective’ children designed to ensure that they too can become citizens, *The Children’s Story* seeks to demonstrate that Scotland’s education system is progressive. That is, the film presents an imaginary of what Scottish education is and should be. Significantly, the film also emphasises the role of teachers in advocating for this progression. As the opening statement goes on to reveal, it is teachers who “are discovering” different, more progressive approaches to teaching. Later, the narrator tells the viewer that it is teachers who demanded that Scottish schooling change in order to be better equipped to produce future citizens. This trust of expertise of the professional may have reflected attitudes to teaching dominant at the time. However, in referring to the expertise of teachers, the film adds another dimension of objectivity. For whilst the film is overt in its call for continued educational reform, by referencing teachers’ expertise *The Children’s Story* underpins that claim with professional authority, and in so doing adds another, apparent, dimension of objectivity. A similar message is represented in *Children at School* which recreates a teacher meeting, reporting that, through their unions, teachers have lobbied for improvements in education. This scene in *Children at School* gives the appearance of observation but is in fact staged with actors improvising the part of teachers. Arguably, the improvisation, as opposed to a scripted dialogue adds authenticity in an attempt to recreate a real life scene.

Given that expertise is situated within teachers, the films suggest that the role of the state, is to ensure that these improvements can happen, through the provision of new school buildings. There is an imaginary that teachers are to be trusted with the education of future generations, a trust that was to be challenged in documentaries in the later years of the twentieth century.

In *Children at School* and *The Children’s Story* along with other documentaries of schooling made in the late 1930’s and early 40’s, such as *Village School*, schools are imagined as vehicles driving citizenship in a democratic society. The films present their ideas of education in contrast to other, dictator nations. *Children at School* even concludes with an urgent warning about the need to reform education:

A nation depends on its children. The dictators know that the children are all important. The dictators are acting on that knowledge. Can the democracies afford to fall behind? Should they, even if they could?

Yet, the imaginaries created by *Children at School* and *The Children's Story* are not so visually distinct from documentaries produced in Nazi Germany around the same time. *Junges Europa* for example, was a series of films focusing on the youth of Germany and these films too used a montage of observations to show happy, healthy German youth as citizens of the future. Both *Children at School* and *The Children's Story* focus on schools as sites of national renewal, with children representing the future generation for whom education is the means by which they grow into citizens of democracy.

Secondary School Expansion

The theme of national renewal continues to be seen in documentary films made in Britain following the end of World War 2, reflecting post-war optimism regarding the reform of the education system. A significant change in British education was the provision of universal secondary education, up to the age of 15 with this being a feature of government sponsored documentaries in the immediate post-war years.

Secondary education had expanded in the first half of the twentieth century, with the principle of universal secondary education established in England and Wales by the 1918 Education Act (The Fisher Act). However, access to secondary schooling, in particular grammar schools, was rationed by fees, or by scholarship whilst the provision of other types of secondary schooling was subject to local authority differences. Yet, with the passing of the 1944 Education Act (The Butler Act) secondary schooling was made universal and free in England and Wales, with the school leaving age raised to 15. This Act, taking effect post-war in 1947 under a labour government brought a radical reorganisation of schooling. Firstly, the primary and secondary stages of schooling became demarcated with the primary education stage established between the ages of 5-11 and secondary education between the ages of 11-15. Local authorities, responsible for the provision of secondary schooling often chose to organise secondary schooling along 'tripartite' lines with grammar schools, technical schools and secondary modern schools, fitting the new system into the pre-existing, but limited, provisions. At age eleven children would sit the '11+' selection test to determine which type of secondary school was most suitable for them, those deemed most academically able were selected for a grammar school education. Organising along tripartite lines was not, however, universal, but this reality is overlooked in documentaries of the time. Finally, the raising of the schooling leaving age increased pupil numbers and the post-war years involved a building programme to accommodate the re-organisation of schooling and increased

numbers of secondary school pupils. Documentary films served an important function in post-war Britain, communicating the changes to the education system to the general public.

Directed by Gerry Bryant, *The Children's Charter* was produced by the Crown Film Unit and sponsored by the UK Ministry of Education and Ministry of Information and released in 1945. Designed as post-war propaganda *Children's Charter* uses observations to show the new education system at work, although the film acknowledges that this is still a system in development. Triumphant in tone (Cunningham, 2000) the film focuses on the new secondary school provision, contrasting it with the unfairness of the previous system. At the beginning of the film, the viewer observes a rural scene of children gathering to catch a school bus. The narrator states:

up to now only 3 out of 25 or 12 out of every 100 have had the chance of continuing their education until they're 16. The results of this examination therefore will give 12 children a better start in life than the remaining 88.

Fairness is a dominant theme in this film and is weaved through the narrative of the *Children's Charter* justifying the provision of different secondary school types according to skills, talents and interests of pupils. The film observes children at work in grammar schools, technical schools and secondary modern schools presenting these as “differentiated in terms of their curricula, but equal in prestige” (Banks, 1998, p. 7). *The Children's Charter* projects an *educational imaginary* of secondary schooling responsive to the differentiated, but equally valuable educational needs of pupils. The film does not merely present facts, but the use of “[v]isual imagery and verbal commentary are both artfully exploited to justify the ideology of selective secondary schooling, which had already been challenged by the political left in the 1920s and 1930s” (Cunningham, 2000, p. 393).

Government sponsored documentary films produced in the early post-war years clearly attempted to present an *educational imaginary* where secondary modern schools, providing an all-round, practically orientated education were equal in esteem to the academically focused grammar schools. *The Three A's* released in 1947 observed everyday life at the Allertonshire County Modern School, in Northallerton, North Yorkshire, describing it as “one of the pioneers” of secondary modern education. The relevancy of this schooling system is made immediately apparent to viewers in the opening scenes when the narrator informs that:

A great majority [of children] will move up to receive the newest type of secondary education at a county modern school.

This film, then, presents an *educational imaginary* applicable to most secondary age pupils in England and Wales. The three A's of the title are explained early in the film, these are, age, ability and aptitude, emphasising that this is a new secondary schooling system for all, whilst also legitimating a segregated secondary schooling system which would ultimately be challenged by comprehensive ideals.

The film observes children engaged in classroom lessons, but mainly practical, as well as gendered, activities, including gardening, farming, sewing and cooking. Narration is provided over direct observation of children enthusiastically engaged in these various activities, emphasising that these activities relate to what the pupils know and what they will become. The rural location of the school is shown to inform the 'country pursuits' focused curriculum, though the narrator points out that details will differ in other secondary modern school according to the local contexts of schools.

The film includes an explicit attempt to establish the secondary modern school as equal in status to the grammar school when the narrator states that:

The modern school teacher has the same training as the grammar school teacher and the same rates of pay.

An apparent factual statement, the inclusion of this comparison could, arguably, be seen as an attempt to allay criticism of a segregated system on grounds of inequality or unequal status of schools. Such a comparison thus serves to support an *educational imaginary* of parity of esteem of secondary schooling, the Ministry of Education's official line on the provision of secondary schooling post 1944. This film presents an *educational imaginary* of secondary modern schools as part of a new, radical system of education better suited to the differential needs of children, and the national than the previous system where few children were able to receive a secondary education. In the closing scenes of *The Three A's* the viewer sees children gathering for assembly as the narrator concludes with the following statement:

The Allertonshire children are already enjoying the happier childhood and the better start in life that the new scheme of secondary education has planned for them. When they grow to be men and women they will repay the country for its wisdom.

Here, the secondary modern school is positioned as providing quality, relevant and enjoyable education for a majority of children, the benefits of which may only be realised when the

children become adults. In this way, the new education system is also imagined as visionary and forward thinking. Providing an *imaginary*, these films are not a direct account of reality but a vision of what the government sponsors believed education could and should be like, as well as what they wanted viewers to believe.

The reality of post-war secondary schooling was more complex. The tripartite system, presented in documentaries as a legitimate and desirable means of organising pupils according to ability and aptitude, was not universally popular amongst politicians, both on a national and local level (Crook, 2013). Nor was the tripartite system implemented by all Local Education Authorities (LEAs). Driven by economies of scale, and the associated difficulties of providing three types of secondary schools Anglesey, in Wales, opted to adopt a comprehensive system, as did a number of other LEAs (Tomlinson, 1991; Crook, 2013).

Additionally, Wales enabled a larger proportion of its children, around 45%, to attend Grammar schools due to an already established system of secondary schooling as well as local attitudes towards providing a grammar education to as many children as possible (Jones, 2002; Gorard, Taylor and Fitz, 2003). Additionally, the tripartite system, so enthusiastically imagined in the *Children's Charter*, should, more accurately be referred to as a bipartite system, as few technical schools were ever created.

The *Children's Charter* and *The Three A's* may have represented an attempt by the post-war government to recruit public opinion to this *educational imaginary* of secondary schooling. As Dent observes “[c]omprehensive schools were already being organized during the years just after the war, when the Secondary Modern School was still in search of its soul” (1971, p. 135) and as such, *The Three A's* in particular might be seen as an attempt to imagine what the soul of a secondary modern school might be, when the reality was this imaginary never dominated. Whilst the messages in these films are powerful in their attempt to convince as to the need and benefit of this system, this *educational imaginary* was not universally shared, and the second half of the twentieth century saw the production of documentaries that challenged the selective and segregated system.

The rise of the comprehensive ideal

Government sponsored documentary films in the 1940's may have represented an attempt to create an *education imaginary* where selection by 11+ and a differentiated schooling system were seen as desirable, but dissatisfaction with this system can be seen in a number of documentaries produced in the 1960s which projected an alternative *educational imaginary* celebrating the achievements of secondary modern schooling and promoting comprehensive schooling as a model for the future.

Sponsored by the NUT the 1962 film *Our School*, directed by John Krish appears to use direct observation of a secondary modern school. Filmed at The Francis Coombe Secondary Modern school in Hertfordshire the film is significant because it celebrates the secondary modern school as indicated by the opening title:

A Secondary Modern School is, in a sense, three schools in one. It must create an academic atmosphere, supply a technical and commercial training and care for those who learn with great difficulty. This film is an impression of a few hours in such a school...

Secondary modern schools, designed to have 'parity of esteem' alongside grammar schools were, nevertheless, perceived to be lesser in status than grammar schools. Banks (1998, p. 214) observed that "parents and pupils alike regard relegation to the modern school as a sign of failure" although she goes on to discuss how many secondary modern schools rose to the challenge of earning such 'parity of esteem' by offering externally examined courses alongside the expected practical and vocational courses. It is this kind of provision that is demonstrated in *Our School*.

Appearing as a form of *cinéma vérité*, *Our School* claims to offer an authentic view of the secondary modern school. However, it is through constructed scenes of real life situations, rather than moments of 'life caught unawares' (Hicks, 2007), that the viewer is shown how the secondary modern school provides education suitable for the diverse needs of its pupils. Without narration until near the end of the film the constructed observation provides the viewer with an overview of a school day. Condensed into twenty-seven minutes, scenes shift from lesson to lesson, covering the range of subjects on offer, the different teaching styles and the range of abilities of pupils. The film pays particular attention to the teacher-pupil relationship, with teachers observed to be encouraging, supportive, dedicated, yet also firm. One such scene features a technical drawing class where we observe the teacher

moving between pupils and offering suggestions for improving work. In itself this is a means to demonstrate some of the qualities of the teaching staff at Francis Combe. With the appearance of direct observation it appears authentic, and therefore neutral. However, in the background of this scene there is a sign displayed on classroom wall which reads:

Miracles are performed here daily. The impossible takes a little longer.

The sign, directly in the centre of the background of the scene as we enter this classroom must be viewed as a deliberate attempt by director John Krish to project an *educational imaginary* of a secondary modern school as a place where all can succeed, even though some of those children may have already been labelled as failures. In this sense it is a thinly veiled critique of the selective system. This is further reinforced towards the end of the film when the narration returns the viewer's attention to the opening title in which the secondary modern school is described as three schools in one. Here, the narrator, John Krish, comments that some secondary modern schools:

can try and keep up with the neighbours, especially if the neighbour is a grammar school.

Referring to the differences between grammar and secondary modern schools, but without overt criticism of this system, *Our School* highlights the ways in which some secondary modern schools have striven to be more like grammar schools. Of course, there is the suggestion that secondary sought to do this in order to achieve a 'parity of esteem' with grammar schools (Banks, 1998) and because of a dissatisfaction with the selective system. Krish's narration goes on to implore teachers, parents and employers to help children become 'dissatisfied with second best'. Such a statement may be seen as a critique of the inequalities of a selective system, but that it achieves this by celebrating the secondary modern school is what makes this film so significant to the *educational imaginary* that it presents. Arguably, the educational imaginary presented in *Our School* is that of a comprehensive school containing the three schools in one referred to at the beginning and end of this film.

Comprehensive schools attracted a degree of cross party support at this time. In 1962, the same year that the NUT released *Our School* the UK Conservative government sponsored *Comprehensive School*, a ten minute documentary directed by Maxwell Munden. Part of a *Looking at Britain* series of films commissioned by the Colonial Office to be screened to overseas audiences, *Comprehensive School* observes life at Holland Park school in London. A purpose built comprehensive school, Holland Park, once described as a 'socialist Eton' on

account of several Labour politicians sending their children there throughout the 1960's (Crook, 2013) is presented as a flagship comprehensive school. A narration is provided over scenes from a school day, featuring the broad curriculum including academic, commercial, craft and domestic subjects, modern equipment and organisation of children into houses. Concluding the film the narrator explains that:

Holland Park Comprehensive School is one example of Britain's constant search for new and improved methods of educating the young on the principle that education's job is not just to instil general and specialised knowledge but to discover and bring out the best talents in every child.

The film presents the comprehensive school as a model of innovation, suitable for all abilities and thus inclusive. *Comprehensive School* was produced in a period of 'acceleration' of the 'comprehensive experimentation' "during the years of Conservative government between 1951 and 1964" (Crook, 1993, p. 51). This reflected a decline in secondary modern schools through the 1960's and a 'swing' to comprehensive schools (Simon, 1985). Fuelled by a 'breakout' (Simon, 1985, 1991) or 'grass-roots' movement of LEAs submitting plans for comprehensivisation this "demanded some revisionist thinking from a Conservative government" (Crook, 2002, p. 251). Thus, *Comprehensive School* does not so much project an *educational imaginary* of what secondary schooling should be like, but reflects the trends of the time which were shortly to become intensified and adopted as government policy.

By 1965, a Labour government had issued 'Circular 10/65' to LEAs requesting the drawing up of plans for reorganisation of secondary schooling along comprehensive lines, offering different forms of organisation to assist in LEA plans (Tomlinson, 1991; Haydn, 2004). Comprehensivisation had already gained momentum by the time the Labour Party commissioned *Education for the Future*, a 1967 film designed for television audiences which focused on the benefits of a comprehensive school system. Filmed at the David Lister High School in the City of Hull the direct observation of school activities acts as a backdrop to the narration by the school's headteacher, Albert Rowe. Direct to camera Rowe begins by addressing the fear that some parents might experience over their children attending a comprehensive school. These fears surround a belief that an exposure to a social mix signals a decline in standards, issues that continue to be examined by sociologists in relation to middle class identities and school choice (Reay, 2007; Reay *et al.*, 2008). Dismissing these as 'myths' Rowe goes on to passionately extol the virtues of a comprehensive school system, challenging the basis for selection:

There is no need, as hitherto, to make judgements about them. Because, the awful thing about educational judgements are, they're all self-fulfilling. If you label children C and D, you go on doing this then they will believe themselves to be C and D, and this is not right. It's not right to label children in this way. So, that in a comprehensive school we have a sufficiently rich environment, facilities, staff, a big staff, a talented staff, facilities, in order to give children the greatest chance to develop in all ways towards their own maximum growth.

The key difference between comprehensive schools and the earlier system based on selection, Rowe observes, is that the comprehensive school is based on acceptance. As Rowe goes on to explain, this is not merely an ideological driven commitment to equality, but is the foundation for a successful school. Rowe states:

We must build accepting schools and not rejecting schools

The need to accept and develop all pupils is linked to the film's title *Education for the Future* and this is made explicitly relevant by Rowe in his concluding direct to camera statement. Describing the comprehensive school as 'forward thinking, Rowe argues that the comprehensive system contributes towards a 'good society' where each is valued for the contribution they are making. *Education for the Future* then projects an *educational imaginary*, as do the previous films, that schooling is a vehicle necessary for social reform. In particular *Education for the Future* rests on the expert knowledge and experience of Albert Rowe to justify the move towards comprehensivisation, not just on grounds of equality, but on grounds that a school providing equality of opportunities mattered for the wider society. This professional expertise, as with the other films discussed here, lends impartiality to the film. For whilst the film was commissioned by the UK Labour Party is not until the end of the film that this fact is revealed, by which time a reasoned and passionate argument in favour of comprehensive schools has been presented. Such an attempt to convince the public of the benefits of a comprehensive system was probably not needed by 1967 as the move towards this form of secondary schooling was already developed. This swing to the comprehensive system (Simon, 1985) motivated, perhaps more by the pressures upon LEAs to provide more school places as well as the associated middle class dissatisfaction with the 11+ and the resultant stigma of failure (Tomlinson, 1991) than with an ideological commitment to equality.

The rise of comprehensive schooling in the second half of the twentieth century has been met by a decline in the comprehensive ideal in the latter years of the twentieth century, and into the twenty-first (Haydn, 2004).

Conclusion

The documentaries discussed here, *Children at School*, *The Children's Story*, *Children's Charter*, *The Three A's*, *Our School*, *Comprehensive School* and *Education for the Future* represent three different educational imaginaries. From national renewal where education signified a democratic nation, through to the expansion of secondary schooling in post-war years to an imaginary of the comprehensive ideal these films represent an audio-visual archive of how schooling was represented at these times. Documentary films, whilst engaged with reality do not capture reality, and must be seen as deliberate attempts to represent real life, making use of an aesthetic to convince viewers to subscribe to the *imaginary* presented. In the case of the films discussed, claims to authenticity are supported by direct observation of everyday activities in school while neutrality is supported with reference to the presentation of 'facts' as well as professional expertise.

Claims of authenticity and neutrality belie the narrative of the films which is to persuade viewers of the *educational imaginaries* presented, whether or not these are grounded in reality. This is particularly evident in the post-war films *Children's Charter* and *The Three A's* which showcase and celebrate the expanding secondary schooling system when some LEAs were already organising on comprehensive lines and when there was an absence of political consensus for this system. The *educational imaginary* represented in these films must therefore be recognised by researchers as attempts to deny or limit alternative accounts of the reality of schooling at the time.

The future is an ever present theme in the films discussed. This reflects the positioning of education, and in particular schooling as a vehicle by which the next generation will have a better future than previous generations. In these films it has been noted that schooling is presented as means of achieving national renewal, and of delivering a good society. This is a necessary component of education argue Cabeleira, Martins and Lawn:

“The practice of education is not thinkable without “intentionality” or a vision of the future. Education is something that *pictures and imagines itself*.” (2011, p. 484 emphasis in original).

In other words we can see that these documentary films form an important means of representing an *educational imaginary*. Whether or not the films are accurate in their representation of facts is not as important as using the films to understand the ways in which the films imagine education to be and imagine how education might become.

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