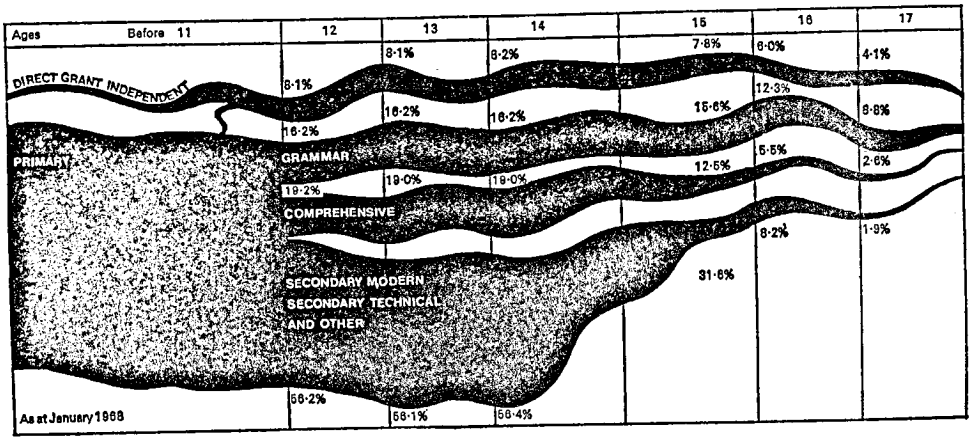
Sonia Bićanić

SCHOOLING IN BRITAIN



1. In clear and concise form the above graph[1] gives much of the important information about the British schooling system. It tells us what different kinds of schools there are. What ages children are when they go to them. What percentage of children go to the different kinds. It makes the picture too simple, and the British education system is not simple, but it provides a starting picture into which complications can later be fitted.

2. *Primary Education.* Children in Britain go to school at the age of 5. Before that there are a small number of nursery schools or nursery classes for children of 3 — 5. Primary education lasts from 5 — 11. Some school areas today are beginning to provide lower schools for children from 5 — 8 or 9 and middle schools for children from 8 or 9 — 12 or 13. These may actually be in different buildings. As the graph shows the vast majority of children (90%) go to state or state aided primary schools.[2] A small number of middle-class children go to private schools, usually known today as independent schools.

[1] Reproduced from Anthony Sampson, *The New Anatomy of Britain,* London 1971, p. 128, by permission of the author.

[2] The state schools, (by far the largest group) are provided and maintained by the Local Education Authority entirely out of public funds. The state aided (also known as voluntary) schools receive grants from the state and are supervised by the Local Education Authority but are partly controlled and financed by voluntary bodies, usually religious ones. They used to be known as "church schools".

In the last ten years British primary education has become famous throughout the world. It is known for imaginative teaching methods and a timetable which makes a child's natural interests the centre of his studies rather than trying to impose a pattern supposed to fit everybody. Freedom to experiment and variety of education are made possible because education, both at primary and secondary levels, is mainly controlled by the local government bodies in the counties and large towns (i. e. what largely correspond to the *komuna* in Yugoslavia). The local authority education officer has a strong influence on schools and programmes, but he cannot impose a fixed pattern on all schools within his area. Great freedom is left to individual schools and, though the local education authority inspects them and makes sure that they provide a high standard of education the headmaster and teaching staff frame school policy.

All primary education (except in the independent schools) is free. School books and basic equipment are also free. Free milk is provided for children up to the age of 7, and cheap (sometimes free) school meals are provided at midday. 60% children in British schools take these meals which have both a health and a social importance. They are properly planned and balanced and make the life of the working mother much easier. Local education authorities must also provide free school buses for children who live more than a certain distance from school.

3. *Secondary Education.* The educational picture becomes more complicated at secondary level. In 1972 the school leaving age was raised from 15 to 16 although 30% pupils stay on until the age of 17 or 18. Secondary schooling thus lasts from 12 or 13 — 17 or 18. As the graph shows there are at present five different kinds of secondary school: *technical school, modern school, comprehensive school, grammar school* and *independent school.*

Immediately after the Second World War there were only four kinds of secondary school: *technical, modern, grammar,* and *independent.* The independent schools are essentially private schools and any child can go to them whose parents can afford the school fees which range between £ 500 to £ 850 a year. Whether or not a child goes to any of the other 3 types of school depended until recently entirely on the famous exam known as the "eleven-plus" which was taken around a child's eleventh birthday. The aim of this three school plan when it was introduced was a democratic one. The idea was that children should be divided according to natural aptitude. The academic children would get places in the grammar schools, the technically minded in the technical schools and those who had no marked aptitudes would get a well-rounded "modern" education, fitting them to be intelligent and informed citizens, in the modern schools. The expectation was that about one third of the children would go on to each type of school. Results were very different from expectations. As it turned out 25% children went to the grammar schools and a much higher percentage in Wales and Scotland, 5% to the technical schools and 70% to the modern schools. There were neither the schools nor the teachers to cope with this situation and the modern schools tended to become (though not in all areas) a rag-bag into which children with no special aptitutes were lumped at too early an age, since many children develop special interests after the age of eleven-plus. The education provided (again with notable exceptions) was not really well thought out or interesting. Children and their parents began to ask what the point was of staying on at

school. The eleven-plus exam and the modern schools, so optimistically introduced, have become the main targets of both educational and social reformers.

Hence, today a new kind of school is beginning to grow up — the comprehensive school, which has something in common with our *školski centri.* The idea is that eventually all children should go to the local comprehensive school, and that these will provide many different kinds of courses and combinations of courses among which children can choose according to interest, ability and future career. Children should not be "streamed" once and for all according to intellectual ability at eleven, which is what happens now. This puts some children among the "bright" and others among the "slow" for everything throughout a whole formative period of their lives and is considered to be both educationally and socially wrong. Instead children should be divided into "sets" according to interest and aptitude, and the sets should be different for different subjects. Thus people are beginning to talk of "setting" rather than "streaming". The hope is that the elitist gap between the grammar and modern schools will be broken down. But this is still no more than an optimistic hope, opposed by many grammar schools.

Outside the state system there are two kinds of school i) the direct-grant grammar school and ii) the independent or public school. They are not the same thing. The direct-grant schools do not charge fees, they have independent sources of finance plus a government grant and there is great competition to get into them. In fact they take their pick of the brightest children through the results of exams. Thus they have the first creaming off (this is the official term used) of the intellectually gifted. They include many of the oldest and academically the best schools in Britain.

The grammar schools of various kinds cater for the intellectual elite, the independent schools cater for the social elite. They are completely outside the state system and are kept alive by fee paying pupils. The percentage of children who go to these schools is very small, much smaller than the graph suggests (between 2 — 3%) as it presents independent and direct grant together. The independent secondary schools go by the misleading name of p u b l i c s c h o o l s and once indeed they were public. They should not be confused with the public schools in Scotland, which really are open to everyone. The English public schools include such famous names as Eton, Harrow, Rugby, Charterhouse (for men) and Roedean and Benenden (for women). Although the numbers who go to these schools are small the social and political opportunities that they offer to those who have attended them used to be very great and still are very considerable. The public schools are still important enough socially to reinforce the elitist class structure of Britain.

The role played by the local education authority continues to be important in the secondary stage also. In general it might be said that the standard and quality of education offered by the modern and comprehensive schools varies according to the educational policy of the local council. This is so much so that some parents who are buying a new house will decide on one place rather than another entirely because of the educational opportunities offered to the children.

Secondary schools also have great freedom in the curricula they offer, and there are wide variations among comprehensive schools. Here, as in primary schools, the headmaster is the single most powerful influence. At grammar

school, however, teaching is greatly influenced by the requirements of the school leaving exam. There are great differences between this exam and the Yugoslav *matura*. There are two kinds of secondary school leaving exam in England: the *GCE* (General Certificate of Education) and the *CSE* (Certificate of Secondary Education).

1) *GCE*. This can be taken at two levels, *O level* (ordinary level) and *A level* (advanced level). *O levels* are taken by the majority of children going to secondary grammar or independent school, and by many modern school children. O level exams are taken in each subject separately so that children may have one or seven/eight subjects at O level. Most children take five to seven subjects at O level. The exams are taken at the age of 15 or 16. *A levels* are also taken separately, by subject. They are taken by those children who intend to go on to university, or to professional training. A minimum of two subjects at A level is a university entrance requirement. The exams are taken at the age of 17 or 18. For both O level and A level GCE the papers are set and marked by the examiners appointed by the universities. Teachers in schools have no part in the examining.

2) *CSE*. This exam was pioneered to meet the needs of the secondary modern school. It is sometimes set by examining bodies outside the school, and sometimes set in the school and approved by outside bodies. In any case it is marked in the schools by the teachers but there is always an outside examiner also known as a moderator. The aim of this is to make sure that standards do not vary too much between school and school. This exam is also taken in as many subjects as the teacher advises. A high grade in CSE is considered the equivalent of a pass at O level of GCE.

4. *Further Education*. This is a broad term to cover education beyond secondary school in various kinds of vocational colleges (i. e. it is further education in the chosen career, not education on a higher level). The main ones are technical, agricultural and commercial colleges. These roughly correspond to the *viša škola* in Yugoslavia. Almost all further education colleges provide three kinds of courses: full-time, evening and sandwich-courses. The last two are the most popular as those attending colleges are often working. Sandwich-courses have become especially popular recently, they consist of 6 months study and 6 months practical work over a period of 3—5 years. These colleges are maintained out of public funds and are therefore usually inexpensive.

5. *Higher Education*. This is provided at Universities, Polytechnical Colleges (usually known as Polys) and Colleges of Education. The last are mostly becoming parts of university departments. In the last ten years the number of universities has doubled, and now there are 44 universities and 28 polys. The universities fall into three categories. Oldest are Oxford (founded 1249), Cambridge (1284) and the Scottish universities (founded fifteenth and sixteenth centuries). The first two have many special features and an old collegiate system that make them different from other universities. They are often referred to collectively as *Oxbridge*.

The second group of universities is known as *Redbrick* or *Civic* — the name comes from the fact that many of them really were built of red brick. They grew up during the nineteenth century, which was the first great period of educational reform in England. Most of them are in the big industrial cities

of the Midlands and the North (Manchester, Sheffield, Birmingham and also London, the biggest British university). These universities were started in order to break the monopoly of Oxbridge and to make higher education more widely and democratically available. Britain's *modern universities* have only been built since the war. Many during the last 10 years. Unlike *Oxbridge* and *Redbrick* they are not built in the middle of towns but in parks outside urban centres. Their buildings are modern and they try to provide up to date kinds of study with varied combinations of subjects not always found at the older universities.

There are several features that make British universities different from Yugoslav ones. First and foremost the ratio between teaching staff and students is 1 : 8 as the national average. This means that teachers can give much more individual attention to students, and that seminars and classes (there are very few compulsory lectures, none at some universities) can be small. Universities are resident, students live in colleges or halls of residence or lodgings, and most students do not study in the same town they live in, even if this town happens to have a university. Thus the student body has special links and tends to form a corporate body. Studies last 3 years (4 or 5 for a few courses) and exams called *finals* are taken at the end of the third year. These are indeed final and cannot be taken again. Students cannot prolong their studies beyond the 3 or 4 years. Universities are small, 2,000 students is common, although London has 22,800. Only 7% children who complete secondary school go on to university, which is a very low figure.

University education is not the only form of higher education in Britain. Another 5% children go on to take the exams of the professional bodies (doctors, lawyers, architects, chartered accountants). Thus in Britain it is possible to get into the top ranks of the professions without going to university.

This is the broad outline of the British educational system. There are slight differences between the British and Welsh system and the Scottish one. In general education in Scotland has a longer democratic tradition than in England, and there are fewer elite schools. In Wales children may be educated in their mother tongue.

The system seems much neater and tidier than it really is. During the last ten years education has become one of the great social and political battlefields, especially secondary education. The two main centres of controversy are the position of the independent schools vis à vis the state schooling system and the introduction of huge comprehensive schools that would provide secondary education of all kinds and allow children to move freely among different subjects (i. e. setting rather than streaming). Educationalists are split over this issue, not always on party lines. However the problems are settled, England in the seventies is probably at the beginning of new educational reforms. Many basic questions are being asked. Should education be content to provide a restricted elite group of the intellectually gifted and the socially fortunate or should it not try to provide more equal opportunities for everyone? How can an educational system be devised that will be truly democratic and be centered on the needs of the individual and not on academic exams or narrow technical training? Of course these problems are not peculiar to England. They are common to many countries.