Živa riječ

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THE BRITISH EDUCATION SYSTEM

It would be impossible within a short article like this to give an adequate description of any education system. It is particularly difficult to describe the British one, because there is so much diversity in it. Firstly, each of the constituent parts of the United Kingdom has its own system; so the Scottish child receives a different education from the English or Northern Irish child. Secondly, control of education is largely in the hands of the local authorities, not the central government, with the result that there is great variety between different regions. Thirdly the schools themselves have considerable freedom over such matters as what subjects they teach, how they will be taught, the number of lessons for each subject, even how they will assess the students' performance. There are no set curricula, no officially approved textbooks, no regulations for the organisation of the school day, and there is no national assessment system. Add to this the fact that alongside the state system there is a flourishing system of fee-paying schools —, and you have some idea of how complex an organism the British education system is.

It may seem from this introduction that schooling in Britain is totally chaotic. How is it possible, you may ask, to maintain any kind of standards? Well, in practice there is a large degree of uniformity. This uniformity, however, derives not from governmental regulations, but from a mixture of tradition, social and economic pressure and simple common-sense.

Take, for example, the question of the curriculum — what subjects a school offers its pupils. Now, legally the only subject that *must* be on the timetable is Religious Studies. According to the Education Act of 1944 every school offers its pupils. Now, legally the only subject that *must* be on the is the only subject which has such a legal basis, and even here the school is free to choose what the content of the syllabus is. The rest of the timetable can be made up as the individual school thinks best. But in practice most schools teach exactly the same subjects. Pressure from parents, employers, local politicians, universities and colleges, pupils and teachers all contribute to creating a general uniformity. A school is not obliged legally to teach, say, Mathematics or History, but it would soon find itself under considerable attack, if it actually tried to leave them out of the timetable.

And what is true of the curriculum is also true of such matters as the organisation of the school day, assessment, teaching methods, syllabus content, the choice of textbooks. Here again in theory the school can do what it wants; in practice there is a large degree of conformity. The strength of the system is that it allows for innovation, experiment and flexibility to suit local needs.

Its weakness, say its detractors, is that it gives too much power to the schools and the individual teachers and not enough control to society.

The aim of this rather lengthy introduction has been to point out that the description of British education that follows should be seen not so much as an explanation of a government-regulated system, but rather as an observation of common practice. For every thing I describe in this article there will be exceptions somewhere in the United Kingdom. With that said, we can take a more detailed look at how education in Britain is organised.

First of all, some figures: at the present moment there are approximately 11 million schoolchildren in Britain, attending 38,000 schools. All primary schools are mixed, that is boys and girls are taught together, and about 80% of secondary schools are also co-educational. There are more than 550,000 teachers, so that the pupil: teacher ratio is about 20:1. Education within the state system is free, and all books and equipment are provided by the schools.

Compulsory education starts at the age of 5. This is younger than in most countries and has generally meant that pre-school education is not so well developed in Britain as it should be. Nevertheless, nursery education for the under-fives is being extended: voluntary groupes are establishing their own schools in many places, while in others the local authorities have been forced by parental pressure to provide more nursery schools.

From the age of five to the age of 11, children attend primary school. The primary school is normally divided into three stages — infants, juniors and seniors. The infants school curriculum is mostly activity-based with a strong emphasis on play and creativity. The work becomes progressively more academic as the pupils get older. One particular feature of teaching in the primary schools is that there are no subject teachers, only class teachers. Thus a class has the same teacher for all subjects in the primary school.

At the age of 11 the pupils go on to the secondary school. This transfer used to be on the basis of an examination called the eleven-plus. The results of this examination determined which secondary school the pupil went to — grammar, technical or secondary modern. The tripartite secondary system was set up by the 1944 Education Act, and was intended to give each child the education most suited to his abilities.

However, during the fifties and sixties a growing number of people came to believe that the grammar school system reinforced social and educational divisions. They felt that although the system was supposed to give the most appropriate education, what it meant in practice was that the grammar school was for middle class children and the secondary modern for children of the working class.

On the basis of this belief, the Labour government of 1964—70 issued a law compelling the local authorities to abolish the tripartite system and make all secondary schools into non-selective comprehensive schools.

This led to a great deal of argument, because, as we have noted, the central government has no real power over educational policy. What it does have, however, is control over a large part of the money that finances education. The Labour government threatened to withhold money from those local authorities who refused to go comprehensive. A number of Conservative-controlled

authorities decided to accept this risk and refused to change their schools, hoping that in the next national election the Conservatives would win. And this is precisely what happened in 1970. Those local authorities who had refused to change breathed a huge sigh of relief, thinking that their grammar schools were safe. But it was not to be, for in the election of 1974 the Labour party was returned to power once more and the struggle began all over again.

The result of all this political fighting has been that at the moment the majority of British schoolchildren (about 80%) receive their secondary education at a comprehensive school. Whether this figure will increase remains to be seen.

But what of the content of the secondary education? There is, of course, tremendous variety, but in general pupils follow a curriculum divided into three stages: common curriculum (years 1—3), preparation for O-level (years 4 ang 5), preparation for A-level (the sixth form). In the first three years all students follow the same curriculum. This will normally consist of 10 or 11 subjects from the following range: English, Mathematics, French (or German), History, Geography, Physics, Chemistry, Biology, Religious Education, Physical Education, Music, Art, Cookery, Metalwork (or Woodwork).

When they enter the fourth form, the first stage of specialisation begins, and pupils choose (with the advice of parents and teachers) 7 or 8 subjects to study for the school-leaving examination. Everybody has to do English and Mathematics, usually one foreign language, Religious Education and Physical Education. The rest of their curriculum depends on their own personal preference and their performance in the subjects so far.

The subjects chosen are studied for two years, at the end of which the pupils sit an examination, called the General Certificate of Education, Ordinary Level (GCE O-level). Alternatively they can take an examination called the Certificate of Secondary Education (CSE), which is of a lower standard and is less academic than the GCE. Neither of the examinations is compulsory. Pupils can leave school without attempting them, if they like, but, of course, most try them.

The most important feature of these examinations is that they are neither set nor marked by the teachers at the pupil's school. The examination questions are set by the universities and then sent to all the schools. The pupils write their answers to the questions and then these answer papers are sent back to the universities to be marked.

The aim of this system is to ensure the highest degree of impartiality and uniformity. The person marking the examination answer papers knows nothing about the pupil, not even the name or sex, because each person sitting the examination is given a code number to maintain complete anonymity. The same examination is done by everyone at exactly the same time on exactly the same date throughout the region covered by a particular university.

The O-level examination is normally done at the age of 16, but it can be done at any time during a person's life, e. g. by going to evening classes. The pupil receives a certificate stating what subjects he passed and at what grade. So it will look something like this:

This is to certify that:

JOHN SMITH

passed the General Certificate of Education at Ordinary Level in the following subjects:

English Language (A)
English Literature (B)
Mathematics (D)
History (B)
etc.

The grading system starts at the top with A and goes down to H. The last three grades (i. e. F, G and H) are FAIL grades. On leaving school students receive no certificate other than the GCE or CSE examination certificates. There is no overall mark for their work done at school.

Pupils can leave school at 16 either to go to work or to continue studying in some other establishment e. g. a technical college or secretarial college. Alternatively, they can stay on at school and go into the sixth form.

The sixth form is a two-year stage and prepares students for the GCE Advanced Level (or A-level) examination. Further specialisation now takes place: pupils normally take just 3 or 4 subjects for A-level, and there are no compulsory subjects. Most pupils choose the subjects they did best at in the O-level examinations, but another factor that can influence their choice is whether they want to go on to university. If they do, then they will choose the subjects that will help them to get the course that they want. For example, if a pupil wants to study a Science subject at university, then he must have an A-level certificate in at least one Science subject, e. g. Physics, and in Mathematics; if he wants to go on to study French, he should do A-levels in French and Latin. And so on.

The sixth form is non-compulsory, so the pupils have much more freedom and also much more responsibility, particularly for the organisation of their work.

The A-level examination is normally taken at the age of 18 and is conducted in exactly the same way as the O-level examinations. With their A-levels a number of students start work, but the main purpose of the A-level examination is to select who can go on to study at tertiary level, i. e. university or polytechnic. Entrance to higher education in Britain is competitive. You must apply to the university of your choice and they will tell you what grades you must get at A-level in order to be accepted for their course. So, let us say you wanted to study Medicine at the University of Leeds, then the Faculty of Medicine at Leeds might write to you and say that you must get A-level in Biology at grade B, in Mathematics at grade B and in any other subject at grade C. If you get these grades (or higher), then you can go to study at Leeds. If not, you must look elsewhere.

The grades that the university asks for will depend on how many people apply for a particular course. The more people that apply, the higher the grades will be. You can apply to any of the 45 universities in Britain and, in

fact, it is the normal practice for pupils to apply to universities away from their own town. So, if you live in Leeds, you will probably apply to study in another town e. g. Manchester or Brighton. The vast majority of students in Britain, then, live away from home.

A-levels also serve as the basic qualification for a grant or scholarship. Once you have got a place at a university, you apply to your local authority for a grant. This consists of two parts: fees and maintenance. The local authority pays the universities fees for you and also pays you a certain amount of money to live on. The size of the grants available changes from year to year to keep pace with the cost of living. The amount that any individual student gets depends on his parents' income. A student from a poorer family or from a family with a number of other children still at school will receive more than a student, whose parents have enough money to pay for all or part of his education. So long as you have a minimum of 2 A-levels, you are entitled to four years of a local authority grant (the amount depending on your parents' means). Most university courses last three years and the normal practice is to do these years consecutively. Thus students in Britain generally finish their education at the age of 21 or 22.

As I stated in the introduction to this article, what I have described is an observation of common practice rather than a statute-based system. There will be numerous exceptions to everything I have described. This has always been the case, and is the more so nowadays when education, for better or worse, is the subject of so much debate and experiment. But I hope I have been able to give some insight into how John and Mary Average proceed through the British school system and emerge, hopefully, better educated than when they entered it. The British Eduation System.

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