

On the British Education System and The State Schools in Cambridge (II)

Minoru SHIGETA*

In my preceding essay, I mentioned how we settled in Cambridge, and how I got permission to the local state schools for my three children. In this essay, before mentioning the school life of my children's, I will tell you first about the British education system in general.

II. The British Education System

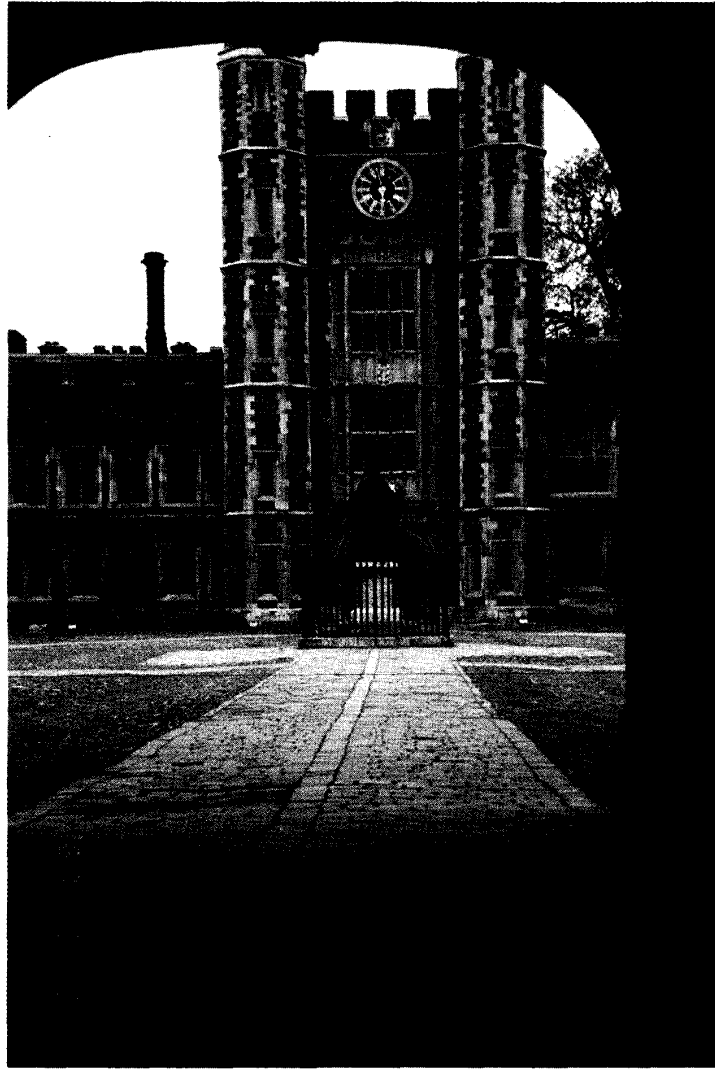
The British education system is rather complicated. It is classified in two parts, the state schools (94% of the whole British schools) and the non - state schools (6% of the whole). An old system of state schools has been partly changed and the new system is not fully understood nor accepted by everyone. However, the education system is not so rigidly controlled nor so centralized as in many other countries. The state schools are generally run by *Local government*. Each Local Education Authority (or LEA) works under very general directions from the Department of Education and Science, which is a Government Department, is equivalent to the Ministry of Education in Japan. The money to run the schools and pay the teachers comes mainly from general taxes, rather than from local ones. Therefore, the state schools are also called "maintained schools," which form the public education system that requires no school fee. On the other hand, non - state are not controlled by LEA but they are registered with the Department of Education and Science and may be inspected by Her Majesty's inspectors. Non - state schools are divided into two schools; independent schools and private schools. Many independent schools, in which preparatory schools and public schools are included, have a long history. Depending on the fees paid by the parents of present pupils but also money from property and investments which they have inherited in the past, independent schools are not profit - making businesses, while private schools are generally profit - making. So the Public Schools of Great Britain are not "public" but independent. This makes a great difference between the public schools of Britain and those of America. And not all independent schools can call themselves Public School because they have to be selected by a conference of heads of well - established Public Schools, such as Eton, Harrow, and so on. The reason why some of independent schools are called "Public School" seems to derive from the fact that the students originally came, not only from the suburban districts, but also from all over England. And "Preparatory" in preparatory schools (from the age of 7 to 13) originates in the fact that most of preparatory schools instruct *preparatory* education for the pupils to go on to public schools because most of the pupils enter public schools by taking their general entrance examinations. Here is a chart of the

*宇部工業高等専門学校英語教室

school system from *Life in Britain*.¹ It shows us the above - mentioned school system and examinations briefly but very concisely: Now we will see the school system individually, concerning the state schools.

A chart of the school system

The state system	
Age of pupil	Type of school
3 years	Nursery school
5	compulsory full-time school attendance
5	Primary school — divided into
5-7	Infants
7-11	Junior
11	Comprehensive or Secondary or Grammar
	Forms or Classes 1 to 5
16	school leaving age
16-18/19	Sixth form of the school or Sixth Form College of a district or College of Further Education
The non - state system	
5 year or under	Private school
5	compulsory full-time school attendance
7 or 8	Preparatory school — independent or private
10 or 11	Independent or private secondary school
13	Public school or some independent school
16	school leaving age
16-18/19	Sixth form of the school
Examinations taken	
at 11	In the areas which refuse to introduce comprehensive schools pupils are selected for either a grammar or secondary school by the 11+ exam.
16	the CSE—Certificate of Secondary Education—taken by less academic pupils; the GCE 'O' Level—General Certificate of Education at Ordinary Level. Some pupils take some subjects in CSE and other subjects in GCE 'O' Level.
17 or 18	the GCE 'A' Level—General Certificate of Education at Advanced Level.
At 13 years in the non - state system pupils may take the Common Entrance Examination by which they are selected for Public and Independent Schools.	
The 'O' and 'A' Level examinations are organized by 11 separate Examination Boards under the control of universities.	
Note: there is no national School Leaving Examination in England and Wales.	



Eton College (Eton, Berks.)

One of the most famous public schools in England. Many of the Prime Ministers in Britain were educated here.

1) Nursery Schools

Pre - school education in Britain seems rather confusing, because there is no definite agreement about which the different kinds of establishments should be called. They are called nursery schools, nursery classes and day nurseries, but there is a little difference between them. If we think of nursery schools or nursery classes only as those schools or classes which have a trained teacher in charge and which come under the control of local education authorities, it would make things a little easier. Nursery schools are equivalent to kindergartens in Japan. Under the existing provisions, nursery school must have one teacher and one nursery nurse per twenty children, and fall within the jurisdiction of the Department of Education and Science. They help children at the age of 3-5 to form good life habits and to learn self - reliance. Many children in nursery schools stay there just

for a couple of hours either in the morning or the afternoon, five days a week. And nursery schools do not generally accept children under the age of three and are quite free. Nursery classes have the same upbringing education as nursery schools, but usually they mean "nursery classes" which are made in primary schools. On the other hand, day nurseries look after the children of the mothers who have to go out to work, and fall under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Health and Social Security, but they have to be registered with local social services departments. They have nursery hours longer than nursery schools, and in fact they are opened all the year round. The fee of public day nurseries is decided according to the parents' income.

However, there are still not enough nursery schools and day nurseries, and they are also distributed unequally, which has given rise to "the very rapid growth since the early 1960s of playgroups organized by parents or voluntary bodies. Most playgroups make a small charge to cover expenses."² In order to encourage the establishment of voluntary playgroups performed in great halls and private houses by mothers, Pre - school Playgroups Association has been founded. To sum up, perhaps the most remarkable feature of nursery is to aim at helping children to discover things for themselves.

2) Primary Schools

Compulsory education in Britain begins at the age of five, and most primary schools cater for children up to the age of eleven, when they go on to secondary school. Primary schools may be housed in a single building for the 5-11 year old children. Within this single school there are usually two departments, Infants and Junior with one head teacher. The children in infant schools are all under seven. The Juniors are aged from seven to eleven. School life in the first year in infant schools is like the enlarged and prolonged life of nursery schools, but it is educational, and the quality of school life becomes systematic. The aim of education is to form a good habit and conduct a training for social life, like that of nursery schools. Almost all infant schools adopt coeducation, and in most cases female teachers take care of pupils. As above - mentioned, at the age of seven infant school children go on to the junior school. The educational method is the same as infant schools, but remarkable change into study from play can be seen, and the curriculum is drawn up on a full scale about each subject, and comes to be much more based on the teaching schedule. There are both the coeducational and single - sex system in junior school, and the latter is often found in such a school as has a lot of school children. However, "in recent years there has been a very strong move in primary education towards open or informal teaching, with timetable divisions being greatly reduced or, in some cases, abolished altogether."³ At the stage of compulsory education, the textbooks are lent, and some stationery such as notebooks and pasteboard is offered free, to all school children, and of course all the schools require no school fee. In the case of my youngest daughter, she was ten years old, so she was admitted in 4th year of a junior school.

Apart from the state system mentioned above, in some areas, there are *Middle schools* for 8 or 9 to 12 or 13 year - old children: so their change of school comes later than 11. In the non - state system children stay at preparatory schools until they become 13.

3) The Secondary School Course

At the age of 11 most children move into secondary education. After 1944, most secondary schools could be classified either as *grammar* or as *secondary modern schools*; school children were selected by passing an examination (called the eleven - plus examination) for grammar school if they were academically clever. If they failed the eleven - plus, they went to a secondary modern school. Originally "it was intended that children should be able to move easily between one type of school and another, but in practice this proved to be impossible. During the 1950s pressure against this selection system at such an early age increased until in 1964 the Government officially recommended it should be abolished and all secondary schools should become comprehensive so that children could move right through the education system without taking any form of selection examination."⁴ So the eleven - plus examination has gradually been disappearing, and comprehensive schools have rapidly increased in number, and they now make up the vast majority of secondary schools. In spite of such a tendency, there are still a number of grammar schools as well as private schools, to which parents who can afford it can send their children if they wish.

All types of secondary schools have 5- year courses for pupils from 11 years up to the school leaving age (normally 16 years). Promotion to a higher class every year does not depend upon examination results. It is almost automatic. At the end of the five - year course, pupils can take CSE (Certificate of Secondary Education) and GCE (General Certificate of Education) exams, but children in Britain still leave school with no formal leaving examination certificate. Here we will investigate roughly what kinds of examinations GCE and CSE are. *GCE exams* are one of the most important examinations in secondary schools, and are set and graded by 8 Examination Boards under the control of universities in Britain. These are classified into three levels; Advanced, Ordinary and Special <Scholarship> levels. Ordinary level is usually taken at the age of 16, and Advanced level after the lapse of two years. But even those who are not on the register in any educational institutions, are allowed to take the exams if university authorities approve. The Advanced levels are estimated by 7 grades of A, B, C, D, E, O and F, and A to E grades are passing marks. If we get O grade in A Levels, we are given a certificate of O level. The result of these exams are used by the local authorities as a material for evaluation of scholarship, and universities and other higher educational institutions make use of the results as reference data for selecting their new students. Moreover, the results may be used as job - order conditions on the part of employers. The general control and supervision over this examination system is in Schools Council for the Curriculum and Examination. As the eight different institutions make examinations of their own, the level of the examinations could be different. So the council always care about the same level of the examinations made by the institutions. *CSE exams*, like GCE, are examinations on academic subjects, and students can take as many subjects as they want. In addition to the same subjects as GCE, students can take not only some subjects such as architecture, civics, but also some subjects on practical knowledge and technical skill like typewriting. CSE exams are indeed intended for those who have the ability below the average from the 5th - year students taking O levels of GCE. The results of the exams are usually shown by 1 to 5 grades, but sometimes without any grades. Grade 1 shows the same academic level as O level of GCE, and the examinees below grade 5 cannot have any grades. And in the Certificate are these grades recorded. The exams are managed by some teachers



Impington Village College (Impington, Cambs.)

working at the local institutions, and the certificate is made use of by employers as well as by the applicants for a position. Furthermore, the certificate serves as one of the requirements for admission to a college of further education like Technical Colleges.

4) The Sixth Form

Most of the school children in the secondary schools in England and Wales find employment at the age of 15 when they finish their compulsory education, but some of them are moved up to the fifth form, and they may transfer to college of further education or find a situation by passing O levels of GCE or some grades of CSE. But some of the fifth formers may stay school for two or three years more, and study three or four subjects, trying to pass A levels of GCE. This system is called the sixth form. In recent years these sixth formers have been increasing in number. Comprehensive and grammar schools have sixth form departments providing one-, two-, or three-year courses, but secondary modern schools do not usually have a sixth form. "In some areas the various schools have combined their sixth forms to make a new and separate Sixth Form College. It offers a wider choice of courses than the individual schools could do — much wider than schools in most other countries."⁵ Studies are highly specialized at the sixth form stage because the courses lead to the GCE "A" Level exam which qualifies students for all kinds of higher education, and at "A" Level only three or four subjects are taken. Here are examples of groups of subjects taken at A Level: English/French/German; Maths/Physics/Chemistry; Geography/History/Economics. As for my

daughter, she entered Impington Village College which has the sixth form as well as the secondary school course because maybe there were not any colleges with sixth form in the City of Cambridge, I think.

5) The Non - State School System

So far we have seen the British school system with special reference to the state schools. Now we will take a bird's - eye view of non - state schools. 40% of non - state schools are boarding schools where pupils live for three - quarters of the year. The change to full secondary education comes later at 13 in many Public Schools. It is generally admitted that the intellectual level and the standard of teaching in some Public Schools is very high, and that non - state education is the privilege of a minority because it is expensive. It is true there are some scholarships for very intelligent but poor children, but it may be safely said that non - state education is generally for children with fairly rich parents, or those who struggle to afford it.

Some Special Features of the British School System

In the preceding sections, we have seen the British compulsory education system with special reference to the state schools. Here I will add some special features of the British school system.⁶

- 1) The school system is not centralized.
- 2) Teachers are not civil servants; they can move freely between state and non - state schools.
- 3) Individual teacher has wide responsibility inside the classroom for what is taught and how is taught.
- 4) The Local Education Authority has full local responsibility for school within the state system.
- 5) Some older pupils, especially sixth formers, are chosen to be Prefects or Monitors, and at the same time they have considerable responsibility for discipline and the running of their schools.
- 6) Most pupils have considerable freedom to choose the course they will study. However, not every school can afford all possible courses.
- 7) The chosen course provides some qualification leading either to a job or to a particular kind of further study. It is difficult, however, for a pupil to change courses at a late stage; and the different Examination Boards have different exam requirements. So the British system is sometimes accused of forcing pupils to specialize too early in life.
- 8) A considerable amount of school time will be spent in physical education, including sport. All schools make use of sports grounds and football pitches, even though inner city school pupils have to go to them by bus.
- 9) By law only one subject has to be taught in state schools, and that is religious education. How it is taught and how often depends upon each school.
- 10) Almost all schools assemble all pupils and staff at some time during the week in the Assembly Hall of the school. They conduct a short ceremony of reading from the Bible and singing. At the same time, notices about the school life are read out. In many schools "Assembly" begins the school day every day.
- 11) The school year is divided into three terms of about thirteen weeks each. The academic year

starts in September. Each term has a short holiday in the middle, known as half - term.

Examples of Term Dates (1986/87, Milton Road Junior School in Cambridge)		
1986	Autumn Term Open	Tuesday 2nd September
	Half Term	27th-31st October
	Autumn Term Close	Friday 19th December
1987	Spring Term Open	Thursday 8th January
	Half Term	23rd-27th February
	Spring Term Close	Friday 10th April
	Summer Term Open	Monday 27th April
	Half Term	25th-29th May
	Summer Term Close	Friday 24th July
	Autumn Term Open	Tuesday 8th September
	Half Term	26th-30th October
	Autumn Term Close	Friday 18th October

(Note) Half terms are not the same in all LEA schools, nor in all non-state schools.

Now I have finished mentioning the British compulsory education system especially concerning LEA (Local Education Authority) schools. About a university, polytechnic or college of higher education, and the school and colleges where my three children attended, I will talk on another occasion.

(NOTES)

1. See *Life in Britain* by H.F. Brookes and C.E. Fraenkel (Kinseido, Ltd., Tokyo, 1985), p.12.
2. Shirley Toulson, *Education in Britain* (Kinseido, Ltd., Tokyo, 1985), p.12.
3. *Ibid.*, p.30.
4. *Ibid.*, p.64.
5. Brookes & Fraenkel, *op.cit.*, p.14.
6. See *Ibid.*, pp.14-15.