**Faculty of Letters and Languages – M’sila**

**Department of English**

**Level:** Master 01

**Course:** British Civilization.

**Lecture**: Education.

**Lecture number**: 08

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**INTRODUCTION:**

British education operates on three levels: schools, higher education and further/adult education. Schools are mainly mixed-sex, although there are some single-sex schools, and are divided into state (maintained from public funds) and independent (privately financed) sectors (the latter mainly in England). But there is no common educational organization for the whole country. Northern Ireland, Scotland and England/Wales have somewhat different school systems. Further, adult, and higher education generally have the same structure throughout Britain and are mostly state-funded.

The quality of British education concerns parents, employers, politicians and students. School inspectors have criticized standards in English, Mathematics, Technology and writing and reading skills. In 1997, the *World Economic Forum* claimed that Britain ranked 32nd out of 53 countries in the quality of its primary and secondary schools. A 1997 *National Institute of Economic and Social Research* study showed that British thirteen-to-fourteen-year-olds were one year behind most European countries and even further behind Japan, Korea and Singapore.

Later, in 2001, the *Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD)* reported that Britain was slipping down the global league table of secondary schools (19th out of 28), defined by good passes in national examinations. Britain also had some of the worst pre-school education and child-care in the western world, with a lack of high-quality nurseries, low-qualified and underpaid staff and poor working conditions. *A National Skills Task Force* in 2000 reported that 7 million adults (nearly one in five) in Britain were functionally illiterate. It is argued that low standards of literacy and numeracy stem from decades of inadequate school education.

**School History**

The complicated nature of British (particularly English) schooling and current educational controversies have their roots in school history. To simplify matters, this section concentrates on the largest school element, that of England and Wales, with comparative references to Scotland and Northern Ireland. State involvement in education was late and the first attempt to establish a national system of state-funded elementary schools came only in 1870 for England and Wales (1872 for Scotland and 1923 for Northern Ireland). But it was not until 1944 that the state supplied both primary and secondary schools nationally which were free and compulsory.

**The 1944 Education Act**

In 1944, an Education Act (the Butler Act) reorganized state primary and secondary schools in England and Wales (1947 in Scotland and Northern Ireland) and greatly influenced future generations of schoolchildren. State schooling became free and compulsory up to the age of fifteen and was divided into three stages: primary schools (five–twelve years old), secondary schools (twelve–fifteen) and further post-school training. A decentralized system resulted, in which a Ministry of Education drew up policy guidelines and Local Education Authorities (LEAs) decided which forms of schooling would be used in their areas. Two types of state schools resulted from the Act: county and voluntary. Primary and secondary county schools were provided by LEAs in each county. Voluntary schools were mainly those elementary schools which had been founded by religious and other groups and which were now partially financed or maintained by LEAs, although they retained their religious affiliation. Non-denominational schools thus coexisted with voluntary schools. This situation continues today: most state non-denominational schools are controlled by LEAs and voluntary (faith) schools are controlled by religious groups.

**The State School System**

State education in the UK is free and compulsory for children between the ages of five and sixteen. The vast majority of children are educated in state primary and secondary schools. But the state system is complicated by remnants of the 1944 Act and a diversity of school types throughout the country.

In England and Wales, the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) initiates policy (with Wales having some devolved responsibility) and the LEAs retain decentralized choice to organize school planning in their areas with finance provided by central government. The LEAs have traditionally left academic organization of schools to headteachers and staff. Many state schools have boards of unpaid governors, who are local citizens prepared to give help and guidance and who may be involved in the hiring of headteachers and teachers State schooling before the age of five is not compulsory in Britain and there is no statutory requirement on the LEAs to provide such education. But more parents (particularly those at work) are seeking school provisions for young children and there is concern about the lack of opportunities. At present, 64 per cent of three- and four-year-olds benefit from a state nursery education, while others attend private playgroups.

The Labor government wants to expand state nursery education. Pupils attend primary school in the state sector from the age of five and then move to secondary schools normally at eleven until the ages of sixteen to eighteen. Over 87 per cent of state secondary pupils in England and all state secondary pupils in Wales attend comprehensives. There are only a small number of grammar (166) and secondary modern schools left in the state system. The continued existence of these schools depends partly upon local government decisions, partly upon parent power and partly upon Labor government policy. *Scotland* has an ancient independent LEA educational system, with schools, colleges and universities which are among the oldest in Europe. Its state school system is comprehensive and non-selective. Children transfer from primary to secondary education at twelve and may continue until eighteen. The Scottish ‘public schools’ are state and not private institutions (although a few independent schools do exist).

**The Independent (Fee-Paying) School Sector**

The independent school sector exists mainly in England, is separate from the state school system and caters for some 6 per cent of all British children, from the ages of four to eighteen at various levels of education. There are 2,400 independent schools with over 563,500 pupils. Its financing derives from investments and the fees paid by the pupils’ parents for their education, which vary between schools and can amount to several thousand pounds a year. The independent sector is dependent upon its charitable and tax-exempt status to survive. This means that the schools are not taxed on their income if it is used only for educational purposes. There are a minority of scholarship holders, whose expenses are covered by their schools. Some 250 public schools (private, not state), such as Eton, Harrow and Winchester, are the most famous of the independent schools, and are usually defined by their membership of the Headmasters’ Conference. They were originally created (often by monarchs) to provide education for the sons of the rich and aristocratic. Such schools are mainly boarding establishments, where the pupils live and are educated during term time, although many of them now also take day-pupils who do not board in.

**School Organization and Examinations**

The school day in state and independent schools usually runs from 9.00 a.m. until 4 p.m. and the school year is divided into three terms (autumn, spring and summer). Classes in British schools used to be called ‘forms’ and in secondary schools were numbered from one to six. But most schools have adopted year numbers from 7 to 11 in secondary schools, with a two year sixth form for advanced work. A reduced birth rate in recent years led to a decrease in the number of schoolchildren, resulting in the closure of schools in rural and urban areas. Numbers have since increased and the Labor government is committed to reducing average class size for primary schools to below thirty, although many secondary schools have classes with over thirty pupils.

Most teachers are trained at the universities and other colleges. There is a serious shortage of teachers in Britain in all subjects, but especially in mathematics, technology, physics and foreign languages. Potential teachers increasingly see the profession as unattractive and many practicing teachers leave for better-paid jobs or retire early. Teachers at present are suffering from low morale after battles with the government over pay, conditions and educational reforms, and from what they perceive as the low status afforded them by government and the general public. The teaching profession has become very stressful and subject to greater pressures, such as assaults upon teachers by pupils and increased bureaucracy. The quality of teaching in state schools has attracted much criticism in recent years and the Labor government is committed to raising standards, removing incompetent and underperforming teachers and closing ‘failing schools’. However, the effect of alleged spending cuts in education has been considerable, with GDP public expenditure on education in Britain being below that of many comparable countries. This has prevented the building and modernization of schools, especially in inner-city areas. It has also resulted in reduced services and a shortage of books and equipment for pupils, teachers and libraries.

**Higher Education**

There were 23 British universities in 1960. After a period of expansion in the 1960s and reforms in 1992 when existing institutions such as polytechnics were given university status, there are now some 87 universities and 64 institutions of higher education, with 1.3 million full-time students in 1999. The Open University and the independent University of Buckingham are additional university-level institutions. The universities can be broadly classified into four types. The ancient universities of Oxford and Cambridge (composed of their many colleges) date from the twelfth century. But until the nineteenth century they were virtually the only English universities and offered no places to women. However, other older universities were founded in Scotland, such as St Andrews (1411), Glasgow (1450), Aberdeen (1494) and Edinburgh (1583).

A second group comprises the ‘redbrick’ or civic universities such as Leeds, Liverpool and Manchester, which were created between 1850 and 1930. The third group consists of universities founded after the Second World War and in the 1960s. Many of the latter, such as Sussex, York and East Anglia, are associated with towns rather than big cities. The fourth group comprises the ‘new universities’ created in 1992 when polytechnics and some other colleges attained university status.

The competition to enter universities is now very strong in popular subjects, and students who do not do well at A- or equivalent levels may be unable to find a place. Some 17 per cent of students now drop out of higher education because of work, financial or other problems. But the majority aims for a good degree in order to obtain a good job, or to continue in higher education by doing research (masters’ degrees and doctorates).The bachelor’s degree (Bachelor of Arts or Bachelor of Science, BA or BSc) is usually taken in final examinations at the end of the third year of study, although some degree courses do vary in length in different parts of Britain (such as Scotland with a four-year MA degree). The degree is divided into first-, second- and third-class honors. Some degrees depend entirely upon the examination results, while others include continuing assessment over the period of study.

Universities are supposed to have uniform standards, although there are centres of excellence in particular subjects and there has been recent criticism about levels in some universities and some subjects. Students can choose from an impressive array of subject areas and teaching is mainly by the lecture system, supported by tutorials (small groups) and seminars. The student–lecturer ratio at British universities has increased because of expanded recruitment. Most students tend to live on campus in university accommodation, while others choose to live in rented property outside the university. Until recently few British students chose universities near their parents’ homes and many seemed to prefer those in the south of England. But financial reasons now persuade many students to live at home or locally. Universities are independent institutions created by royal charter, enjoy academic freedom, appoint their own staff, award their own degrees and decide which students to admit. But they are in practice dependent upon government money. This derives mainly from finance (dependent upon the number of students recruited) given by government to Universities Funding Councils for distribution to the universities through university Vice-Chancellors who are the chief executive officers of the universities.

**EXERCISES**

**1-**Explain and examine the following terms

Public schools -Grammar schools –Comprehensives-LEA-OECD

**2-Write a short essay about:**

What are the main advantages and disadvantages that you see, between the public and the private sectors involvement in the education system?

**REFERENCES**

Oakland, John. 2002. *British Civilization: an Introduction.* London: London University Publication Office.

Mcdowall, David. 2008. *An Illustrated History of Britain*. New York: The McGraw-Hill Companies, Inc.