# PRIVATE SCHOOLS IN TEN COUNTRIES

## Policy and Practice

Edited by
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ROUTLEDGE
London and New York

First published 1989
by Routledge
11 New Fetter Lane, London EC4P 4EE
29 West 35th Street, New York, NY 10001



Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Mackays of Chatham PLC, Chatham, Kent



*British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data*

Private Schools in ten countries: policy and practice.
1. Independent schools
I. Walford, Geoffrey
371'.02

ISBN 0 415 03464 7

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# INTRODUCTION

## PRIVATE SCHOOLS POLICY AND PRACTICE IN COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

**Geoffrey Walford**

Politicians and policy-makers tend to hold very firm opinions about private schools. They are either 'for' or 'against' with little room for compromise, and political debate on the private schools has often been conducted in these simplistic terms. Polemic is more common than informed argument. On the one side are seen the strong supporters of private education, who believe that the freedom to be able to choose the kind of education that parents want for their children is one of the basic rights of a democratic society. They believe that the existence of the private sector encourages a healthy diversity of provision of education, and competition in the market-place will ensure that the quality of education provided remains high. They claim that parents should be able to spend their money on schooling for their children in exactly the same way that they spend money on holidays, homes or cars.

In contrast, there are those who are equally strongly 'against' private schools, arguing that they exacerbate inequalities of class, race and gender and lead to a more socially divided society. Education is seen not as a private consumer good, but as a public good, and as a means by which the society's social cohesion and social aims are achieved. It is believed that those parents who are wealthy should not be able to purchase an unfair advantage for their children, but that all children in the society should be given equality of opportunity to succeed.

These two diametrically opposite views may appear to be greatly over-simplified caricatures, but an analysis of government policy on private schools shows that the actions of political parties often seem to have been justified by such uncomplicated and uncritical understandings. Discussion about private schools has tended to be polarized, and at the

level of polemic and propaganda, leaving little room for rational analysis. Recent policy changes within the United Kingdom provide a good example of this. In 1979 in England and Wales, 6.1 per cent of all pupils were in private schools. The General Election of that year brought to power a Conservative government concerned to reduce public spending and encourage private enterprise in all spheres. In education, the government's desire to support the then somewhat ailing private school system was such that new public spending was allocated to an Assisted Places Scheme at a time when cuts were being made to the state-maintained sector. This scheme was designed to 'give able children a wider range of educational opportunity' by giving help with tuition fees at private schools to 'parents who could not otherwise afford them' (DES, 1985).

> The scheme was justified in terms of an extension of parental choice, a restoration of academic opportunities to children who would not be fully 'stretched' in schools coping with the full range of ability, and a protection for both those individuals and the nation's supply of talent against the levelling down effects attributed to comprehensive reorganisation.
>
> (Edwards et al., 1985)

In devising and financing the scheme, the government was thus advertising that it thought private sector schools were superior to, and more desirable than, many of those schools for which it was itself ultimately responsible (Walford, 1987).

The development of the Assisted Places Scheme is the clearest case, but it is only one example of the financial and ideological support for the private sector that has been evident since 1979. After the 1987 General Election, the degree of support has deepened, with a small extension to the Assisted Places Scheme and government proposals for new forms of private schooling. At the same time, the state-maintained sector has become increasingly underfunded in terms of its needs, and the morale of teachers in such schools is suffering, as they have had their negotiating rights removed at the end of a long and bitter dispute over pay and conditions of service. By 1988 some 7.0 per cent of pupils were in private schools.

As the British Conservative government has increased its commitment to private education, so the Labour Party in

opposition has become more solidly opposed. When it was last in power, from 1974 to 1979, government funding to the semi-private direct-grant schools was gradually phased out, but there was a failure to remove any of the other government subsidies to the private schools derived from their charitable status. Now, however, if returned to power, the Labour Party is pledged to cut immediately the Assisted Places Scheme and to remove all government subsidies to private schools as quickly as is practical. The strength of feeling and depth of polarization on the issue is such that private schools are seen by the Labour Party as being almost inherently evil.

Many more details of the English and Welsh case are given in the first chapter of this book, but even the very brief outline given above makes it clear that discussion of private schools and related decision-making has often been conducted in very simple terms, with little consideration of the complexities involved. In Great Britain, private schools and privatization have become a major area of political conflict, as has also occured in several of the other major industrial nations, yet there has been little attempt to gather or analyse empirical data on private schools within Great Britain and even less attempt to examine the nature and role of private education in other countries. Debate has been characterized by subjective impressions, isolationism and insularity.

One of the major aims of this book is to provide information which will allow educationalists, politicians, policy-makers, and members of the public to look beyond the narrow confines of their own country and consider the variety of ways in which education can be provided and funded. The comparative study of education systems and education policy provides a 'check on parochialism in thinking about policy and theory' (Wirt, 1987), and is of vital importance in the search for general principles.

One of the most obvious aspects about the way in which educational systems differ is that there is a great diversity in the extent of private provision. Different countries have made very different choices about the way in which their governments control, provide, and finance education, so that the size of the private sector at primary and secondary levels varies from zero in some countries to 100 per cent in others. The range is somewhat smaller for the major industrial countries, but is still considerable. Within the ten countries considered in this book, for example, the range is

from just 4 per cent of pupils in private schools in Scotland to over 70 per cent in The Netherlands. Both of these countries, incidentally, are ones which have extensive public welfare provision. Such a wide variation in the proportion of pupils in private schools should immediately cause us to question our assumptions about the inevitability of one particular way of funding and organizing educational services. But to make such simple statistical comparisons is just the start of a process of understanding. As the following chapters make clear, these figures have to be understood within a wider consideration of each society's political, social and economic history. Quite simply, the term 'private education' has a somewhat different meaning in each of the countries discussed.

This should not be seen as a problem for the comparative study of private schools, but as an important part of coming to an understanding of exactly how each educational system operates. The differences in meanings stem directly from the different assumptions about educational provision which are held in each country, and it is these assumptions which can be challenged and explored by way of a comparative perspective.

The relationship between ideology and terminology is well illustrated by the nomenclature used by various groups in Great Britain. The major private schools for many years were designated as 'public schools', which was a source of confusion to both the British and others, but a source of pride to the schools themselves and an indicator of their social exclusivity. However, during the late 1960s and early 1970s, when the schools felt under some attack, they succesfully attempted to rid themselves of the associations of elitism and privilege which had been linked with the term 'public school' and opted for the term 'independent' instead.

This new term was designed to suggest liberty and individual enterprise. The change of title was achieved through the establishment of the Independent Schools Information Service which brought together a wide range of private schools under the same umbrella. The full range of 'independent' schools were to be seen as providing a variety of different educational facilities according to academic, social and religious needs and, of course, according to ability to pay. However, while the schools themselves now wish to be considered as 'independent', their critics would prefer terms such as 'fee-paying' or 'commercial'. The term 'non-public' still has a strange ring to it in Britain, while

'private' and 'privatization' have very different associations depending on political orientations.

This variety of terms used to designate the private sector is in large part a reflection of differing ideologies, but is also a result of lack of homogeneity within the system. Within any country's private educational sector there is a considerable diversity of schools in terms of quality, exclusiveness, and degree of direct and indirect state support received. While some schools have excellent academic facilities and expect all pupils to enter higher education, others are more concerned with presenting one particular world view or religious belief system to pupils, and may be sub-standard in more usual terms.

Comparative study shows that the private sector cannot be considered in isolation from the state-maintained public system. In practice, even the line drawn between the two sectors is often permeable, as many private schools receive direct and/or indirect funding from the state. This is to be expected, as, in most countries, education was first provided by the churches and other philanthropic groups - the state only becoming involved much later in providing schools. The arrangements that were made to integrate these new state schools with those already existing, and the subsequent changes in the relationship between them, are of vital importance in understanding private schools now.

In Great Britain the majority of religious schools, both Church of England and Roman Catholic, were eventually incorporated within the state-maintained sector. Although they have a special status as voluntary-aided or voluntary-controlled schools, these religious schools are considered by all to be part of the maintained sector of schooling and the vast majority of the funding is provided by the state. This historical difference has meant that the debate about private education in Britain has usually been conducted in terms of elitism, whereas in most other countries, the majority of private schools have been usually associated with promoting or maintaining religious diversity, and the concern has been with the relationship between the state and denominational religious education. Elite schools have existed, but they have been in the minority.

Even this brief sketch makes it clear that the comparative study of private education is unlikely to lead to immediately transferable 'solutions' to perceived problems. But such a realization is itself important, and it does not mean that there are no lessons to be learnt. Careful study of

the diversity of educational systems can provide a powerful challenge to our assumptions, and act as a cure for political and educational myopia.

## The chapters

The countries considered in this volume have been selected to illustrate some of the diversity of ways in which school systems are funded and organized. However, in order to be able to make meaningful comparisons, all of the countries chosen are major western industrial societies. Great Britain consists of three separate countries. England and Wales, which are subject to the same legal and educational system, have been discussed together in one chapter, but Scotland, which has a different educational and legal system has been treated in a separate chapter. This means that the book considers ten countries in nine chapters.

The authors of each chapter are experts in their field who have previously conducted research and written about the country under study. They draw upon their own work and review the work of others to produce accounts which have three aspects. First, each chapter gives an outline of the nature and extent of private schooling in the country under discussion. This description is set in an historic, economic, and social context, and, where relevant, looks especially at the changes that have occurred in the last 5-10 years. Next, the chapters describe and discuss any recent changes in government policy towards the private sector. These policy changes may be directly aimed at the schools or be the indirect results of policies primarily aimed at other aspects of the government's responsibilities. The authors attempt to assess how these changes in policy have affected the schools. Finally, each chapter gathers together available evidence on the relationship between attendance at private schools and the maintenance or reproduction of inequalities in society. The evidence here is varied in nature, and it is clear that for most of the countries, more empirical data is necessary before definitive conclusions can be drawn.

There is considerable variety in the ways in which the authors have tackled their task, and a diversity in the style of argument and presentation of the data. Part of this is due to the fact that while most of the authors are writing about their own countries, and thus giving an insider's view, others are non-natives and are able to give the rather different