MAILBOX UK monograph - the British scene.

This background note introduces the four UK case studies. It was drafted in August 1997, on completion of the MAILBOX observation, and reports on the situation at the time of the research. It should however be read in conjunction with Government proposals relating to networking and schools available on the UK Government web pages at www.open.gov.uk/dfee/dfeehome.htm.

Of special relevance is the Consultation Paper "Connecting the Learning Society" which proposes a national grid for learning.

The new Labour government has as its stated top priority "education, education and education".

Attendance

School is compulsory for all children between 5 and 16. This has been so for over 20 years since the school leaving age was last raised. Nursery school provision for 3-5 year olds is rather low; continuation of 16-19 year olds has also been very low until recently, although it (and university attendance) has increased very dramatically in the last decade.

System

Most children attend government schools free. Schools can be classified by the age of children. The most common types of school are primary (5-11) and secondary (11-16 or 18). But there are many subdivisions: schools may be infants (5-7), junior (7-11), middle (11-13), 6th form Colleges (16-18). Some secondary schools select children according to ability and aptitude. Comprehensive schools take any child - these are the most common; grammar schools have selective entry (by passing an examination); technology colleges take children who have an aptitude or desire for technology-focused education. There are also private fee-paying schools at all levels. Some places in some private schools are subsidised by government for intelligent pupils under the assisted places scheme, now being abolished. In principal there is choice between all these options, but in practice most children attend the school nearest their home, except where selection applies.

Some schools have a religious affiliation but this seldom excludes children from a different religion.

Children with special needs (physically or mentally disabled, children with behaviour problems, also immigrants who do not know English) all attend the same schools as others unless the school cannot cater for them. It is only children with really serious difficulty that attend Special Schools.

Funding

Traditionally, schools are funded with government funding channelled through Local Education Authorities (LEAs). Under the last Government some schools elected new arrangements where they control their own budgets and are funded directly by government. This is known as grant-aided, and gives individual schools greater control over their spending. Most schools remain subject to constraints of funding through LEAs, with major funding constraints under the last government. The present Government has so far increased funding only slightly.

Size

Size of school varies tremendously. Large comprehensives have around 1500 pupils. Primary schools tend to be much smaller, often with about 300 pupils, some smaller. Often several primary schools "feed" a single comprehensive. Size depends to some extent on environment. In some rural areas there are very small schools with multi-grade classes. Class size, particularly in primary schools, has recently become an issue. Many primary schools have classes with more than 40 children. The present

Government has pledged to reduce class size to a maximum of 30 for all 5-7 year olds - over 400,000 are at present in larger classes. The money saved from abolishing the assisted places scheme will be used for this. Classes in many private schools and grammar schools are relatively small.

Since most children attend a school near home, in urban areas the ethnic composition of schools tends to reflect the ethnic composition of the neighbourhood.

Curriculum
A national curriculum was introduced 10 years ago. It is arranged in Key Stages, and children sit tests at each stage. Children's performance in these tests is used as a measure of school quality. The National Curriculum does not apply in Scotland, which instead has its own curriculum guidelines. In Wales there are variations to allow for Welsh language medium schools.

In England, Wales and Northern Ireland, children are expected to sit for the GCSE examination at age 16. They may take as few or as many subjects as they like. The more successful ones, with 5 or more good passes, are likely to continue in full-time education to take A level, the university entry qualification. A-levels are quite different from similar exams in most other countries: they require intensive specialist study usually over two years; the norm is to take three subjects only. A new exam - General National Vocational Qualification (GNVQ) - offers a broader more vocationally oriented alternative but is not yet very popular and has been criticised as insufficiently challenging intellectually. University entry is highly competitive so children aged over 16 generally focus on little but their exam syllabus.

The system in Scotland is different. The exams (O grade) taken at 16 are similar to those elsewhere in the UK. But instead of A levels, children work for Highers, a broad range of subjects, usually about 5. An option which integrates vocational and academic subjects (known as Higher Still) is in use experimentally in Scotland and is likely to be the model for a new system in the rest of UK.

Culture and performance
Overall, education has had something of a low status until recently, perhaps a hangover from the elitist view that persisted until the introduction of comprehensive schools in the 1970s. There are still wide variations in status: important variables are locality - in Scotland education is taken more seriously than in England, while in some areas of England it still has very low status. Ethnicity is a factor - Chinese and Asian families see it as vitally important - as is gender: girls outperform boys. Recent statistics indicate that the worst performers are working-class white boys.

Performance varies dramatically between schools. Despite attempts to raise standards, UK's ranking is low amongst OECD countries, especially in maths and English. Many children leave school at 16 unable to read. The last Government introduced school league tables which are now used to encourage schools to improve.

Teachers' status
Teachers' morale has sunk very low, wastage from the profession is high, and many teachers retire early. There are serious teacher shortages in key subject areas. But teachers pay compares well with other OECD countries.

Teachers are often well respected in their local communities, and the new government aims to build on this and improve school performance by strengthening home-school links through, for example, agreements with parents over homework..

IT in UK schools

UK has a relatively high computer: pupil ratio in schools. But use of these computers is poor, and is not moving forward.[1] How can this be explained?

First, the computers themselves: Part is history - we began early (1982) with the target of 1 computer a school. Many computers are now very old, but there is no cash to replace them. The original computers (BBC Acorn) work to a non-standard operating system, and most new educational software is for PCs. Then the average figures hide very uneven distribution of computers between schools. Secondary schools tend to put more resources relative to size into IT, despite the more obvious curriculum need and potential in primaries.

Second, the teachers: their competence with computers varies tremendously. Use of computers is a small component in initial training, and for most teachers does not continue long enough. Often in-service training results in the emergence of one or two specialist teachers in a school, while the majority remain barely computer literate.

The national curriculum: IT is compulsory as a subject, and must be taught and used across the curriculum. But (England and Wales) the curriculum is too general, and there is not enough guidance to teachers on curriculum implementation. Each school is supposed to have a strategy for moving towards the integrated use of IT across the school, but few are able to produce one..

Two national bodies, NCET (National Council for Educational Technology - UK wide) and SCET (Scottish Council for Educational Technology, Scotland only) have a role to promote, extend and support use of IT in schools. Each local education authority has an IT adviser.

Connectivity: many schools - some estimates suggest as many as 80% - have a link to the Internet. But most connections are not usable for teaching and learning or not used to good effect. The cost of connectivity is high. The few teachers and children that make serious use of electronic networking show great enthusiasm.

This situation is set to change with a national campaign to train teachers to use IT, funded through the National Lottery, and the establishment of a National Grid for Learning. These proposals had not been announced at the time the MAILBOX observation occurred.

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[1] This point and much of the following data is taken from The Stevenson Report, an independent enquiry into the use of ICT in UK schools, commissioned by the Labour Party and published March 1997.