

British Private Schools: Research on policy and practice

Edited by Geoffrey Walford
London, Woburn Press, 2003.

It may seem somewhat inappropriate to draw attention to a book that I have edited myself, but I do so because I know that many in Japan will be interested in it and, because it is published by a small publisher, many might not otherwise hear about its publication.

British private schools are a continuing topic of fascination for many. In particular, the so-called public schools have long been subjected to both criticism for their elitism and praise for their academic success. Traditionally, Conservative Governments have strongly supported the private sector through special funding - such as the Assisted Places Scheme - while Labour Governments have reduced State support for the private sector and threatened to abolish it. However, the present new Labour Government has reversed Labour's former opposition to private schools and sought co-operation between the two sectors. This has led to an increased interest in the realities of private schooling, yet there has been little hard research evidence about almost any facet of private schooling.

This edited book thus brings together the best of recently conducted research on the various aspects of private schooling. All of the chapters are previously unpublished and were commissioned because I knew the authors had good research material to report. There is a considerable diversity of subject matter.

Immediately following a brief introduction where I outline recent statistical and structural changes in the private school system, are four chapters that give a historical context. In the first, Ted Tapper traces the historical relationship between the Labour Party and the private sector of schooling, and then places Labour's policy within the context of the general evolution of the Party's social policies in the 1980s and 1990s. In the second chapter, Clive Griggs examines the particular role that the Trades Union Congress has played in the development of policy on private schools. In the third, Sara Delamont focusses on the goals and achievements of the private schools for girls through the depression, the Second World war and the years of 1944-1968. Finally, Alice Sullivan and Anthony Heath investigate the educational success of students

who attended different types of state and private schools in England and Wales in the 1970s.

Moving from an historical analysis, the next four chapters discuss various aspects of present-day private schooling. Tony Bowers examines the almost totally unresearched, yet important, area of teacher sickness absence. Pauline Dooley and Mary Fuller, report some of their research on the experiences of girls in what were formerly boys' private schools, while David Palfreyman explains the current legal status of charities and estimate the fiscal advantages to private schools of such status. This is followed by a chapter by me on the range and nature of private Muslim schools in Britain.

The final three chapters focus on issues of choice of school and of university. The first of these, by Anne West and Philip Noden, reports upon their considerable ongoing research into parental choice of schools in both the private and state-maintained sectors. Nick Foskett and Jane Hemsley-Brown examine the evidence for the process of choice amongst parents considering private education for their children, drawing principally from the findings of the "Parents' Choice of Independent Schools" research project. Finally, Lesley Pugsley throws some light on the process of university choice for students within the private sector.

In summary, the book covers a diverse range of topics, but all of the chapters are of interest, and all of them present new research data and analysis. I hope that readers will find the book useful.

Geoffrey Walford
University of Oxford,
UK.