

## **St Augustine's Centre, Halifax**

### **English for Life in the UK**

#### **Season 3 - Episode 11 - The School System in the UK**

**July 2022**

#### **Mark**

Hello and welcome to the podcast "**English for Life in the UK**". This podcast is for those people who want to improve their English by listening to native English speakers, talking about a range of subjects. This is our last episode for a while, as we are taking a break over the summer period, but we will be back in the autumn. Today's episode is focussed on the school system in the United Kingdom and there are three of us on this podcast talking about our own experiences of the system and explaining a little bit about it.

This podcast is brought to you by volunteers from the St Augustine's Centre, in Halifax, Yorkshire, where we support, in particular, those people seeking asylum and refugees. If you want to know more about our work - and also, to get the transcript for this episode of the podcast, and find out about other episodes, as well - you can do that on our website. Details of this are available at the end of the episode.

*Music (1 minute:30 seconds)*

#### **Mark**

Today we're going to talk a bit about the schools system in the United Kingdom<sup>1</sup>. I'm delighted to say, first of all, I'm joined by Sheena, who has been on the podcast before, but not for a little while. Hello, Sheena - how are you?

#### **Sheena**

Hello, Mark, I'm fine, thank you.

#### **Mark**

A little bit later, we're going to be joined by Sarah as well, but Sheena and I are going to start things off by just talking, in very general terms, about the way the school system works, particularly for those who are not based in the United Kingdom.

So - I'll start by just saying that, broadly, we have what we would call nursery or pre-school, that tends to be for children up to the age of 4 or 5 - and then, at that stage, they would start what we would call "primary school". After primary school, they would go to "secondary" school. And beyond secondary school, there are different kinds of college, universities and that sort. So that's broadly that structure there, but within that we've also got something which we call "key stages". Sheena - do you want to just explain a little bit about what they are?

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<sup>1</sup> There are some variations between England, Scotland and Wales and the regional governments of Scotland and Wales have authority over education in those regions.

**Sheena**

Yes - Mark. Erm - so "Key Stage 1" is in primary school and that's for children who are aged between 5 and 7, and we call that years one and two. At "Key Stage 2": it's still primary school and that's for the 7 to 11 year olds, and those are year three, year four, year five; and then, in year six, they finish primary school and go to secondary school.

In secondary school, they start "Key Stage 3", when pupils are 11 and that lasts until they are 14. And then the last stage of many secondary schools is "Key Stage 4" and that's for pupils from 14 to 16 - and that's when they do their GCSE<sup>2</sup>, Mark.

(3:47)

**Mark**

Tell us what GCSEs are, Sheena.

**Sheena**

Well they are national exams that all pupils take in different subjects. Some subjects are compulsory like Maths<sup>3</sup>, English and Science and then other subjects - humanities, history and geography - can be taken and then, maybe, more creative subjects as well.

**Mark**

OK. And then after the GCSE stage, if people ... the pupils will sometimes stay on in schools and sometimes will go to colleges - and that's where they will take what we call "A" Levels - advanced level studies - and that's what you need for entry into university or higher education.

That's the broad structure - I think maybe we should just say something about private and public schools, which I always think is quite a complicated and difficult one for people who are not used to the British system.

So, the vast majority of children will go to what we would call "state schools". That means they are funded by the government - that they are free for the children and the parents. And something like - I think it's around 92%, 93%, of children - will go to that type of school. It's usually their local school - although they do have choice - parents have a choice within a local area, of different schools, but those are all what we would call state schools.

There are then private schools which, very confusingly, are called "public schools", but that's just a historic thing in this country but if you hear about people talking about a public school in the United Kingdom, it actually means a private school, a school where you have to pay fees to go to it. And there are a range of these public schools - schools where you have to pay fees.

Hope that's not too confusing for listeners - I hope that's helped a bit. We're going to go on and talk a little bit about our own personal experiences. Sarah's going to join us on this a bit later, but we'll start first of all - Sheena.

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<sup>2</sup> GCSE - General Certificate of Secondary Education

<sup>3</sup> Maths - Mathematics : will normally cover arithmetic, algebra and geometry

**Sheena**

As a teacher, Mark, I taught only in secondary schools - so: Key Stage Three and Key Stage Four. Although when I started teaching we didn't have Key Stages - they were something that came along, I think, in the '90s, with a national curriculum<sup>4</sup>. So, we didn't even have a national curriculum, when I started secondary school. It was different - schools could teach different things, in their curriculum - so that changed a lot, when I was at school.

My main subject was English - that was my first subject - that's something that I really enjoyed teaching, and it did change a lot in the thirty-two years that I taught. And then, I also taught Media Studies. So - I think English was hard work, with lots of marking<sup>5</sup> and lots of exam preparation, but Media Studies was really enjoyable to teach, because it was more creative - so we could make films, radio [programmes], and podcasts and things like that. So that was a little bit of light relief and fun for the staff and the pupils.

(7:32)

**Mark**

Tell us a little bit about what those two different bits of the English curriculum would be about.

**Sheena**

English Language: you would study the use of English and you would write your own stories and maybe your own poetry and things like that in English and you would study - much more so, now - more analysing language and the way that it's used.

And Literature is the study of plays, novels and poetry - and throughout both Key Stages, most pupils will do both of those subjects.

**Music (8:24)****Sheena**

Right, well we've just been joined by my ex-colleague<sup>6</sup> - Sarah Hinckley - we worked together, I think, at least ten years, do you, Sarah? something like that. And I mentioned that in our secondary school in Manchester we taught English Language, English Literature and Media Studies. Can you tell us where you're joining us from now, Sarah? You're no longer in Manchester - where are you now?

**Sarah**


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<sup>4</sup> national curriculum - subjects and content designed by central authorities advising schools as to what to include in teaching pupils of different ages.

<sup>5</sup> Marking - teachers reviewing pupils homework and commenting on it

<sup>6</sup> ex-colleague - previously a colleague; "ex-" in front of a word usually means "former" and can be used in different contexts. E.g. Ex-husband, ex-MP

Hi - thanks for inviting me on. I am now moved from Manchester and up to where actually I was born and grew up, which is in the Eden Valley, in Cumbria. I'm at a school called Samuel Kings, which is in Alston - so it's in the Pennines<sup>7</sup>, just very close to Penrith<sup>8</sup>, and on the way to the North East - a small market town.

### **Sheena**

Right - that's interesting - and can you tell us a bit about your school, then? Because the secondary school we worked in, in Manchester, had maybe an average population of children which was about 1200 .....for most secondary schools, in this country, now.

How many do you have in your secondary school?

### **Sarah**

Unbelievably, around about 86 pupils in the secondary school.

### **Sheena**

Wow! Mark have you ever heard of a secondary school with 86 pupils ?

### **Mark**

Well I have, actually, and I have actually worked with one or two very small secondary schools, but it is quite unusual.

### **Sheena**

Sarah - can you tell us the difference between working in a large secondary school and your experience of - is it nearly two years, now?

### **Sarah**

Yes - I moved in the middle of the pandemic, so my first experience was interesting, in that, I actually came for a tour of the school, before I applied for a job here. As I was about to begin my contract, the first day of my teaching, which started January last year, the lockdown<sup>9</sup> hit and actually, I began my teaching job at this school on Zoom<sup>10</sup> - via Zoom - so met the staff via Zoom, met my students via Zoom, erm .... which is a very unusual way to begin a job and quite challenging, I have to say. But it really had its benefits. I think, what happened was, I really got to know the students really well, who were coming on Zoom and having that learning experience, and when they did put their videos on, their cameras on, that made it even better. But sometimes they were a bit reluctant.

So, but you know the positive was I did get to know some of them extremely well and when I did eventually come in face-to-face, to start that face-to-face learning: it was just brilliant to actually ... as it was for

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<sup>7</sup> Pennines - a range of mountains

<sup>8</sup> Penrith - a major town in the north of the area known as The Lake District.

<sup>9</sup> Lockdown - government restricted movement when the Corona virus or Covid epidemic struck and asked people not to leave their homes other than for necessary work.

<sup>10</sup> Zoom - a computer program which allowed people to see and talk to each other through their computers, whilst staying in their own homes.

anyone, anyone in education, to actually get back into the classroom, and - you know - really get to grips with what I was doing and, at the time, I was teaching various subjects as well. And so that's been a challenge up here. It's a bit like teaching in a primary school, in that, if you are a secondary teacher here, you sort of need to teach in more than one subject. So I started off by teaching Catering, a little bit of English, which is my specialism, Careers, Citizenship and RE<sup>11</sup> and I then did some "TA'ing" so I've "TA'ed" in Science and Maths quite a lot. But it's been great, actually - to see how different subjects are taught, how different teachers teach.

### **Mark**

Sarah - sorry to interrupt - can you explain what "TA" is?

### **Sarah**

Yes - so a TA is "Teaching Assistant": really important role, in my view, because this is where you really are getting to know the students one-to-one - and you really support the students who have some special needs, of some kind. And you can, you know, really one-to-one help them and get to know them and it really helped me understand, actually, the role of TA and just how integral and pivotal they are, in the classroom. So, in terms of, you know, supporting the learning of students - so I really enjoyed that experience and I'm glad that I got that opportunity.

### **Mark**

I'll just explain a little bit more for people not familiar with the system in this country - so, schools will have teachers who have to have a teaching qualification specifically, but schools, increasingly recently, have also employed a number of people who usually have the title "Teaching Assistant" - and they also have to have qualifications, but not at the same level as the qualification of the teacher - and very often, not always, but very often, a teaching assistant is working more closely with an individual student or groups of students - and helping out the main teacher, in that classroom situation.

Sarah - I'm interested - what do you enjoy most about your job? in that school? I mean, it doesn't have to be in that school - generally, in your career to date, in terms of the education system - what are the things you most value and enjoy out of it? And what would you say are some of the major challenges that you face?

*(13:26)*

### **Sarah**

I think the things I most enjoy are really opening opportunities up for young people. Erm ... I think I've worked in two schools now - one in Manchester with Sheena and now in Cumbria. I think there are some challenges there - in terms of pupils or young people really knowing their communities and really valuing where they live, but also just really wanting to have that opportunity to see beyond that. So, I think, a lot of my work really, I feel has been about - you know - even in class discussion - has been about what's going on with the world, and understanding where we fit as citizens of the world and just kind of taking them places and getting them to experience things. We went on a recent trip to see a writer at Hexham Book Festival - you know, it doesn't have to be far - just getting them out there and really enriching the lives of young people. I think that's a really big part of it. And also, just my love of teaching English and sharing that - my passion for reading and various literature texts and just - yeah - imparting that knowledge and just seeing

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<sup>11</sup> RE - Religious Education

those who love it, seeing how much they can achieve. What they go on to do as well. Some young people come back and see you - and you know they've been to university and they're doing all kinds of wonderful degrees and been so successful and you think you've had a part in that. So, I think that those are the biggest things that I love.

In terms of the challenges, it's the same idea really - it's the erm ... - do you open up opportunities for young people? How can you sort of get them to understand that it is important to reach beyond what they know and to know a little bit more and to open up horizons - to expand their horizons? it sounds very cliched<sup>12</sup>, but I think it's really powerful and so it's finding ways - I love that challenge.

A lot of what I've done here, at Alston, has actually been about building up community links and I've ended up teaching "Careers", like I said - and I organised 20 *work experience placements* for year 10, you know. I've helped those young people get out into employment for a week and I think they've really loved it, you know, and I'm looking forward to really building on lots more ideas. In fact, today, I've been to another school that I used to go to. Erm ... in Penrith - Ullswater Community College in Penrith - and we spent the day in their library looking at ideas to build up a love of reading and how to make the library an exciting place to be. So it's just ... everyday is exciting - everyday is different, at the moment.

### **Mark**

That's great Sarah - thank you ever so much. Sheena - what about you?

### **Sheena**

Well, I think probably very much in the same way as Sarah has explained. Because even though we worked in Manchester, the community we worked with was really a little bit isolated, so we did lots of things there, to either bring writers or poets and people from elsewhere, into the school. Or Sarah has been on many, many trips with me, as well, taking the children out of school which is really, very difficult these days - it can be - but it's always worth it, in the end - so just a relief, when things go well and the absolute relief when pupils who have worked really, really hard for their exams, do pass those exams. And even if they are not going on to teach English, at least you know they can do what they want - even if it's science or anything - they can do what they want - because without English and often without Maths, now - it's not possible to progress to a higher level.

Probably a lot of it was curriculum change and assessment change, in that you found texts as Sarah said, texts that the children enjoyed, you enjoyed - you really felt that they were worth teaching - and then, there maybe a change of government or a change of curriculum, and you had to adapt: start all over again. Start with new resources and start teaching different literature, but we always managed and I'd just like to say, not just because Sarah's here, one of the other great things about teaching is teaching in a team and being able to work with young people, like Sarah, and other people to make things happen.

(18:02)

So, Sarah - even though we have worked together -and I have worked with Mark at St Augustine's - I didn't know Mark in his former career as a teacher. I don't know which Key Stage Mark worked in, how he started teaching, why he started teaching. So - that's just what I'd like to know, now, Mark - from you: how it all started ? And again, the challenges and the rewards of your career?

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<sup>12</sup> cliched - you hear it often, it is not an original suggestion

I think it's important to say how much the support from the Authority<sup>13</sup> and from people like you, how helpful that support was, when we had challenges in school and when we had curriculum changes. Very, very important for classroom teachers to have that support from outside.

## Mark

Well - my career was a bit different. Sheena. I started off as a teacher in a secondary school - a *comprehensive school*, in London - and then later taught here up in Yorkshire. I was a teacher of history and humanities. But after about ten years of teaching I went to work for the local authority, that is the local government area, supporting schools and teachers. From there, I went on to become a Director of Education, so I was responsible for the schools in a local government area and I did that in two parts of the north of England, and then, later on in my career, I worked on some projects nationally, around the curriculum and also around supporting and developing head teachers - those people responsible for running the schools, in this country.

So it was a different kind of experience. I still remember very fondly the direct teaching and that's why I have recently come back, since retirement and have volunteered to do some teaching of English, to our members at the St Augustines Centre and I still value that opportunity to help people to learn to develop and to grow as individuals and to become active citizens.

I suppose the biggest challenges I faced particularly in that second part of my career was how do you help schools that are struggling to get better and sadly, we still have a situation where there are significant inequalities between different areas of the country and there are inequalities between different schools. And part of my role was to try to help those schools - particularly those facing the most challenges - to actually improve, and to offer the very best opportunities to the young people, in those schools.

Well that's it for this week. My thanks to Sheena and to Sarah for sharing their experiences of the school system. I hope you've found that useful.

*(Music). (21:48)*

## Mark

### Language Support

This is the part of the podcast where I choose some words or phrases from the episode and explain them. Just two short ones this week - two short pieces of vocabulary. When Sarah was talking about her experience she was talking about how she organised **work experience placements** for her students,

I suppose this probably is quite obvious but, just to explain, most schools, at some stage, will give an opportunity to some of their older students to go and spend some time in a workplace. It can be the full range: it can be in a factory, it can be an office situation, it can be on a farm - absolutely anything. But the students will go and spend perhaps a week, sometimes two weeks, in that work-setting, and it's to help them to get used to the idea of the world of work and very often, as well, there will be some activities and exercises built around that experience, to help the students to learn from that experience.

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<sup>13</sup> Authority - the Local Government (also called the Local Authority)

Secondly, when I was talking about my own background I said I taught in a **comprehensive school** - that's another phrase which we hadn't used before, in this episode, and normally when we talk about a comprehensive school in Britain - we are talking about, first of all, a secondary school but, in particular, a secondary school that serves the full range of abilities - so it doesn't specialise, for example, as some schools do, in pupils who are higher attaining, those pupils who are going to go on and do the highest level qualifications, nor is it a special school which might focus on pupils with particular needs. A comprehensive school will work with pupils of all abilities, from all kinds of backgrounds, and that is the most common type of secondary school in the United Kingdom.

Well, that's it - I hope you've found this a useful episode.

If you want to find out more about our work, please go to our website:

[www.staugustinescentrehalifax.org.uk](http://www.staugustinescentrehalifax.org.uk)

And in that address the "saint" is abbreviated to just "st".

This is our last episode for a while - we're taking a break over the summer, but we plan to be back in the autumn. We'd love your feedback on what you find most useful and what you would find helpful in our next season of the podcast.

Until then - wherever you are listening to this - stay safe and keep practising your English - and if you do feel able to support our work in any way, you will find ways to do that on our website.

Goodbye for now.

***Music (25:32) Ends***