
Markets are for Commodities, Not Children

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ABSTRACT Recent governments have transformed the English education system from an arrangement of local, democratically managed, groups of schools into a market free-for-all in which individual schools compete for pupils, status and resources. Elements of a market exist in the relationship between parents and private schools but much market behaviour is inimical to a fair education system. Successive governments' clumsy attempts 'to fix the market' in favour of the schools they have created has led to stressed parents, over-tested pupils and a deeply fractured system. Two simple changes could improve the system: ensuring schools receive balanced intakes of pupils (with all receiving fair shares of those who find learning easy and difficult); and spreading high quality teachers between schools. Ways to achieve these changes are proposed.

Like many people, when I think of a market I picture stalls of fruit and vegetables, home-made clothes or local souvenirs; a place where sellers and buyers meet on fairly equal terms and make mutually satisfactory deals. For many children, markets are places experienced on a Saturday morning or on holiday. As children grow older, however, they realise that the party with greater power – the buyer who can afford to be 'picky' or the seller of a scarce commodity – can take advantage of the situation and drive a hard bargain. The behaviour of big supermarket chains towards farmers and manufacturers illustrates the problem.

The Aims of Marketisation

Curiously, despite this obvious problem, the market model has been promoted by recent Conservative, Labour, and now Coalition governments, as the most effective means of organising the English education system. The theoretical basis for this view stems from the work of Milton Friedman. His book *Capitalism*

and Freedom has become the inspiration for a new strategy of governing known as New Public Management (NPM).[1] Its key elements are individualism, competition, choice, privatisation, decentralisation, deregulation and the use of the market in all public services. NPM asserts that the only effective motivating factor is financial reward – leading to a very mercenary view of people. It has encouraged the disparagement of teachers and public servants. For example, ‘Knaves not Knights’ is the theme of a number of publications by English academic and former government adviser, Julian Le Grand. Le Grand suggests that professions, such as teaching, will usually act in self-interest rather than through any deep commitment to students or to public service.[2]

Those in favour of NPM argue that educational markets have long existed: fee-paying parents have usually judged private schools by setting institutions’ reputations against their costs, although, interestingly, few prestigious private schools have chosen to expand or create replica schools. Eton, founded in 1440, has so far preferred exclusivity to opening a second branch.

Governments have nevertheless forced adoption of market principles on the organisation of state schools and, where geography allows, sought to end the long-standing tradition of children attending their local school. Choice has become the ministers’ mantra. Competitive behaviour, by school heads and governing bodies, has been incentivised so that they vie with each other for both pupils and resources. Ministers appear to believe that only the stiffest competition is likely to bring about school improvement.

Ministers of recent governments have used the publication of the reports by school inspectors (formerly Her Majesty’s Inspectorate but now a privatised Office for Standards in Education [Ofsted]) to name and shame schools at the bottom of ‘league tables’ of test and examination performances. They have threatened school closures and appointed choice advisers in order to stimulate a ‘market’ for state schools. They have also created several new types of secondary schools with differing funding levels, governance arrangements and powers of self-management. Some schools have been given new ‘wow-factor’ buildings, as well as greater freedom to select their pupils. Ministers have even exempted the latest types of schools from having to comply with Freedom of Information legislation.

Problems with Education Markets

Curiously, it does not seem to have occurred to these ministers that, if markets were indeed the best way to organise education, such obvious attempts to ‘fix’ them – with such unfair partial actions – would be unnecessary. Ministers also failed to anticipate that some popular state schools, just like private ones, would react like favoured market traders and, rather than negotiating mutually satisfactory ends, use their advantage to select those pupils most likely to find learning easy and to cause least trouble to the school.

This focus on pupils with the best learning potential, who will undoubtedly help the school to improve its showing in the league table,

coupled with the failure to share responsibility for the full range of children, inevitably damages the educational chances of others. Over 30 years ago one of the studies with which I was involved, *Fifteen Thousand Hours*, demonstrated the importance of schools having a balanced intake. The study found that if schools had a proportion of pupils who could learn relatively easily then they would cope better with a similar proportion of those who learned only with difficulty.[3]

The nature of a school's intake is important since there is evidence from every developed country that children from socially and economically advantaged homes fare better in schooling than their more disadvantaged peers. This is true even in countries (such as Finland) which have distinguished themselves by achieving both exceptional results and remarkable equity in international tests.[4]

Teachers will know from first-hand experience why family background is so important. Consider two children of the same age, sex and ethnic background. The first has benefited from stable and well-paid parental employment, good health care, excellent diet, comfortable housing, the availability of toys, books, stimulating outings and numerous other educational experiences including – in the last resort – private coaching. She or he will have grown up expecting to do well in the world. The second child has lived a life punctuated by crises affecting parental employment, housing, health and diet. He or she will have had fewer toys, books and additional educational experiences and will have far less certainty of success in life. Yet both will take part in the same highly competitive tests and examinations. Can anyone really be surprised that the first child is much more likely than the second to do well? The only surprise is that a small number of exceptional disadvantaged pupils buck this trend and, against all the odds, succeed.

An inevitable result of marketisation has been a parental obsession with making 'the right choice' and consequent high levels of stress for many parents who fear that they may be disadvantaging their child by making what may turn out to be the wrong decision. It has also led to the unfair criticism of many teachers who have spent their careers working with the most disadvantaged pupils in schools which – despite all their efforts – are unlikely to top any league table. According to Warwick Mansell, a journalist who has studied this aspect of the education system, the pressure on schools to reach the highest positions in the league tables has led to the frequent practising of tests and made common 'teaching to the test' – to say nothing of a few instances of blatant cheating.[5] Teaching to the test has been condemned by, amongst others, the House of Commons Education Committee [6], the Mathematics Association [7] and the Royal Society.[8] Ironically, the obsession with league table results may actually be based on spurious data. Three professors concerned with quantitative analyses of test scores submitted evidence to the House of Commons Committee showing that up to one-third of individual scores were likely to be wrong and that many changes in the league tables lacked statistical significance.[9]

Marketisation has also fuelled the ambition of private companies to take over former public institutions with the hope of using business methods to improve results and, at the same time, pocketing large amounts of public money and gaining valuable real estate.

Despite the determination by successive governments to put markets at the centre of schooling, there are a number of aspects of the education system which are inimical to market behaviour. First, schooling is compulsory rather than optional. Unlike customers looking for goods, parents do not have the freedom to say 'no thank you' and decline to buy.

Second, markets take no account of what can be termed the national interest. Instead, they favour the interests of those likely to be the best customers – the rich and powerful. Such people are often adept at discerning the best options for their families and ensuring by all means, both fair and foul, that they achieve them. Yet in a country which has a large, and increasing, gap between the richest and poorest citizens, such strategies that further divide the rich and the poor will only exacerbate the national problem, so graphically portrayed by Wilkinson & Pickett in their book *The Spirit Level*.^[10]

A third stumbling block for educational markets is the fact that few children welcome changing schools. In my experience, when a parent decides to transfer a child from a school they consider unsatisfactory, they are generally very reluctant to repeat the experience – even if, to their horror, the new school turns out to be no better than the first one. Instead they, and their child, tend to decide to stay and make the best of the situation.

Finally, the logical outcome of an educational market culture is that the least popular schools will close. But as anyone who has had anything to do with the demise of a school will know, the closure of a school can have far-reaching social consequences for its pupils (and teachers). Pupils with highly supportive parents may escape the worst damage but may find it difficult to find a satisfactory alternative place. Other children may actually blame themselves for the death of the school. It is often better, therefore, for the school to be helped to improve rather than to be closed.

In recent years, therefore, English children have discovered that instead of just viewing markets on Saturdays or on holiday, they themselves are being treated by their governments as commodities in an educational market. This is one of the factors that has surely contributed to the stress recorded in the 2007 UNICEF childhood survey, in which the United Kingdom came twenty-first, with the lowest score of all the advanced countries taking part.^[11] A similar position (twenty-fourth out of 29 participating countries) can be found in the children's 'Happiness Index' compiled by Jonathan Bradshaw and Dominic Richardson at York University.^[12]

Alternatives to Markets

Before governments embraced a market ideology, state schools were built and managed by local authorities. These bodies had a duty to provide sufficient

places of an acceptable quality for all children of school age living within their boundaries. Without much formal debate, successive governments have whittled away the powers of local authorities and, even now, are further reducing the rigour of the School Admissions Code and, as the pressure group Comprehensive Future has warned, limiting the powers of the Schools Adjudicator and Admission Forums over individual schools.[13]

In my view these are serious governmental errors. No school should be an island. And surely each generation would benefit from a system in which responsibility for the entire body of pupils was shared by all schools and where as many schools as possible receive balanced intakes of pupils. How such a situation could be recreated in England has been described, and eloquently justified, in *Radical Education and the Common School*. The book has been written by two Institute of Education professors, Mike Fielding and Peter Moss, disillusioned with the obsession with the market.[14] Such a scenario is possible. It can be found in Alberta, a province in Western Canada with a right-wing government. A far-sighted school superintendent created a system in which schools work in harmony – cooperating rather than competing – each taking responsibility for the entire pupil body. Its results in Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) international tests are outstanding.[15]

I believe that schooling, like other important aspects of how we live, should be democratically managed on a local basis. This means reinstating many of the powers that have been removed from local authorities. I am not advocating the removal of all self-managing powers – I believe schools have benefited from gaining a number of new responsibilities – but I wonder if it is sensible to expect all schools to operate as businesses. Many of their back-office functions, once better handled by local authority specialist staff, now frequently distract head teachers from what should be their principal focus: learning and teaching.

More radically, I question whether it makes sense for the appointment of head teachers and other staff to be delegated to the school community and to be made without any time limit. One of the features of the Albertan system is that all appointments are made by the School Board (local authority) and principals (head teachers) and teachers are regularly moved around the Board's schools (as well as in and out of the Board's staff of advisers). This is one of the main ways in which declining schools are improved and the quality of all schools maintained. It is a similar practice to that of another high-performing country, South Korea.[16] There teachers are moved every five years in order to prevent staleness and to enable as many schools as possible to function at the highest level.

Another key question for those who prefer an education system not built on a market model is how best to create schools with balanced intakes in an unequal society where the quality of housing and social environments varies widely. Currently, in England pupils are admitted to schools on the basis of preferences expressed by a parent together with how close they live to the school within its defined catchment area or through attending a partner school.

Most schools also give preference to those with older siblings already at the school. Other criteria, such as being in care (looked-after children), having a religious affiliation or, in the case of selective schools, passing an entrance examination also play their part. The argument for siblings is understandable in purely practical terms. Younger children generally like going to the same school as their older brothers or sisters and for parents, coping with demanding work and family responsibilities, the complications of getting children punctually to different schools or of having different holidays could make life impossible. It is also excellent that governments have sought to give preference to those with special needs and to looked-after children. But I can see no justification whatever for selection. It is based on the assumption that intelligence, or educability, is fixed and can be easily ascertained by an intelligence test. Research has shown these assumptions to be utterly false: children develop at different times and in different ways. IQs have been recently shown to vary considerably during the teenage years.[17] Children should, therefore, not be pigeonholed according to how they perform at any one age. Furthermore, all we have learned about expectations shows how damaging it is to typecast students as 'good' or 'bad learners'. [18] It seems to me much better to keep open all options – as is the practice in Nordic countries.[19]

Neighbourhood schools help build communities, reduce the time and energy spent by children in travel and are ideal in socially mixed areas. But in a country where – for historical, geographical or demographic reasons – housing districts in urban areas often display contrasting social characteristics, these will inevitably be mirrored in the population of neighbourhood schools. This makes it difficult for many schools to receive balanced intakes. Other education systems, such as those in some American states, have experimented with bussing in urban areas in order to overcome such problems. But, generally, these schemes have not been found to be successful, as pupils, both those categorised as the 'more' and the 'less' disadvantaged, have found the experience of being exported to a different area unpleasant and inconvenient. (In the 1980s I visited a school in South Boston, Massachusetts where no black pupil could leave school, other than in a specially designated bus, for fear of attack.)

In England there are two main ways in which the problem of unbalanced intakes is being addressed. The first is through the use of area-wide banding systems which allocate set proportions of particular bands of pupils to each school. It is used by a number of local authorities. It was used by the former Inner London Education Authority whose aim was to ensure that all its comprehensive schools received a balanced intake of pupils, as measured by a set of verbal reasoning tests (later, by scores on a reading test) and a teacher's estimate of potential ability. Banding can help achieve balanced intakes but, less happily, it depends on formally allocating pupils to different categories. Banding pupils is thus a problem because pupils, once categorised, tend to think of themselves in this way. For those placed in the top group, such an identity might further boost their confidence. But for the others, labels may act as a limiting self-fulfilling prophesy. In Finland, which performs outstandingly in

international tests, any such form of categorisation is illegal.[20] In England, unfortunately, children are already categorised according to their performance in the national curriculum tests. Such results are powerful influences, as they are known by teachers and parents as well as by classmates. I believe that adding a 'formal band' to their profile would further reinforce this limitation for many children.

The second way is designed to create schools with balanced intakes in locations which include distinct areas of advantaged and disadvantaged housing. This involves using a lottery randomly to allocate pupils to schools. This is currently practised in some areas but, according to the new draft admissions code, is to be outlawed.[21]

Brighton and Hove proposed using a lottery in 2007 but were immediately challenged in the courts by a group of parents. The courts, however, dismissed the parental objections and the scheme was started in 2008. The Authority sees the scheme as successful in that the proportion of parents gaining their first choice has increased but a 2010 research study by academics at the University of Bristol and the Institute of Education, University of London, found that the lottery had failed to reduce segregation between rich and poor pupils. The researchers point out that while there have been winners and losers, the way the new catchment areas have been established and the fact that lotteries operate only within them means that, in general, poor families from outlying areas are very unlikely to gain places in the most popular city centre schools.[22] Whether this failure to reduce segregation is because of the inadequacy of a lottery or because of the limitations of the catchment areas is a moot point. It seems very short-sighted not to allow the experiment to continue with adjusted catchment areas so that the matter might be resolved.

Random allocation of pupils to schools is undoubtedly the most difficult method to justify in terms of crude politics. Newspaper headlines are likely to scoff at the idea of authorities using 'chance' in its processes while simultaneously condoning wild gambling in parental choices. But it is the method that has the most potential to create the highest proportion of schools with balanced intakes. The adoption of lotteries across authorities would need bold ministerial support as local authorities tried to draw up suitable catchment areas. But if this could be achieved, one of the major stumbling blocks of the English education system – the lack of schools with balanced intakes – would be removed.

If, at the same time, local authorities were, as I have suggested, given powers to move heads and teachers around the system so as to maximise the opportunities for all schools to improve, England would have a chance to build a system of education appropriate for a modern country. Parents should find relief in knowing that each of the available schools was acceptable instead of having to gamble with difficult choices. Children, finding transfer between the phases of schooling less stressful, might even respond more positively to surveys about happiness. Teachers and heads may not welcome the idea of compulsory transfers. But if care was taken to ensure that people were treated fairly, in time,

this might also benefit teachers' careers by ensuring that they gained a range of experience and were likely to work in effective schools.

Such a system would be much better than anything likely to be produced by a market of winners and losers. As I have sought to argue, a market is acceptable for the buying and selling of commodities but is inherently unsuitable for the most precious component of any society – its children.

Notes

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