
What Price Free Schools? The Continued Insidious Privatisation of UK State Education

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ABSTRACT A review of American charter schools and Swedish free-school research is outlined, providing strong evidence that both free-market models are flawed in their claims of enhancing young people's educational experience. A substantial body of work is included that strongly indicates charter and free schools increase social segregation and lower educational attainment. It is also argued that the rationale for and commitment to competition undermines cooperation between schools and reinforces class differentiation, suggesting the view that the model facilitates choice is erroneous. It is also argued its inception in the UK is, like the academies model, driven by a narrow ideological stance and should be replaced by a non-selective, state-funded, comprehensive school model accessible to all.

Introduction

The term 'free' when used to describe a school has two obvious connotations: first, it implies there is no charge; and, more contentiously, there is an inferred liberal element of choice of curriculum and policy. It is a clever and appealing term, though one, it will be argued, that is entirely misleading. In a revealing 2010 House of Commons answer, the Secretary of State for Education, Michael Gove, described the implementation of free schools in the following way: 'Innovation, diversity and flexibility are at the heart of the free schools policy. We want the dynamism that characterises the best independent schools to help drive up standards in the state sector' (Gove, 2010). The rationale for their introduction therefore is clear: they are to be modelled on the perceived strengths of the public school system. There is also a tacit government view that somehow having more free schools – 102 were due to be open in 2013 (Department for Education, 2012) alongside the proliferating academies – provides more choice rather than further division and inequality. Supporting the

introduction of yet another school model, it is argued later, reflects the ideologically erroneous notion that competition and choice raise educational standards.

Charter and Free School Development in the USA and Sweden

The USA and Sweden have both been at the forefront of profit-based approaches to public education. In the USA, the charter school system developed (Chubb, 2007), and in Sweden in 1992, via a voucher system, free schools were created, leading to what Fredriksson (2009, p. 299) calls the 'market-oriented teacher'; while he was referring to an approach which encouraged profit, free schools in England are 'not for profit'. However, it is perhaps unsurprising that Edison Learning, a major American for-profit education business, was in 2011 given approved status by the Department for Education as a supplier for English free schools and that Swedish educational company IES UK won a 10-year £21 million contract to run Breckland Free School in Suffolk. In such an arrangement, profit and not-for-profit distinctions become clouded.

Charter schools in the USA have received considerable attention. Nathan (1999) saw them as promoting innovation, accountability and parent and community involvement. Finn et al (2000) in a national two-year study involving over a hundred charter schools, whilst expressing certain reservations, felt the approach had the potential to transform. Wells et al (2009) ponder whether charter schools simply reflect broad social change informed by economic policies. The smaller and more focused Swedish model is likely to provide greater insight as to what we might expect. These aspects are explored in more detail later.

The Swedish government felt that increased competition within the state system would raise standards. The context, however, was very different to the American one in that there was a history of resistance to private-sector involvement in welfare and education. Sweden had a tradition of public services combining to promote an egalitarian society with universal free comprehensive education (Tilton, 1991; Blomqvist, 2004). The Social Democrat government in 1962 created the nine-year straight-through, non-selective, fully integrated comprehensive school system and the percentage of children attending non-public funded schools had fallen to 0.2% (Wiborg, 2011). In 1991 there were only 60 non-public schools in the whole of the country, though by 2009/10 this had risen to 709, with 64% of municipalities having free-school availability (Skolverket, 2010). The Swedish voucher system is based on a profit-generation model, unlike the English approach, but as noted earlier, this is a blurred line when the provider is a private company. It is revealing that in Sweden five out of six free schools made a profit of more than half a billion SEK (Lundahl et al, 2010). One presumes the aforementioned IES UK will be looking for a return on its investment.

Ideological Rationale

In a 2012 press announcement, Rachel Wolf, Director of the New Schools Network, a charity supporting the establishment of UK free schools, claimed the following:

Inspired by the success of the Charter School movement in the US, Free Schools take power away from politicians and put it in the hands of parents. They offer parents greater choice and give freedom to teachers to run schools as they see fit ... By the end of this Parliament there could be hundreds of schools – providing government continues to push through reform. (Wolf, 2012)

There is a modicum of truth in that an additional school adds choice but, as outlined below, this is unlikely to enhance attainment and will almost certainly increase social segregation. David Cameron, in a 2011 speech at a Norwich free school, felt the qualities of free schools to be

choice and freedom, we are also bringing in the dynamic of competition. This is what our free schools revolution is all about. We've said to charities, to faith groups, to businesses, to community organisations, teachers: come in and set up a great new school, in the state sector ... They also encourage existing schools in the area to compete and raise their game. (Cameron, 2011)

There are parallels here with the Swedish rationale in that schools would be expected to become more economically productive and efficient if working within a 'quasi-market' as part of the public sector (Blomqvist, 2004; Lundahl, 2005; Skolverket, 2006). A further commonality is that their introduction both here and in Sweden coincided with an economic downturn, perhaps providing an opportunity in time of public expenditure constraints to introduce reform. Klein (2007) describes how the American neo-conservative right, in what she describes as disaster capitalism, exploits downturns and catastrophes as an opportunity for private-sector intervention. In an extreme example, the New Orleans public schools were largely replaced, with President Bush's backing, by Charter Schools following Hurricane Katrina.

The ideology, then, is clearly right wing; the Tea Party wing of the Republican party are strong advocates, and are based on an extension of the liberalisation of the market reflecting Milton Friedman's free-market approach initially embraced in Britain by Margaret Thatcher's administrations. It is unnerving that the adherence to political dogma masks the truth of the reform, as described below.

Consequences

Increased Segregation

There is ample evidence that free schools undermine social cohesion and in fact create segregation. In the USA, Weiher and Tedin (2002) suggest charter school choice is guided along ethnic lines and that the level of integration is less than in the comparable public school system. Frankenberg and Chungmei (2003) reinforce the assertion, finding that in charter schools there is minimal attention given to racial balance and 70% of black charter school students attend intensely segregated minority schools, compared with a 34% figure for public schools. In a more comprehensive 40-state study, Frankenberg et al (2011) discovered that charter schools isolate by both race and social class.

Sweden is a less ethnically diverse country, but here too studies reveal alarming levels of segregation. Skolverket (2003) notes that parental selection afforded by free schools has added to ethnic and social segregation, particularly in deprived areas. This view is compounded by other independent studies (Daun, 2003; Böhlmark & Lindahl, 2007; Bunar, 2008). Lundhal (2002) produced convincing data showing reinforced social division and exclusion in the free school initiative. Although not exclusively, Vasagar and Shepherd (2011), drawing on research by CACI, a market analysis firm, suggest that free schools in England are attracting middle-class families and that the white working class will be under-represented.

Lower Educational Attainment

Bifulco and Ladd (2006) compared American education performance in charter and public schools and found students made considerably smaller achievement gains in charter schools. Advocates of charter schools also point to an increased level of accountability, though it is interesting that poorly performing schools are allowed to remain open (Carnoy et al, 2005). In Michigan, Horn and Miron (2000) found lower mean test scores were recorded than in public schools. The most damning report was by the American Federation of Teachers (Nelson et al, 2004), which, in a national study, found that charter school performance in mathematics and reading was lower than in public schools. According to the most recent report (CREDO, 2009, p. 1), 'Over a third, 37 percent, deliver learning results that are significantly worse than the student would have realized had they remained in traditional public schools.' Ladd (2003, p. 72) noted too that the 'means tested voucher programs of the type implemented in New York City, Dayton and Washington, DC apparently do not raise the achievement of the typical student who participates in them'.

In Sweden, though there has been less research, the findings largely mirror those of the United States. Böhlmark and Lindahl (2008) found that children educated in free schools performed at a level commensurate with their peers in public schools in upper-secondary exams. Myrberg and Rosen (2006) did, however, note a slightly higher reading performance at third-grade level in

free schools, though they felt this was the result of cultural capital which, to an extent, it could be argued, reflects the traditional UK tri-partite model. Wiborg (2011, p. 282) found that 'the children from highly educated families gain most from education in independent schools, but the impact on families and immigrants who had received a low level of education is close to zero'. Perhaps the most damning criticism came from Per Thulberg, Director General of the Swedish National Agency for Education, who, in an interview with the *Guardian* (Shepherd, 2010), said that free schools had 'not led to better results'.

'Marketisation' and Competition

Fredriksson (2009) found, in Sweden, that free school teachers were less experienced than their colleagues in the public sector, possibly because of the different conditions of service, and that their approach was less on cooperation and more on self-interest due to targets and student numbers, a scenario reflecting the experiences in England and Wales following the 1988 Education Reform Act. Staff also appeared pressurised to replace students who had dropped out (Arreman & Holme, 2011). Waldo (2007) found no evidence that efficiency was increased by free school competition and McMillan (1999), in an American study, even suggested that competition reduced achievement in public schools. Belfield and Levin (2002) felt that in the United States any gains from competition were modest and suggested caution in the claims that it increases performance. Lubienski (2003, p. 393), in a review of charter schools, suggests that the system 'has the potential for choice and competition to constrain opportunities for education innovation and to impose pedagogical and curricular conformity'. Ball (1993, p. 3) is more blunt in his appraisal of the effects and argues that 'markets in education provide the possibility for the pursuit of class advantage and generate a differentiated and stratified system of schooling'.

Conclusion

The creation of free schools appears, then, to be a largely ideologically informed development. There is little evidence that their inclusion in the suite of school alternatives raises educational attainment. Disturbingly, they also appear to increase segregation akin to the grammar school/secondary modern split and, unsurprisingly within a competitive market-orientated environment, to undermine cooperation. During a time of reduced public expenditure it is also worrying that the evidence is they are not particularly cost efficient, though, of course, professionals working for a privately funded provider will have different conditions of employment compared with those in the public sector. But choice - is that a factor worth embracing? Yes, it is important - the choice between a publicly funded, non-selective comprehensive school model accessible to all and the laissez-faire free school model working independently of LEAs. It is more than worrying that the coalition government chose the latter.

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