
Some Factors Affecting What We Mean by *Public*

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ABSTRACT After exploring what we mean by 'public', this article advances the argument that there have been two distinct periods in the post-war English schooling system and argues that the latest one, of markets and managerialism, ushered in on the back of neoliberal economic theories during the 1980s, has internal contradictions if, as both parties declare, their aims for the schooling system are to secure 'equal opportunity', 'equity' and 'social mobility'. It concludes with an argument for changing five systemic influences external to schools – namely: governance; pupil admissions; finance; curriculum exams; and accountability, and the existence in their present form of private schools – in order to make the system fairer.

The notion of *public* – whether of school, education or service – is deeply influenced by *place*, *culture* and *time*. Since devolution of powers from Westminster to Stormont, Holyrood and Cardiff in 1997/8 within the UK, four distinctively separate *place* and *cultural identities* affect how the English, Irish, Scots and Welsh each see the role of the state (as opposed to any other third party) in providing education and other services for all its citizens.

Time also affects our understanding of the state's role in providing *public* goods. In schooling, the Victorians saw the state as 'provider of last resort', to be involved only when all else failed. The Butler Act of 1944 and the Beveridge-inspired embrace of the Welfare State changed that view, establishing the state as the main provider of public services. Being a public servant was an unselfish and honourable occupation devoted to the public good, whether in housing, health, education, social services, the uniformed services or public utilities such as water, electricity, gas, railways, coal and steel – in short, much of the available employment field. As far as education is concerned, it ushered in an age of *trust and optimism* where three partners – central government (through ministers and civil servants), local government (through councillors and education officers) and schools (through headteachers and

teachers) – each played their part in building and expanding the reach of a schooling system and its ambition to play its part in creating a better society – what Attlee described as a ‘New Jerusalem’.

After the doubts and disillusion of the late 1960s and 1970s, what some call the ‘neoliberal’ reforms of the Thatcher years weakened such shared certainty. A process began and gathered pace whereby services, accepted as part of the public realm, were either privatised or outsourced to private providers. Council houses built for social need were sold off and local government was precluded from further house-building; utilities previously nationalised were privatised; state-provided schools were encouraged to become ‘academies’ – in effect private schools funded by the state but ‘nationalised’ and answerable, by regulation, to central rather than local government; and all manner of jobs – architects, engineers, lawyers, accountants, carers, psychologists, administrators, ICT technicians, formerly employed as public servants, have been outsourced to the private-for-profit sector where inevitably motivations are different. If the high point of *public* service employment was the 1950s and 1960s, it is much diminished now.

As with other public services, schooling also was affected by neoliberal ideas, and successive legislation encouraged a market in schooling: *choice* (for parents), *autonomy* (of schools), *diversity* (of types of school) and *accountability* became the driving themes asserted in white papers preceding legislation which introduced a plethora of measures, such as a single national curriculum, and national tests at ages 7, 11 and 14, with GCSE at 16, so that results could be published and compared in league tables. Ofsted first published school inspection reports and then graded the outcomes at first in seven grades before settling for four. While at first Ofsted considered broader aspects of school life, it soon focused more narrowly on pupil outcomes. Poor exam or test results in practice correlated to schools’ placement in the Ofsted ratings of ‘Outstanding’, ‘Good’, ‘Requires Improvement’ and ‘Inadequate’. By these measures, governments in this second period introduced a quasi-market which required continual attention as its operation inevitably produced both failures and successes. Tinkering and interfering has become a habit enabled by increasing the powers of the Secretary of State [1], whose consequent managerialism interferes in many aspects of school life – even extending not just to what is taught but to how it is taught.[2] This second age – one of *markets and managerialism* – is the prevailing background to our present consideration of what’s needed to resolve the paradox schools face in their daily task.

The Paradox Facing Our Schools in Their Work

National aims for the public good through schools are partly compromised by the very structures which govern the way schools work. For example, all political parties agree that schooling can and should be an agent of increased ‘equal opportunity’, ‘equity’ and, more recently, ‘social mobility’ for pupils and should result in a consequential reduction in socio-economically based

disadvantage. Most teachers are attracted into their career for these purposes either after university or in mid-life after earning often higher salaries elsewhere. The market mechanisms (described above, and operating outside schools), however, militate against them realising those ideals. This dilemma and unease increase, moreover, when some schools are tempted into giving emphasis to practices *within* their schools which may not serve the interests of 'equal opportunity' and 'equity' but will make them look attractive in the market place. It is not the purpose of this present article to elaborate on those practices; nor would it be possible in the space available to consider in depth all of the *external* structural/systemic influences which can and do impede the realisation of 'equal opportunity' and 'equity'. The main five, however, are listed as follows:

- *Pupil admission arrangements* where there is a danger that schools choose pupils rather than parents choose schools, where the Schools Admission Code needs to be strengthened and policies made fairer, and where a third party – under democratic local control – administers entry to all state-funded schools.
- *Tests, examinations, accountability arrangements and curriculum* where the focus of the first two is on testing a narrow range of skills and knowledge at the expense of what may be more valuable but cannot be easily measured and where accountability arrangements compound that problem by high-stakes school inspections [3] and reputation-altering league tables of school test and exam results. The curriculum, backward looking at its inception before the digital age has so dramatically changed what our future citizens need, must be overhauled to incorporate the explicit expectation that its detail, as opposed to its broad outline, will be for schools themselves to decide within guidelines recommended to the Secretary of State by the Standing National Education Advisory Council outlined below. (If the first post-war age was too relaxed on issues affecting accountability, examinations tests, school improvement and curriculum, the latest period has been too tightly prescriptive.)
- *Finance*, where the post-war system of LEAs determining how much of local taxes and the Revenue Support Grant (RSG) should be spent on schools and support services lasted until 2006, when government centralised what had turned into an unfair system.[4] Much more than the mooted National Fair Funding Formula is needed if schools are to have access to the support services they need, and which vary locally and regionally.
- *The supply and retention of suitably qualified teachers*, where in 2010 the Secretary of State abandoned his duty to carry out this duty precipitating the present crisis of supply and retention, which relates to a lack of numbers planning both nationally and regionally, to teachers' pay and to continuous professional development.
- *Governance locally regionally and nationally*, where too much power is in Whitehall (tempting it to ever more managerialism), and some schools [5] are not answerable to a local democratic voice, while the middle tier is a confusing muddle of overmighty, prescriptive multi-academy trusts and impotent local authorities, together with eight Regional School

Commissioners, agents of the Secretary of State. The answer nationally is to establish a Standing National Educational Advisory Council (SNEAC) to advise variously on the national aims and values underpinning our public schools (see above) and on national decisions affecting curriculum exams and accountability. It should be representative of teachers and support staff unions, Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI), the Chartered College of Teachers, universities, the Confederation Of British Industry (CBI) and Chambers of Commerce, the Trades Union Congress (TUC), the Local Government Association (LGA) and bodies representing Churches and Faiths, and its chair appointed by the select committee for five-year terms. Reports by the select committee and Her Majesty's Chief Inspector (HMCI) would be considered by it and advice given to the Secretary of State annually. It should also advise on the new governance arrangements at the regional, local and school levels, as well as on the other four issues listed.

What Aims, Values and Attitudes Should Underpin 'Public' Schools?

Given this conflict between the influence of the 'market' and the desire for 'equality of opportunity', 'equity' and 'social mobility', there will need to be clarity about the aims and shared values of a public schooling system within a public education system. *Public* as a word ducks the question of *aims* and underpinning *values*. After all, 'Hitler Youth' was a 'public service' but the participants, along with most in Germany's public service at the time, were committed to a regime of whose values nobody now would approve. Today totalitarian and/or tyrannical regimes run 'public services' under rotten values systems. In England on the other hand, as in other western countries, public services are seen as serving different forms of democracy.

An essential precursor to arrangements supporting public schools within a defined public education service should therefore be a discussion of the *aims*, *values* and *attitudes* which underpin society. There are a few examples to guide us. American schoolchildren daily stand and chant, 'I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America and the Republic for which it stands, one nation under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.' Clearly it can be argued that such cursory words are not enough and that an explicit expectation that schools will go further is needed. This the Americans do, with guidance from their local democratically elected school district and state.

In England the aims of the national curriculum laid down in 1988 (which make no mention of 'liberty' or 'justice') [6] stipulated:

Every state-funded school must offer a curriculum which is balanced and broadly based and which

1. promotes the spiritual, moral, cultural, mental and physical development of pupils at the school and of society and

2. prepares pupils at the school for the opportunities, responsibilities and experiences of later life.

In 2013 Michael Gove, in introducing the revised aims of the revised national curriculum, declared: 'The national curriculum provides pupils with an introduction to the essential knowledge they need to be educated citizens. It introduces pupils to the best that has been thought and said, and helps engender an appreciation of human creativity and achievement.'

Each of these declarations contains fewer than 50 words and English governments have focused prescriptive advice to schools on knowledge and skills defined by 'subjects'. Since the role of local authorities in the curriculum has progressively weakened to vanishing point, it could be fairly argued that our schools operate within a vacuum as far as clarity on aims, values and attitudes is concerned. This vacuum does not apply to 'faith' schools either within or outside the state-funded 'public' system. These schools are very clear on values which derive from their religious beliefs and contribute to youngsters' future behaviour as responsible citizens. Other state-funded schools are always operating within disputed territory as far as values, attitudes and behaviour are concerned.

Connected to this is an absence of any national descriptive elaboration of what our youngsters are expected to become as adults. How youngsters turn out as citizens when they have left school is a concern of most teachers, yet such outcomes are not part of our school accountability system. Schools within the independent sector are more forthcoming. Haileybury, for example, was founded by the East India Company and for most of its first hundred years saw its explicit purpose as producing school leavers who would go on to serve the British Empire. All such schools for the privileged few, who are tacitly – sometimes overtly – expected to become the leaders of society, have values-laden school mottoes. Schools funded by the state tend to have 'mission statements' analogous to slogans in the business and commercial world. They are often values-free.

When Whitehall attempted a description of *British* values in 2011, it was in connection with the 'Prevent' strategy which itself was a response to fears of terrorism. It was updated in 2014 in the statement set out as follows:

A key part of our plan for education is to ensure that children become valuable and fully rounded members of society who treat others with respect and tolerance regardless of background.

We want every school to promote the basic British values of democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty and mutual respect and tolerance for those of different faiths and beliefs.

This ensures young people understand the importance of respect and leave school fully prepared for life in modern Britain.

(<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/guidance-on-promoting-british-values-in-schools-published>)

This statement, accompanied by examples of practice, was as unexceptionable as it was incomplete; its origins in Islamophobic terrorism were easy to guess; and its imprecise thinking about 'Britain' – as opposed to the UK or its four separate countries – was evident to any thoughtful reader.

Ideally, we now need an England-wide discussion led by and reporting to the Standing National Educational Advisory Council about what we want all our schools to promote in terms of values and broad aims in the long-term interests of the pupils and the public. A general description of skills, knowledge and experiences must follow, but without clarity on values, aims and attitudes we make the jobs of our schools much more difficult. The following passage illustrates the sort of unifying statement which might be the agreed foundation of aims – though not values – on which the schooling system might be built:

We should want our children to understand through their schooling that:

- It will be their duty as adults to guard and participate in a representative democracy which values national and local government. To that end schools will progressively involve students in many aspects of school life and the community in which the school and the families are located.
- Their religious faith and beliefs will be respected and they will be encouraged through their schooling to respect all faiths and the humanist position.
- Many differently rewarded careers which are vital to the wellbeing and practical operation of our society and others elsewhere in the world are open to them. These include carers, cleaners, cooks, designers, musicians, sportsmen and women, writers, composers, broadcasters, actors, builders, electricians, farmers, teachers, sailors, plumbers, other tradespeople, lawyers, accountants, doctors, nurses, other health-related jobs, bankers and providers of other financial services, shop-keepers, drivers and politicians. This kaleidoscope of employed and self-employed opportunities, available in the private, public and voluntary sectors, is ever changing and expanding under the influence of accelerating political and technological developments.
- These careers require differing talents, and students' schooling experience will be based on valuing them as individuals and equipping them with the values, attitudes skills and knowledge

needed to make a successful and rewarding contribution to society as adults in and out of work.

- They will be encouraged to think for themselves and act for others through their life at school and in the community. In doing so they will explore and understand the range of obligations, rights and choices open to them in our own and other societies.
- They will encounter through their schooling experiences expert help in acquiring a foundation of skills and knowledge which will allow them to survive and flourish in our own or another society.
- They will be equipped to make good arguments for a just cause and thereby influence their social and political environment.

Complementing such aims should be a similarly brief statement of values and attitudes acceptable in childhood, adolescence and adulthood. All schools are deep into this territory of acceptable behaviours on a daily basis but often in conflict with some of their families. Headteachers and teachers who have worked in both faith and community schools will, when asked, agree with the proposition that it is easier to establish 'shared attitudes and values' in the daily life of faith schools because they spring essentially from the faith and are uncontested. Values in public (community and other state schools) would be less contested if they were more explicitly stated, whether (ideally) on a UK BASIS, or on an England-only basis. Although some values seem timeless, others – such as respect for LGBTQ+ rights and lifestyle – change over time. Once these broad values and aims are established, they therefore need periodic review through the SNEAC.

One More Factor

One more factor outside the system altogether will frustrate all efforts to secure 'equal opportunity', 'equity', and especially 'social justice' and the values and aims of a public education system – namely, the continued unreformed existence of the private sector of schools.

Eton, Harrow, Westminster, Winchester, Marlborough, Roedean, Cheltenham Ladies [*sic*] College, not to mention Manchester Grammar and Oxford High, are just examples of the hundreds of day schools where the fees are three, four or five times the amount spent in local state-funded schools. Compared with truly 'public' state-funded schools, their buildings and sports facilities are incomparably better and their staff – where the 'child/student: teacher ratio' is so much more favourable – stay longer and receive pensions from the state. Children attending such schools are advantaged, and have richer school experiences and better prospects in life – all at the expense of the other 93% [7] of children not in the privileged schools. This neither is just nor does it provide equality of opportunity.

Short of closure of these schools – and others have pointed out that the two best chances (Green & Kynaston, 2019) of doing this have probably gone – what can be done to mitigate their malign effect on ‘equity’ and ‘equal opportunity’? The following passage illustrates some of the measures which, if collectively implemented, would make private schools less destructive of ‘equal opportunity’, ‘equity’ and ‘social mobility’:

- Stop giving rates relief (of £500 million) and remove charitable status, (ii) impose full business rates, and (iii) introduce a new local hypothecated tax on the difference between the individual private school fees and the average of the local state school costs and distribute the resources as a supplementary (top-up) grant to the state-funded schools locally. (Independent/private schools would make clear that this was an extra ‘equity’ charge which parents of their children are required to pay).

- Require every university to take no more than 10% of their undergraduate entry from those who have spent three years or more at private fee-paying schools.

- Require every fee-paying school to pay a ‘recruitment/transfer’ fee for teachers trained or working in a state-funded school.
- Require every fee-paying school to run its own pension fund for all staff, including teachers.

- Give the local/regional democratically elected body (where the school is located) the right to nominate up to 10% of the ‘boarding’ entry at those private/independent schools with boarding. (Costs to be paid by central government, and the requirement made that at least half the nominated entry be from the local list – or from another authority’s list – of Looked After Children.)

Finally, even when we have been explicit about the values and aims of a public schooling system, there will be a duty on those engaged in it to subscribe wholeheartedly to their realisation. As has been raised from time to time, there is a case for the requirement for a Hippocratic Oath from those working in the public schooling system, which incorporates a pledge to do their best to help realise ‘equal opportunity’ and ‘equity’ within a democracy.

I leave it for others to decide whether it could be required of those working within the private sector of schooling, although I am sure the best teachers there would be glad to do so.

Notes

- [1] Under the 1944 Act, the Secretary of State had three powers; now he has over 2000.

- [2] For example, Nick Gibb has made the teaching of synthetic phonics compulsory in schools. A more trivial example is Michael Gove distributing to all schools a copy of the King James Bible, and currently each secondary school is being sent a scripted lesson to teach of the dangers of knife crime.
- [3] In late 2018, HMCI Amanda Spielman identified Ofsted's role in the distorting and narrowing impact on the curriculum and announced her intention to change the school inspection framework from September 2019 in order to encourage schools to consider the wider aspects of schools' purposes and to demonstrate their curriculum thinking. While welcome, it needs to be complemented by other reforms to examinations and to the accepted means of assessment which have always influenced schools' curriculum practice.
- [4] So great were the variations that there was a clear failure to ensure 'equality of opportunity' let alone 'equity' of provision since the difference in funding levels between apparently similarly placed neighbouring schools either side of a local authority border was demonstrably significant.
- [5] There has been a proliferation of school types – academies, foundation, free, community, voluntary aided, voluntary controlled, trust – which has served to obscure and complicate responsibilities and lines of accountability. This needs to be simplified into two models of school for state-funded 'public' schools, one for faith-based schools and the other for the rest.
- [6] Interestingly, R.A. Butler was powerfully influenced by this passage from William Temple (1942) which emphasises liberty and justice:

Until Education has done more work than it has had an opportunity of doing, you cannot have a society organised on the basis of justice, for this reason ... that there will always be a strain between what is due to a man in view of his humanity with all his powers and capabilities and what is due to him at the moment of time as a member of society with all his faculties still undeveloped, with many of his tastes warped, with his powers largely crushed. Are you going to treat a man as what he is or what he might be? Morality, I think, requires that you should treat him as what he might be, as what he might become ... and business requires that you should treat him as he is. You cannot get rid of that strain except by raising what he is to the level of what he might be. That is the whole work of education. Give him the full development of his powers and there will no longer be that conflict between the man as he is and the man as he might become. And so you can have no justice as the basis of your social life until education has done its full work. And then again, you can have no real freedom, because until a man's whole personality has developed, he cannot be free in his own life... And you cannot have political freedom any more than you can have moral freedom until people's powers are developed, for the simple reason that over and over again we find men with a cause which is just ... are unable to state it in a way which might enable it to prevail ... there exists a form of mental slavery which is as real as any economic form... We are pledged to destroy it ... if you want human liberty, you must have educated people.

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[7] The percentage varies in different parts of the country from 3% to 25%, so the financial supplementary grant to state-funded schools outlined in Table II will vary accordingly.

References

Green, F. & Kynaston, D. (2019) *Engines of Privilege*. London: Bloomsbury.

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