

## **How much longer can we afford the free school debacle? State sponsored neoliberalism and the myths of choice**

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### **Abstract**

*The United Kingdom's 2010 Academies Act further widened the school and State relationship with free schools, in particular, becoming a model separately identified as endorsing and celebrating the neoliberal ideology of competition informed by market principles. The main features of the model are described and complemented with illustrative evidence from Ofsted inspections and research strongly suggesting that, rather than delivering an informed and inclusive approach as claimed by the government, they in fact are socially divisive and serve only to further accentuate class structures and prejudice. It is concluded that they should be replaced by open access, non-selective and fully State owned and funded approaches based on principles of equality and anti-discrimination.*

**Keywords:** markets, business, competition; social division.

### **Introduction**

Given the Conservative party win in the May 2015 United Kingdom general election, it is now perhaps apposite to reexamine the significance of free school development, a central ideological feature of the new government's educational policy, Prime Minister David Cameron pledging 500 more by 2020 (Vaughan, 2015). The first 24 free schools opened in autumn 2011, and with further approvals the total is now 408, catering for 230,000 children (DfE, 2015) so a further 500, along with the academies initiative, creates a significant level of provision of more than one in 30 State schools with about 500,000 places. This paper will argue their development represents the very worst of the neoliberalism agenda of educational reform and seek to reaffirm they are actually socially divisive and do not, as is claimed, raise educational standards but simply confirm the myth that competition enhances the quality of the learning experience. To support the arguments, evidence is presented from Ofsted reports and relevant research.

'Free' as a term certainly has an attractive ring to it suggesting some sort of liberation or boundary breaking exploration, there is even an apparent nod to Summerhill, but sadly the truth is the most accurate reference is 'free market'. They are government funded but have a

great deal of autonomy by setting their own conditions for staff (who do not need to hold or be working towards a teaching qualification), decide term time and school hours, and don't have to follow the national curriculum. They can be created by community groups, faith organisations (St Andrew the Apostle School in Barnet teaches Greek and Latin alongside the mainstream curriculum and is administered by the Greek Orthodox Church), parents or any affiliation. Occasionally, independent fee paying schools transfer to free school status such as Queen Elizabeth Grammar School, Blackburn and The Royal School Wolverhampton, scrapping fees to allow State funding. In Wolverhampton, pupils at the school who don't board currently pay fees of £13,230 which fell to nothing from September 2015, for families of children who board fees drop to between £10,000 and £14,000 a year. Faith schools figure strongly and sometimes the arrangement can be via a trust such as The Tauheedul Trust which runs a network of Muslim faith schools and is due to open primary schools in Bolton, Greater Manchester, Preston and Birmingham in 2016. Some certainly are unusual, The Boxing Academy in Hackney is an Alternative Provision Free School attempting to prevent exclusion through the 'discipline and ethos of boxing', though actual boxing thankfully remains voluntary. In Oldham, The Phoenix School was planned but was even too odd for the right wing, it was to employ only ex-military personnel, none of whom were to be qualified teachers, with a view to instilling a school with firm discipline. Many belong to a franchised arrangement, Edison Learning for example, an American for-profit education business, was awarded approved status as a free school provider by the Department for Education in 2011 and the Swedish IES company, part of the Sabrees Educational Trust of their International English Schools initiative from Sweden, was given a 10-year £21 million contract to administer Suffolk's Breckland Free School. There is then a deliberate policy to involve the private corporate sector with profit and not-for-profit becoming blurred when costs are paid to private administrations.

### **Rationale and justification**

Support for free school expansion reflects the momentum of right wing influence on State organised school provision. The former Secretary of State for Education (Gove 2010) explained in The House of Commons, 'innovation, diversity and flexibility are at the heart of free schools policy. We want the dynamism that characterises the best independent schools to help drive up standards in the State sector', a very revealing quote in that there is unashamedly a celebration of the perceived superiority of independent schools and the need for the public funded sector to learn from their qualities. Unsurprisingly, David Cameron (2011) echoes the stance that it is the private sector that should be applauded for innovation and standards;

'In Britain today, we have schools that are intolerant of failure, where ninety percent of pupils get five good GCSEs. Yes: private schools. You've heard me talk about social responsibility so let me say this. I want to see private schools start Academies, and sponsor Academies in the state system. Wellington College does it, Dulwich does it – others can too. The apartheid between our private and State schools is one of the biggest wasted opportunities in our country today. So let it be this party that helps tear it down.'

Interestingly, ‘independent’ is soon used as a term equating to an absence of Local Authority responsibility but clearly has private sector connotations, ‘I have always believed that independent schools within the State sector is part of the answer to driving up standards in our country’ (Cameron 2012a). The rhetoric is clear, free schools are modeled on the private/independent sector, an approach that could be construed as taxpayers’ money supporting a form of private education. Eton College, David Cameron’s *Alta Mata*, sponsors Holyport College which opened in 2014 with 68 day pupils and 55 boarders. Eton provides a mostly pastoral role, Holyport’s main funding coming from the State, private and public again becoming somewhat blurred. The term appears new but their rapid development follows similar models in The United States and Sweden where they are called ‘charter schools’.

The impetus for American reform towards a charter system arguably lies within the culture of corporate capitalism though a landmark starting point was Friedman (1955)’s treatise which advocated a parental voucher system, one would purchase a child’s education and only spend it when satisfied, schools being maneuvered to improvement through free market competition. The State would only be a monitor or overseer of standards, the market would take care of the rest. It was a similar voucher system that was introduced to Sweden in 1992 in what Fredriksson (2009:299) lamented was ‘the start of the ‘market-oriented teacher’ which Beach (2010) recognised as a planned transformation from public to private production with the inevitable commodification and reductionism of services to units of economy.

### **Limitations and criticism**

Many of the concerns stem from American research given that the model has been implemented longer there. Bettinger (2005) applied a standardised testing programme used in Michigan schools and compared results from public and charter schools finding that charter school students’ scores do not improve and, in some cases actually decline, relative to public schools. Also, and very interestingly, he found no significant effect on raised scores influence from charter to public school which contradicts the DfE (2014) report which claims free schools have a positive influence in raising standards in local schools. Bifulco and Ladd (2006) in a North Carolina study also found no evidence whatsoever that charter schools were achieving at a higher level than nearby public schools and that in fact charter school students were actually making considerably smaller achievement gains than they would have in public schools. Sass (2006) shares a slightly more positive slant from a Florida study that indicated educational performance was initially lower in charter schools but after 5 years they were performing identically to public schools. Swedish studies also were unable to record benefits. Bohlmark and Lindahl (2008) found no difference in educational attainment levels between charter and public schools in examinations though Myrberg and Rosen (2006) found a slightly higher reading age in charter schools though questioned whether this was due to the social mix within the study. A significant criticism from Per Thulberg, a previous Director General of the Swedish National Agency for Education, was that free schools had not led to better results (Shepherd 2010). Even the last Swedish Education Minister, Bertil Ostberg,

warned when asked about free school development, ‘We have actually seen a fall in the quality of Swedish Schools since the Free Schools were introduced’ (Anderson 2010). The evidence is considerable and overwhelming, free schools as models of free market approaches to education do not raise educational standards and, in some case, appear to actually lower them. Competition obviously means a winner and loser, the latter somehow in this crude free market model being deemed able to improve, and so issues of fairness are not even vaguely a concern. Such an argument is an ill-fit to those who see education as part of the process towards a fairer society but to the present right wing Conservative administration, is a consequence not a concern, a position to be rectified by more competition and less State support.

There is also a considerable amount of research strongly indicating the free/charter school model increases social segregation which further feeds inequality. The Civil Right Project (2010), in a massive 40 state study, concluded the charter school sector delineates students by race, class and even possibly language. They found black race segregation to be particularly widespread. An equally forceful and convincing study, Stambach and Becker (2006), find that charter schools merely replicate race and class exclusion to the extent they actually reinforce and therefore help to ensure White economically advantaged groups. Among other concerns, especially with resourcing, Bodine et al (2008) discovered that in charter schools which work with a majority Black populace, the school relies more on non-accredited teachers with less experience than in the public sector and the working conditions are poorer. As Sweden has a less ethnically diverse population, segregation by race is harder to judge, Lindbom (2010) offering tentative evidence, though nothing as conclusive as in America. Bohlmark and Lindahl (2007) found some evidence of ethnicity divisions but formed stronger conclusions as to socio-economic sorting, charter schools with their strong private sector ethos attracting children from wealthier backgrounds. The idea of choice by schools other than those local to you, including charter schools, becomes an even more nuanced model when admissions criteria are introduced. In a Stockholm Study, Soderstrom and Usitalo (2010) noted significant changes to segregation by socioeconomic background and ethnicity with charter schools insisting on a higher entry grade policy when grades as entry criteria are considered. The UK’s free schools are not supposed to invoke any selection process but, because of the individuality accorded by national curriculum exemption and the minority interest groups, including private schools becoming one, it is almost certainly a small step to becoming a selective choice within the UK’s socially discriminately organised tripartite system. The Stockholm study is a useful reminder of the inevitable evolution to further social division but also should be noted as a clarion call to the right who welcome such division as contributing to and maintaining the *status quo*.

The misconceived freedom to be separated from a Local Authority universal, non-selective comprehensive school model available freely to all to a market-led approach inevitably redefines and informs the pedagogical experience. DfE (2014:3) uncritically report that in free schools, ‘57% of respondents reported setting their own pay and conditions for staff’ and ‘77% of free schools reported linking pay to teachers’ performance’, the latter suggesting payment by results as per attainment of curriculum targets and by outside body

board assessment such as with GCSEs. In short, teaching and learning could become a largely a criterion-referenced experience being narrowly confined to prescriptive, and arguably, contrived outcomes. The report's arguments that free schools are centres of innovation is somewhat challenged when payment by results is the norm. The report also explains that 46% of free schools don't use unqualified staff which, of course, means that 54% do. Unqualified staff equates to lower wages and an incentive for financial inducement (payment by results). How such an approach is to be considered a freedom is questionable. Also, with finance as a catalyst or even driver of the learning experience, the school becomes a sort of State sponsored centre of entrepreneurial activity with value informed by a relationship to economy and the market (Apple 2000). This arguably also inhibits innovation, experimentation can be costly, Lubienski (2003) reporting that charter schools actually encourage pedagogical and curriculum conformity; in a competitive environment with a 'market' of children informed by demographic trends, cost is a factor in sustainability. Rinzulli et al (2015) provide copious evidence that charter schools move to safe positions of generalisation, an assimilation process, where school identity becomes blurred into the majority expectation of all other schools, a safe market position which can be maintained if costs are manageable. Lastly in this section, if a market-led approach is favoured then the school has to be seen by the parent/child 'consumer' as attractive and having positive qualities, and this invites commercialisation. The school has a product (education) and its qualities need communicating, a section of a school budget therefore has to be spent on marketing. Loeb et al (2011) conducted a fascinating study which attempted to correlate a relationship between educational performance and marketing and suggest that school leaders respond to competitive pressures by an improvement in their marketing efforts rather than investing in enhancing educational performance. It is then a terrible irony that the neo-liberalist ideology with its claims of innovation, standard raising and pedagogical engagement is so obviously flawed, the evidence shared in this section being overwhelming, yet it remains what increasingly will be the experience of thousands of children.

Much of what this paper has been concerned with is how public money can be so wastefully spent on a model of schooling that is so easily discredited with an underlying theme that free schools are contributing to maintaining an unequal society. There is then a frightening irony in the press release announcement, (Morgan, 2015), 'At the heart of our commitment to delivering real social justice is our belief that every pupil deserves an excellent education'. Free schools will not and are not intended to create social justice, 'social justice' from the right wing perspective, provided here by the Secretary of State for Education, being a somewhat vague concept. The next section moves towards illustrative evidence of actual free school performance.

### **Performance and quality concerns**

This section highlights concerns within free schools, not as some sort of skewed appraisal, but rather to illustrate some characteristics that schools outside of the free schools classification would unlikely to be concerned with. It is accepted that in Local Authority schools there will be difficulties, indeed it would be surprising if there weren't given the

government's rhetoric and ideological stance as illustrated by the UK 2015 Education Bill which details how Local Authority schools rated as 'inadequate' by Ofsted will have their legal options curtailed or removed allowing the Department for Education to quickly replace their management and impose sponsors and academy status. However, failing academies will not be returned to Local Authority administration, free schools being part of the 2010 Academies Act. Ofsted assessment of schools, whatever one thinks of the methodology, collates strengths and developmental needs across all schools so a comparison of evaluation between free schools and Local Authority administered provision has validity in that there is a consistency of evaluation. The following overview was written from verified inspection reports within the public domain.

As a general observation to explore how free schools are being categorised by inspection, Garner (2014) reported that 30 per cent were failing to meet a good standard compared to an overall rate of 19 per cent among all schools in the State sector. Mansell (2014) provides more detail; overall, 79% of State schools are rated good or outstanding compared with only 68% of free schools, and 9.7% of free schools being graded as 'inadequate' compared with the State sector 3%. Embarrassingly for the government, both Bedford and Greenwich free schools, co-founded by Jonathan Simons, head of education of Policy Exchange, a right wing think tank, and Tom Shinner, an adviser to Michael Gove, one of the Department for Education's most senior civil servants, were recently found by Ofsted to require improvement.

Perhaps the central concern is the extraordinary and untenable policy of employing unqualified 'teachers'. Such an approach demeans the profession and encourages workforce casualisation. Discovery New School in Crawley, West Sussex, was closed in 2014, the first free school to be forced to do so. A first Ofsted inspection followed by two subsequent ones initiated the closure because of concerns over teaching standards and a risk of children leaving the school unable to read or write, the school being described in a letter to governors as being unable to deliver "even the most basic level" of teaching and learning. £3m of public money was spent setting it up. One can have enormous sympathy for the community who created the school but, in such a *laissez-faire* and almost casual approach to education, it is inevitable that even the basics of provision can be undermined. Even when in special measures, I'm unaware of a single Local Authority maintained school that has been unable to teach children to read and write. An October 2014 Ofsted report found Al-Madinah Free school, a Muslim based faith school, as 'chaotic, dysfunctional and inadequate' with 'unacceptable teaching standards', the secondary section being closed in 2015. The Hartsbrook E-ACT Free School, E-ACT is a sponsor of academies, was judged 'inadequate' in every category, teaching being 'inadequate in all classes'.

A further example of how divisive free schools can be is with religious faith. It's not uncommon for a free school to be initiated by a group with a very specific interest and/or identity. Durham Free School, also to be closed by Nicky Morgan who claimed it was sharing 'prejudiced views' because it was apparently teaching creationism, which in fact is illegal, but that it actually took place reflects the *ad hoc* way free schools are set up. An

Office of the Schools Adjudicator (OSA) investigation decided that Khalsa Secondary Academy in Stoke Poges, Buckinghamshire asked parents “unreasonable, unclear, not objective and not fair” questions as part of its admissions policy, the school’s position being that following oversubscription places would be given according to the score parents achieved on a religious questionnaire designed to measure how committed they were to the Sikh faith. The opening of this paper notes a Greek Orthodox School and Muslim faith schools. Gosden (2015) reports on Grindon Hall Christian School’s Ofsted inspection report which recorded that, “discrimination through racist or homophobic language persists”, the curriculum did not adequately prepare its 590 pupils for “life in modern Britain” and that “pupils show a lack of respect and tolerance towards those who belong to different faiths, cultures or communities.” Religion in schools has a long and complex history, though revealingly, the 1902 Education Act which began the Local Education Authority arrangement replacing school boards oversaw a secular curriculum; the LEAs provided grants for maintenance and if a school wanted to deliver denominational teaching, it had to pay for the buildings. Clearly, this separation has been compromised, the Catholic Church as early as 1917, for example, issued a canon forbidding Catholic parents from sending their children to non-Catholic schools, but free schools provide a model inviting and even encouraging separateness and narrow religiosity. As Hill (2015:40) suggests, to remove inequalities and provide an anti-discriminatory curriculum requires, among other things, ‘to free up the curriculum so there can be more creativity and cross subject/disciplinary work’ and be ‘anti-racist, anti-sexist, anti-homophobic’, in essence to encourage the democratic approach of debate and enquiry. Such fundamental ideals are sadly severely compromised when religion becomes the focus. Ofsted rightly have quickly acted in cases of overt extremism, and this is certainly to be welcomed, but there remains within the model opportunities for single faith groups to receive State funded education within an environment culturally constructed towards a narrow ideal.

Another issue is the *ad hoc* approach, reflecting the liberal *laissez-faire* market-led ethos of development fed by competition and the absence of government overseeing. Business frequently views rules as impositions which undermine perceived freedoms to innovate and exploit a market opportunity rather than the reality that regulation is needed to reduce excess and exploitation. Free schools are certainly part of this business model, albeit supported by the tax payer, working to a framework of de-regulation as per the independent sector, the following examples illustrating further, this time in terms of a scant regard to planning. Gateway Academy and Gladstone School, both proposed for the north London borough of Brent, have been unable to find sites. Gateway has folded and Gladstone deferred until September 2016 on a temporary site. It seems incredible that schools without buildings can be supported by the DfE and this is somehow acceptable, such enterprises being ill-planned. The free school Sir Isaac Newton Sixth Form is housed in the city's old fire station, a grade two listed building which has been converted at a cost of more than £3m. In Caversham, The Heights Free School was opened on a temporary site and will stay there for at least three years, though funding has been found for expansion so the children can have indoor PE. Heyford Park free school is situated on what was once, during the Cold War, a quick response area of a US airbase. It is surrounded by the remains of approximately 2,000

buildings and the children were taught initially in Portakabins before moving to a converted officers' mess (Rustin, 2013). It would seem the rhetoric and ideology blinds politicians to the very basics of educational provision, a decent physical environment, preferring to support a casual opportunistic approach which bizarrely, in some unspecified way, is expected to somehow raise, however defined, educational standards. There is a long tradition of purpose built schools stretching back to the Victorian period or arguably beyond; if a Local Authority had opened a school without an indoor PE facility or with Portakabins there would rightly have been an outcry, but in a free school environment the market dictates standards, which appear woefully inadequate in many cases.

### **Perpetuating the myth**

Much evidence has been shared in this paper confirming the application of the neoliberal model to education is deeply flawed yet free schools, heavily subsidised by government grants, continue to grow in number. The factors explaining this apparent anomaly all reflect ruling class self-interest. Firstly, ensuring their proliferation helps maintain and reinforce the *status quo* reflecting, in many ways, Freire's (1970) seminal work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, in that by dividing children largely by class structure and encouraging learning based on the acceptance of a government's imposed values remains a central capitalist interest. Within such a model, children will also be a part of and contributing to an approach of competition between themselves and establishments as a means to achievement, 'to the winner the spoils', a sort of clumsy endorsement of neoliberal principles with no alternative model testing this inadequacy so, almost by terrible default, the debacle persists. Secondly, the model reflects the wider societal change to market-led principles within an increasingly oppressive cultural base (Giroux, 2004) and is therefore the dominant hegemony within the USA and certainly now Europe which from the 1970s equates to the encouragement of entrepreneurial freedom based on maintaining private property rights leading to the accrual of individual wealth. Harvey (2005) insightfully suggests for its supporters the allure is, in part, that it claims qualities of human dignity and individual freedom, and who would want to resist such powerful attractions? And here is the myth, the model actually delivers the opposite, it ensures a denial of social justice, maintains inequality and, as Harvey and Giroux explain, undermines the pretence of democracy. Free schools operate within and to such an ideology and are therefore a significant and influential piece of the jigsaw. They are intended to maintain and reinforce the *status quo* and, sadly, do so successfully and, given the uncritical sway of UK media towards the right wing, do so largely unchallenged.

### **Conclusion**

The new government's overwhelming support for free school expansion, as part of the academy school agenda, has increasingly fragmented the national system of UK State schooling. We now have a haphazard system of uncoordinated providers, including private companies surreptitiously housed or even concealed within franchised arrangements, funded by the government. It is unquestionably an example of the worst excesses of neoliberal extremism operating within, and paid for, by the public sector. In England and Wales, we



have not yet reached the extremism of the first Bush administration which dismantled the New Orleans public education system following the devastation of Hurricane Katrina to impose a charter school approach, an example of corporate opportunism described by Klein (2007) as 'disaster capitalism'. But, given the declared intent to reduce public funding yet expand free schools, it would be unsurprising if the private sector did not become further involved.

The agenda is also reductionist, a school as a business model with a corporate identity operates within a contrived market and therefore adopts the approaches and language of the market. The justification is the myth of choice, which is actually really a clumsy relationship of child/parent as customer. Higham (2014) finds no evidence that free schools are addressing social disadvantage and Ball (2013) suggests that they, in part, provide opportunities for the more articulate to push for provision feeding social advantage, and are therefore divisive. Both authors question whether 'choice' is a reality, Ball making the point that choice in this context replaces social democracy, the wealthiest and more socially influential being able to wield 'choice' as selfish advantage, mirroring the private independent schools revered by the government;

"And to all those people who say: 'He wants children to have the kind of education he had at his posh school,' I say: 'Yes - you're absolutely right.' I went to a great school and I want every child to have a great education. I'm not here to defend privilege; I'm here to spread it." (Cameron 2012b).

Some free schools are, of course, very successfully engaging children in productive learning. In any system or model, however badly flawed, there will be committed, enthusiastic and motivated professionals who guarantee success. However, as this paper has argued, the model of educational neoliberalism is deeply problematical and, though there will be some successes, should be challenged. The model is based on vague notions of competition and supposed choice somehow enhancing provision when the truth is actually the opposite. It is promulgated from a narrow ideological perspective which ignores the reality of a model that, as illustrated above, actually creates and maintains inequality; is socially divisive and, possibly intentionally, accentuates and reinforces class divisions; as measured by Ofsted, delivers lower standards; works to a separate curriculum which, in some cases, appears to be narrow, particularly in religious faith schools; undermines professionalism by employing non-qualified teachers; are organised on a very *ad hoc* basis with frequently an apparent scant regard to facilities and planning; attract private sector involvement albeit in a covert, not-for-profit structure mostly and generally appear to be an unnecessary alternative to Local Authority whose provision is being severely undermined. One wonders at the harm being done to children and the proposed expansion is a real concern.

The alternative is basically the opposite of the above. What is needed are fully State funded, Local Authority administered, open access, none-selective schools which are run by both children and staff on a basis of fairness and respect. They should be community based, include free adult education classes and deliver a curriculum which is holistic, evolving and based on exploration, anti-discrimination and questioning with a remit to reduce inequality. Sadly, all such qualities are the antithesis of the ruling class and political agenda, hence the

encouragement of free school expansion. The Labour Party appear to be less supportive than previously, before losing the election they encouraged free school growth and were actually the instigators of the model, perhaps at last realising now their mistake. Let's hope for their abandonment but expect doing so to be a long process.

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