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Part 3

School Education: Policies, Innovations, Practices & Entrepreneurship

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Free Schools: The Way forward or a Mistake in the Provision of School Places and Educational Innovation in England

Abstract

This paper discusses the rise and possible fall of the Free Schools movement in England. The arguments here are taken from a collection of government reports, education charitable trust's papers, press reports and articles written by champions of the Free School movement. It does appear from examining the presented evidence, that the initial idea of the involvement of parents and teachers in establishing these schools has not been a success, due to the time and bureaucracy involved in founding such schools, to meet the required criteria. Often, rather than providing needed school places in areas of shortage, many such schools have been established in areas where there is a glut of school places. It appears that the underlying belief that this movement would empower and liberate teachers away from the restrictive national curriculum has not succeeded. However, despite ongoing problems with Free Schools, there are some who believe they are a real alternative to the structured and controlled state schools following the dictates of the national curriculum. At present it is impossible to say if the venture has been a success or not, but there are certainly serious concerns over some of the schools which have been established; those that have failed and those that do not really intend to serve the need for parental choice. In addition, the costs of this venture, when finances for schools have been severely curtailed in England in the last few years, raises the question as to whether this initiative is providing value for money.

Keywords: free schools, innovation in teaching, school place provision, education policy

Introduction

The idea of introducing Free Schools (FS) in the English education system arose in 2010, at the behest of the then Secretary of State for Education, Michael Gove. They were a copy of the movement started in countries such as the USA and Canada, and where they were known as Charter Schools in the1960s/70s and were introduced to give parents more choice in the education of their children. These schools were also modelled on the Swedish experiment and intended to be outside of the control of Local Education Authorities (LEAs) so could be based on the academy philosophy, or founded by parents or teachers who wanted more control

over the choice of curriculum and the way it was taught. Studio schools and university technical colleges are part of the movement and these schools are free to attend for students. FS, like the academy movement, are governed by non-profit making charitable trusts. The initial idea was that by competing with LEA run schools they would drive up standards and increase the number of schools places available (Inge, 2018). FS are operated by charities, independent schools, universities, community and faith groups, sports clubs, business and international companies, such as Sky. Since their introduction in 2010, the number of FS has increased, more than 400 being approved by the coalition government (2010-2015). However, of late closures have occurred, due to a variety of reasons, for example failure of Ofsted inspections, inability to find a suitable space and buildings to house the schools, lack of parents choosing the schools, or inability to raise sufficient funds and the time it takes to complete the complicated paper work. Many schools have failed and there has been, in the opinion of the National Education Union, a massive waste of tax-payers' money, when schools are being severely restricted with funds (Weale, 2018). Seven years on the flagship policy has, by many critics been deemed a failure and a called a gross waste of money (Inge, 2018).

What is a Free School?

FS are non-profit making, independent but state funded schools, which are allowed to re-write the national curriculum; though the curriculum delivered must be, as for the national curriculum broad and balanced. They are also, like Academies, introduced by the Blair government in 2000 (Politics.Co.UK, 2004-2019) allowed to set their own terms and conditions for employing staff; including remuneration and were not obliged to use trained and qualified teachers. Both of these last conditions were not well received by unions and many parents. The difference between a FS and Academies is that FS are generally new schools, whereas Academies are usually formed from failing LEA run schools, which are forced to become academies and generally join an Academy chain of several schools, in an area of the country. Gov.UK (2018) reported that in September of 2018, 53 new FS and one university technical college would open, creating up to another 40,000 school places across the country. Many of these however, have been set up by multi-academy trusts (MATs) rather than by parents and teachers, though in some places they are combinations of a charity and a university sometimes with a MAT. One example of this is Saracens Rugby Club in London, which with Middlesex University opened a Free School to boost education through sport. Some have religious affiliations, or are established to serve a particular need in a local area, such as special education, or technical or arts, or subject based education.

> *Education Secretary Damian Hinds said – I want to create new, great schools where they are needed most and give parents greater choice when looking at the schools that are right for their children.* (Gov.UK, 2018)

FS according to New Schools Network (no date) are funded all, or in part by the Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA) part of the Department for Education (DfE). The amount they receive per pupil depends on the LEA in which they are situated and they also receive the pupil premium (additional funding) for those pupils who receive free school meals, children of forces personnel and those in care

of the LEA, as they are judged to come from deprived backgrounds. However, other factors come in to place, such as the numbers of students, student retention figures, provision of high-cost subjects and costs specific to an area. Additional funding is supplied for high needs students, by bursaries and financial support for individuals.

The original purpose of the Free School movement was to introduce innovation in who provided schools, how they were run and the curricula offered with teachers and parents being at the heart of the planning and allowing autonomy and encouraging a self-improving system (Montacute, 2018). The initiative followed on from the former government's idea of introducing autonomous Academy schools, where there would be less control over curricula and teacher qualifications. The idea was to allow those establishing a school to have the freedom to shape the school from its initial conception until it was an up and running entity. The idea was that this would boost quality, as schools would be more autonomous and this would increase competition and rivalry between schools (Garry et al., 2018).

Has the Free School movement met with success?

This question has been hotly debated by protagonists from opposing views of the initiative. There are those who are involved in FS projects are totally committed to this movement, including The New Schools Network, who are the charity receiving government funding to support Free Schools. Counter arguments however, have been presented by other bodies such as Ofsted, who have closed several FS and the NFER, Sutton Trust and National Audit Office, who have questioned the financial costs to the education budget of this venture.

Criticisms of the Free Schools programme

Critics of the initiatives have included, teachers, unions and the National Audit Office (2017) whose Report *Capital Funding for Schools* found that 57,500 of 113,500 new places in mainstream free schools opening between 2015 and 2021 would be likely to cause spare places in the immediate areas of some of the institutions. Of the FS which opened in 2015, the report considered that 52 could have a moderate, or even high impact on government funding of some 282 neighbouring schools and the report claimed that the venture had produced billion pound bills, related to setting up and procuring buildings, whilst existing schools fell into disrepair. In addition, 150 million had been spent on schools that had failed to open or been quickly closed (Inge, 2018). The Labour Party at its 2018 annual conference, committed to axing the FS programme, which was deemed to be inefficient and a waste of money (Cowburn, 2018). Problematic too have been the traumas caused by FS that have opened and quickly closed for a variety of reasons, including several studio schools linked to sport or technology. Limited curricula, poor discipline and failure to properly prepare students for national exams were some of the reasons for rapid school closures (Lock, 2018; Mintz, 2018). Another problem with these studio schools for students aged 14-19, was that specialisation at the age of 14 had not proved popular with students.

Further criticisms have come with regard to the difficult path to founding FS, including a two pathway approach (Bowen-Viner, 2017). These involve a central route, where applications are made to central government for funding and

permission to open a school and the presumption route where LEAs are responsible for finding the funding, so as to provide much needed extra school places. However, at present LEAs do not have the finances to do this. Bowen-Viner (2017) also criticises moves towards opening FS specialising in maths, as this would require selection of more able pupils something not in the original FS ethos. Instead she recommends combining the two strands of central and presumptive. This would only allow central government funding if there was a proven lack of school places in the area and for LEAs where this did not exist, a more competitive process could be used with potential groups bidding to open a FS in the area. This author does praise the opening of FS for special needs students, but strongly points out that FS are about providing much needed school places and are not the vehicles of innovation and improvement suggested in their initial launch.

One of the main ideas underpinning the FS movement was the idea of parental and community involvement, but it appears parental involvement in both FS and MATs is declining. In 2016 the involvement of parent governors was restricted by the government as a publicised White Paper suggested their role was no longer essential. Later there appeared to be a change of heart and the Education Select Committee in Parliament were assured by the then Secretary of State for Education, that the role of the parent governor was vital (Roberts, 2018a). In addition this author points to the concerns of the National Governance Association, over the lack of FS being set up by parents, as MATs seem to have taken over. The Association had predicted this problem when FS were proposed, as they believed that starting a school is a massive enterprise and far too time consuming and complicated for most parents.

Reports from parents who have succeeded show that in reality, to establish a school is a massive undertaking for parents, who are unable to concentrate on anything else. The complicated paper work involved and the difficult job of finding premises, coupled with the struggle to achieve success in Ofsted inspections, is well documented by parents and teachers involved in the task of setting up a FS and that for most people, in reality, the task is not possible as work and family life have to be set aside (Roberts, 2018b). Toby Young a successful FS creator, in the same article is quoted as saying that government attitudes have changed from the initial ideas, as it there was now a perception that allowing parents, teachers and communities with no experiences to set up schools was a risky exercise. Roberts (2018b, p. 12) points to the fact that ‘although 61 are up and running in England only 4 parent or community-led schools were set up in 2016-17 and none at all have been set up this academic year’.

One strong critic of the FS programme has been the founder of the Teach First initiative in England, Brett Wigdortz. In a speech in Dubai, he claimed that the programme was too oriented towards London and was causing a concentration of talent which needed to be more widely spread. He particularly raised the problem of schools in coastal towns, which in many cases struggle to recruit innovative teachers, as new ideas were being concentrated in the capital and in the FS and Academy movements (Pells, 2107). Doug Lemov, the American teacher trainer, working with the staff of a new FS to be opened in Folkestone on the Kent coast, agrees that schools in coastal towns in England have particular problems and he highlights the lack of parental ambition in such areas, with a mainly white working

class population and their lack of clear understanding of the need for a good education, as the towns are deprived areas, lacking employment prospects, which results in a lack of pressure to be well educated (Hazell, 2018).

The NFER/Sutton Trust report on Free Schools (Garry et al., 2018) pointed to many problems with the FS initiative including that of a lack of innovation in curricula or teaching, which was part of the original aim of the initiative; nor are they mainly parent-led. In addition students from disadvantaged backgrounds are less likely to attend FS than other students in their area, but if they do achieve better results than those in mainstream schools. In addition the report underlined the fact that parental involvement in setting up the schools decreased massively from the first schools opened in 2011. Over half of the free schools opened have in fact been introduced by MATs, with the proportion of these growing all the time. The lack of innovation was also underlined.

> *... only one-third of established free schools have demonstrated a novel approach. Of the 152 open primary free schools in England, 35 per cent were found to be innovative, compared with just 29 per cent of the 113 open secondary free schools.* (Roberts, 2018c)

As far as the report was concerned the initiative was not fulfilling its original purpose. In addition a further report from Education Policy Institute criticised the initiative as being ineffective in targeting areas of low school quality and FS pupils are more likely to have English as an additional language, than those in main stream schools (Andrews & Johnes, 2017). However, the report concludes that it is too early to make judgements on pupil performance or schools' excellence in comparison with mainstream schools as yet.

Positive reports on Free Schools

In December 2018 Malnick in the *Daily Telegraph*, reported that the DfE had released figures from Ofsted in relation to behaviour standards in schools. It appeared that 39% of Academies and FS had been rated outstanding for behaviour in Ofsted reports, compared with LEA schools at 31%, though at present only a few FS in relation to others have been assessed. In addition, Lehain (2018) claimed that FS were more likely to rated outstanding by Ofsted than other state schools and GCSE results had, for FS been at the top of the tables. In addition at key stage 1-5 FS had excellent success rates. Earlier it was demonstrated that provision of new school places was being achieved in some areas of need (Evans, 2018). In addition it appears competition between schools had made state schools look at their results and change their approaches to teaching.

Toby Young a strong advocate of FS, who has led one successful secondary FS in London and opened a new primary school in a different borough before moving to the New Schools Network, in a blog in *The Guardian* argued that as suggested by the original intent for FS, they are the perfect place to introduce new approaches and could serve as a research base to test out educational practice. His approach is based on classical liberal education philosophy with the importance of knowledge, essential in the development of higher order thinking skills, at its heart, as opposed to the skills development agenda now popular in education (Young, 2018).

Conclusion

As can be seen from the above the final conclusions on the effectiveness of the FS movement has yet to be fully assessed and dissected. However, despite some strong advocacy from passionate believers in the policy and records of successful outcomes for some children, it appears that the original purpose of the policy has been lost to a great extent, as it was over ambitious in attempting to involve parents and teachers in the mammoth task of establishing schools. The report by NFER/Sutton Trust (Garry et al., 2018) must be taken into account, as it points to numerous failings and the take-over of the so-called Free establishments to a great extent by Academy chains, negating the idea of community autonomy and innovation being at the heart of the policy. Maybe the idea to remove schools from the straight-jackets of ever increasing government control and regulation was in the first instance, a good idea, but appears to most eyes to have been naïve and simplistic in its assumptions. It will take time for final judgements to be made and certainly many highly dedicated people have attempted to rise to the challenge made in 2010, but it does appear that in hindsight, as an idea which was over ambitious; putting people with limited experience in charge of such a massive task. Finally the costs have far outstripped expectations.

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