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Privatising public education across Europe – Shifting boundaries and the politics of (re)claiming schools

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The issue of privatisation is not new. It has been debated since the end of the 1970s following a major financial crisis and the subsequent ‘crisis’ of the public sector. The once celebrated welfare state that has been a core institution in many industrialised European countries has been under various forms of pressure: financial, social, managerial, but also of political legitimacy. Ideologically, the welfare state has been challenged by (neo)liberals who have seen it as not only financially unsustainable, but also antithetical to the goals of economic efficiency and the pursuit of personal liberties. Its operations have also been attacked by political pragmatists who have seen its cumbersome bureaucratic nature as increasingly problematic. The answer for this latter group was not (necessarily) privatisation but the increased diversity of providers (often all state providers) competing for resources in order to increase the state’s responsiveness and effectiveness.

This thematic issue deals with moves to privatise public education in four different countries – England, Italy, Spain and Sweden – where privatisation is examined as a ‘policy’, an ‘economic’ and a ‘governance’ response¹. Over the last few decades, all four countries have experienced ideological challenges and growing calls for cutbacks and reforms of their public services, which led to new “politics of retrenchment” after the 1980–1990s period (Pierson 1996). The national adaptations to privatising and market-driven dynamics reflect the different welfare-state regimes that the four countries represent – the liberal, the social-democratic and the sub-protective (Esping-Andersen 1996), but also their particular ideological and historical trajectories and ‘national’ ways of doing education politics.

The UK (and England in particular) represents one of the most radical swings to the political ‘right’ in the way power and to some extent resources were distributed during the 1990s, with a strong central state committed to reforming welfare despite the political costs attached to such a course of action. Sweden followed a very different trajectory, having built a strong Social Democratic polity where, despite the

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class conflicts, there has historically been a stronger and more “equitable distribution of wealth and a strong feeling of fellowship, which made it relatively easy to reach solutions to social problems that everybody could accept” (Sejersted 2011:502). But the fiscal crisis of the early 1990s heralded the beginnings of extensive reforms of the Swedish welfare state and the political challenge to the institutions of Social Democracy. Following Esping-Andersen’s (1996) descriptions of the ‘continental’ model of social welfare, Italy and Spain (post-Franco) had rigid welfare systems that relied on a statist model, assuming work for life, protection from (male) unemployment, and in terms of education having an elitist character with some degree of professional autonomy. Both countries followed a route of welfare retrenchment and reform after the economic crises of the 1990s, resulting in challenges to the traditional bureaucratically-based welfare state.

Privatisation seems to have been a popular reform in all four of the countries represented here. First, there was the privatisation of state industries in the post-1980 period and later the privatisation(s) of various aspects of welfare provision in the public sector, with education being directly affected. These moves involved the changing ownership of capital, assets and services (from public to private hands), but also the introduction of new interests and actors in the provision of public services, as well as a redefinition of what the state ‘does’ and how it governs.

What the four national cases illustrate in this issue is the need to explore the versions of education privatisation and of other types of public sector reform as rooted within the national (and local) contexts that have given rise and shape to very particular and specific relationships between the *state*, the *market* and *citizens*. Accordingly, the privatisation of school delivery in Sweden has very different characteristics, origins and outcomes than the privatisation of processes that may otherwise sound similar in Italy. The term “privatisation” does not necessarily describe the same process and certainly does not denote the historical origins or eventual outcome in the balance of powers between the *public* and the *private*. And, despite the Europe-wide nature of the phenomenon, and the international dimension to privatising education services through initiatives such as GATS², what we observe is still mostly ‘national’ in its manifestations. Yet, and most surprisingly, of the four countries considered in this issue, it is Sweden that is the closest to privatising education services that may go ‘international’ with the increasingly confident for-profit, free-schools sector.

Therefore, despite the common terminology used in this issue, as well in education policy writings in general, privatisation does not necessarily affect education in the same ways across different national systems. This thematic section illustrates some of the diversity of the characteristics of privatisation in different education settings, and provides insights into the processes of policy direction as well as the controversies such policies often produce.

Defining the terms and drawing the boundaries between public and private

All four contributions describe education reforms characterised by spending cuts, forms of deregulation, liberalisation and commercialisation, outsourcing and the introduction of new providers of school services (some for profit and others not). But, in addition, they describe the changing policy directions and discourses that encourage what Jones et al. call “pathways of influence that now lie open to educational capitalism” (2008:83). Different types and forms of privatisation have been described in the education policy literature, such as ‘endogenous’ (“the import of ideas, techniques and practices from the private sector”) and ‘exogenous’ privatisation (“the opening of public education services to private sector participation on for-profit basis”, see Ball and Youdell 2007), and some of these terms describe well the recent education reforms across Europe. However, reforms involving ‘deregulation’ and ‘liberalisation’ as well as the introduction of ‘quasi-markets’ do not by themselves describe privatisation. Competition between state schools for funding or positions in league tables, or parental competition for prestigious state school places in an increasingly diverse school market, may describe very different ways of managing the state school system (than the traditional bureaucratic model), but still do not constitute privatisation. Such arrangements usually draw on New Public Management that operates on the basis of targets and the measuring of performance against set standards, with schools ranked against each other on the basis of such performances. Target and inspection-driven management and new modified discourses on governance and networks thrive in quasi-market conditions, particularly in England and Sweden (Pollitt & Bourchaert 2011, Rönnberg 2011), and this is taking place both between private and between state providers. The argument here is to opt for a specific meaning of privatisation as the “transfer of ownership of assets and production of goods and services from the government to the private sector” (Starr 1989). The Swedish Free Schools are the clearest example here of this definition of privatisation. Having the capacity to generate profit for their owners/shareholders, Free Schools are indeed a form of quite aggressive privatisation policy where the state has significantly reduced its operational responsibilities in the provision of education. However, it still entails the privatisation of the “production” of services only (Lundqvist 2010), where the state funds schools, negotiates contracts with the private providers, inspects the services they provide, and enforces the legal frameworks that regulate schooling (including adherence to the national curriculum, admission policies etc.).

Other reforms, driven by neoliberal and managerial imperatives, certainly suggest a fundamental shift in thinking about the role of the state – from being a provider of services to becoming what Lundahl et al. call a “market maker” and regulator of these services. These reforms point to a very different form of the governance of

education which in some cases involves for-profit privatisations, whilst in others concerns different ways the state funds, distributes resources, regulates and organises education provision. As the authors in this issue present these changes, it becomes clear that we should think about them not simply as individual piecemeal policies but *as large packages of reform* that England, Italy, Spain and Sweden (and other countries) are pursuing with the explicit intention of changing the relations between the state, civil society and the market. When Olmedo and Cruz describe Spanish education as an “incomplete quasimarket” and the new forms of hybrid and reflexive forms of governance in place, this is no longer just a different set of mechanisms to organise schooling in more effective ways. Instead, it is a response to the perceived un-governability of education (and the public sector more generally), and what the authors, quoting Bonal, call a “political reaction” as opposed to “political action” to governing the public sector.

Similarly, the English case of Academies and Free Schools³ that will soon be exempt from the national agreements on pay and conditions for teachers, and the unavoidable flexibilisation (and further de-professionalisation) of the teaching force that will follow, highlight a second and related conclusion: The state is removing itself from labour claims and conflicts by diverting claims away from political leaders and delegating them to the institutional level (also see Jones et al. 2008; Starr 1989). All four countries examined in this issue provide examples of this changing relationship between the state and the teaching profession, that is being ‘disciplined’ through various forms of the privatisation of their employment conditions or contracts.

The lines between public and private are of course difficult to draw, hence the earlier suggestion to adopt a ‘strict’ definition of privatisation to imply the transfer of ownership from the government to private actors – which include both for-profit and non-profit actors. Even though philanthropic and other third-sector organisations may not necessarily offer schooling for profit, they certainly fall within that definition since they do constitute a private sector that pursues its own interests/agenda even when this does not mean material/monetary gain. Both the Italian and English analyses presented here provide good examples of third sector organisations that, through their powerful governing bodies, the discourses they use and the practices they promote, have begun to shape ideas around schooling that draw on neoliberal and utilitarian conceptualisations of education and education professionals. Philanthropic and religious organisations may be ‘private sector’, but they argue (ironically through aggressive marketing) that they act for the public interest through their particular ‘ethos’ and ‘mission’. As far back as the 1970s, Peter Berger and Richard Neuhaus published their influential book “To empower people: From state to civil society” (1977/1996) suggesting that governments ‘empower’ communities through the use of mediating structures that lie between the individual and society at large. They put forward an agenda for a greater reliance on voluntary institutions, self-help groups, the church and other formal and informal organisations for the provision of

social welfare. Similar ideas have mushroomed mainly in the USA since the 1980s and to some extent they have spread to Europe, with English policy makers adopting communitarian discourses and the use of ideas of collaboration and building social networks as solutions to problems of social cohesion and poverty. The examples here of third-sector education actors in the four national school systems offer an interesting conundrum of private organisations, arguing for their public mission, operating within the very public space of education but doing it through the use of private (business) models and working methods.

But, despite the proclamations of public ethos, the promotion of these philanthropic organisations seems to be characterised by two distinct silences: that of any form of political function for the ‘empowered’, and that of the state as an active agent in the process (other than as a facilitator/regulator). The de-politicisation of education is manifested in many ways, ranging from the changing employment status of teachers, the removal of local municipalities/authorities from older functions and responsibilities for organising schooling, the turning of students and their parents into consumers that are expected to make ‘informed’ choices, and many other instances where market relationships and contracts take over, partially or totally, bureaucratically- and professionally-based arrangements. Thus, the promoted model is one of the “polycentric state”, “networked” state as Junemann & Ball, Olmedo & Cruz describe, a system of localised governance (as opposed to democratically elected local government), managing complex sets of organisational networks drawn from both public and private sectors.

Re-claiming schools

Are these developments a ‘bad thing’? In a future whereby education is provided by a mix of private and public organisations, as current policy developments across Europe seem to be indicating, what are the parameters for this new order of things and what do they mean for the experience of schooling for students? This discussion opens up an interesting set of normative questions. Where should the boundaries lie between the public and the private in education? What are the principles and values that we need to establish as criteria for demarcating such boundaries, and what are the tasks we face in education research? Clearly there are no easy answers to these questions, but one of the things we can do as researchers is re-open the discussion on the privatisation of education and its effects. Inspired by the four contributions, we outline here a number of issues related to values and the reclaiming of schools.

First, as was pointed out earlier, different national and local contexts have mediated privatisation policies in education in quite diverse ways. Also, when looking at policy developments historically, we cannot but agree with Albert Hirschman’s description of the cycles of “shifting involvement” between “private interest” and “public action”, where societies oscillate “between periods of intense preoccupation with public issues and of almost total concentration on individual

improvement and private welfare goals” (1982:3). We are certainly moving further and further into a period of intensified privatisation of interests and the pursuit of self-interest, with neoliberally minded states being committed to encouraging this as a hegemonic social attribute (albeit tempered by discourses of ‘inclusion’ and ‘cohesion’). In all four national cases we observe wholesale packages of reforms towards privatisation, but with distinct differences in practices and outcomes in terms of shifts from civic concern to the pursuit of private interests.

The second point refers to the issue of separation between policy and administration and what this means for the many centres of power that seem to exist in education landscapes. The rise of neoliberal thinking within European states and the accompanying rise of managerial practices in the public sector have been seen as a decline in old-fashioned politics and a crisis in the legitimation of the post-war state. As the management of public sector services over the last 30 years becomes more and more business-like, and education institutions are becoming increasingly ‘free’ to operationalise central directions and to make decisions over budgets, their scope for becoming policy makers themselves is increasing. States would argue that they are still in control of the education policy-making process. But, as the papers here suggest, the ‘polycentric /network state’ has by intention and design dispersed decision making as well as responsibility sites. The delegation of significant operational issues to schools in combination with the pressures for them to become ‘successful’ and attract more pupils/customers means they have both the incentives and the freedom to define their institutional ‘identity’, ‘mission’, and policies. In doing so, through marketing and recruitment strategies, overt and covert selection processes, and through competing with each other for a niche in the market, they are redefining government policy in ways that suit their own purposes. These purposes are not necessarily in the service of a public ethos (thought of as the ‘common good’). Rewards in the market place are distributed on the basis of success as defined by either profit (in the case of Sweden), by examination results and positions in league tables (in the cases of England and Sweden), and reputation (in all four countries!).

The inability of any system to clearly separate administration from policy becomes more significant in systems where the boundaries between public and private institutions (and interests) are also blurred. The example provided by Junemann and Ball, whereby ARK has policy-making aspirations encouraged and supported by the government, is a case in point. The mediation and re-interpretation of policy at the institutional level allows for a wedge between administration and policy that leaves openings for private interests to dominate older forms of claims and concerns.

Coming back to the earlier question – is this a bad thing? For some, the answer would be negative. The arguments in support of such a mix between private and public provision of education would offer a good diversity of institutions, and the possibility for groups who oppose the dominant values of state schools to offer

alternatives to their children – with all the possibilities for empowerment but also the traps this may entail (see, for example, the Charter schools in the USA, Alternative schools in Canada, and for a discussion on the latter, Gulson & Webb 2013).

However, some research over the last 30 years across Europe points to the effects of the partial or full privatisation and marketisation⁴ of schools, and these make much more uncomfortable reading for the exponents of such policies. Findings from research in the four countries presented in this issue suggest an increase in geographic and social segregation of social groups from different socio-economic backgrounds as a result of parental choice and school competition, and an increase in social injustice in terms of the unequal distribution of education ‘rewards’ to different social groups (Ball 2008, Grimaldi 2012, Lundahl 2011, Olmedo 2013).

This should not come as a surprise. The incentives provided to institutions and individuals within a school environment organised on market principles and acting on behalf of private interests are to compete for position and for education rewards. In the case of students and parents (with very unequal financial and cultural capital), this would mean competition for credentials and access to prestigious higher education. In the case of schools, it would mean competition for profit (in some cases), further institutional autonomy, a stronger position in the market place, and a higher socio-economic group intake with everything this signifies for teaching, learning and prestige. Therefore, schools as policy makers and especially schools that operate within strong market parameters have an interest in interpreting official policy in ways that will consolidate their successful position or improve their less successful one.

But, of course, the reverse might be true. Instead of looking at the erosion of the public boundaries by marketisation and privatisation, we could explore the opposite possibility. In countries that have invited the private sector (for-profit, and ‘third sector’) to operate within public education spaces, do we observe an erosion of their private nature? Is it possible that private (even for-profit) schools which operate like the Swedish Free Schools are becoming less distinctly private and acquiring a more public ethos of education? This is certainly what some of the philanthropic institutions represented in this thematic issue are claiming. Even though this is less likely, we should not discount it as a possible future scenario, especially for a future where there is a reverse shift of interests back to a more public-minded ethos in education.

Finally, we need to discuss which functions are (and should be) essentially governmental, and why. In literatures in the fields of political science and social policy there are proponents of privatisation, as well as critics of it, and often these are underpinned by cost-benefit analysis, concerns about accountability and effectiveness, but also concerns about abuses of power by overly centralised and monopolistic ‘heavy’ states (Levy 2006, Pierson 1996, Shonfield 1965, Starr 1990). Education of course inhabits parts of civil society where these legitimate concerns do not cover all of its roles and functions. The very nature of education and educational institutions places it in an ideal place to contribute to the creation of a public sphere

characterised by the ethic of public concern, inclusion (even equality!) and democratic accountability. This is something very difficult, if not impossible, to achieve through the operation of a private sector that turns citizens into consumers, however efficient their operations may be. Drawing on Paul Starr (1989) here: “a vital civil society requires more than a rich variety of voluntary associations and independent centres of power. It also needs a rich sphere of public discussion that engages society’s diverse classes and groups”.

Of course, this still does not answer the question ‘how much government’, for ‘what kind of school’ and ‘for what kind of society’, and clearly there is no single answer. Different national and local histories and traditions of schooling, different ways of organising teaching labour and unions, as well as the nature of local ‘opposition’ to the project of privatisation (and marketisation) will produce distinct responses and possibilities across the four countries presented here, and across the rest of Europe.

Notes

- 1 The four contributions were part of a symposium with the title “The privatization in and of education in European countries: The cases of Italy, Spain, Sweden and England”, presented in the European Educational Research Association conference, Cadiz, 17–21 September 2012.
- 2 The General Agreement on Trades and Services was originally set up in 1995 by the World Trade Organisation. It provides the legal parameters for the provision of various public services (education included, unless it is provided “at non-market conditions”) by national and transnational companies, by limiting the national government restrictions on prohibiting such operations in order to remove “unnecessary barriers to trade” (http://www.wto.org/english/tratop_e/serv_e/gatsqa_e.htm).
- 3 Free Schools in England may have similarities with the Free (or Independent) Schools in Sweden, but there are fundamental differences too. The English Free Schools are (still) not-for-profit state schools, as opposed to the Swedish ones (that are private schools, can be for-profit, even though they do not have to be).
- 4 The term ‘marketization’ is used here as overlapping but separate to ‘privatization’. Rooted in neo-liberal public sector reforms, the market (or more accurately) the ‘quasi-market’ has been promoted as an efficient and effective mechanism for the distribution of resources to schools, albeit one that is strongly steered and controlled by the state. The principles of institutional and individual competition, choice and diversity of services, combined with central regulation through inspections, are at the core of this mechanism, with the states having removed ‘price’ from the model (the price is set by the state and does not feature in the toolkit that state-funded schools have available to them while competing). Marketisation of schools can include public and private actors, for-profit and not-for-profit actors, so in this sense it is distinct from privatization despite their often common ideological origins and similar practices.

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