

Theorising the democratic potential of privatised schools through the case of free schools

Ruth Boyask

Plymouth University

ABSTRACT

Principles of freedom, independence and differentiation are shaping a new education landscape that includes new schools like free, charter and academy schools. Paradoxically, the reforms are justified on the basis of a rights and equalities discourse, yet they lead to greater competition through increased involvement of private interests. Critics of privatised schooling highlight its effects upon social inequalities. Looking to schooling in the fee-paying private sector reveals that there are a few schools whose strong ideological drivers resist competitive social relations. The ideas of Durkheim and Dewey on developing individuality in relation to a social good suggest it is theoretically possible that some of the new state-funded schools will also operate from their own social values to further social equity and make contributions to a more just society. This paper explores such a possibility by comparing newly established free schools in England with existing cases of democratic schooling to theorise how in a deregulated market a school might act upon the social field of schooling to promote social responsibility and minimise commitments to economic drivers, showing also the challenges a school might face in so doing.

The *paideia*¹ in the contemporary Western world is founded upon principles of freedom, independence and differentiation. Recent programmes of educational policy reform have been based upon these principles, including the development and enhancement of diversity in school type. Within the United States and more recently New Zealand such reforms are typified in the development of publicly funded charter schools, Australia has seen the government provide establishment grants to non-state schools, and in England there has been the development and expansion of free and academy schooling in the state sector. All of these policies demonstrate a change in the way the nation state exerts control over schooling. Such policy reforms have attracted concern regarding inherent contradictions (e.g. Lubienski, 2003; Cranston, 2010; Ball 2010). The policies tend to be justified in terms of ideas of personal liberty, associated with rights and equality discourses, yet, paradoxically they are realised through the cultivation and protection of private interests through mechanisms of centralised state governance. In England the free schools policy has also proved attractive to some who wish to pursue a social justice agenda through its framework.

In this paper I consider the possibilities for democratic education in relation to the twenty-four free schools that opened in England in 2011. Early media criticisms of the schools have tended to focus on effects of the policy as a whole and its inaccessibility to, or exploitation of, the most disadvantaged groups within society (e.g. Shepherd, 2011). However, there is an ideological

heterogeneity within new free schools that theoretically provides scope for interrupting the inevitability of such outcomes. The paper considers whether current policy on diverse approaches to schooling might be co-opted by a democratic agenda, making real the government rhetoric of freedom and contributing to a stable, just society. This is unlikely given the history of school diversity and its usual association with free market competition and social stratification, and therefore this paper is not intended to support such reforms in an unquestioning manner. Within schooling, social equity competes with individualism in a predominantly conservative system (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990), largely resulting in compromise (see Boyask et al, 2008).

While the reproductive function of schooling ensures the perpetuation of social inequalities and segregation, there is another other side to the compromise. Individuality is not necessarily antithetical to a social good (Durkheim, 1984); and furthermore, individualism may be transformed through its relationship with social equity to become cooperative individualism, where personal liberty contributes to a social good (Dewey, 1916). There exists already within the schooling field examples of schools whose practices have supported and sustained a habitus of both individuality *and* social equity, most typically in the democratic schools movement. Might the free schools policy create some spaces for furthering aims compatible with such schools and disperse their impact throughout a wider population? This possibility is explored through comparing the newly established free schools with examples of existing and historical schools with an explicitly democratic agenda. The paper uses an extended case methodology, to relate investigation within specific sites to wider social theory and practice.

School diversity and social equity in the field of schooling

In 2001 the Department for Education and Employment published the Green Paper *Schools Building on Success: raising standards, promoting diversity, achieving results* making clear their intention to extend diversity in school type and increase autonomy for successful schools. Their proposals included "... significantly expanding the specialist schools programme, welcoming more faith-based schools, continuing to establish City Academies, and changing the law to allow external sponsors to take responsibility for underperforming schools ..." (DfEE, 2001: 7). The remaining years of the Labour government saw the instantiation of these proposals, with 88% of secondary schools identified as having specialist status by April 2010 (DCSF, N.D.), the three academies open in 2002 increasing in number with a target of 400 or 10% of all state-funded secondary schools in England in the future (Curtis et al, 2008), more variety in the religious beliefs represented in faith schooling (Parker-Jenkins, Hartas & Irving, 2005), and increased heterogeneity in school governance (Ball & Junemann, 2011). Shortly after the change from a Labour government to a new Conservative Liberal Democrat coalition in May 2010 it became apparent that policies in school diversity, unlike other Labour government initiatives in education, would be strengthened and not abandoned. On 26 May, 2010, Michael Gove, Secretary of State for Education, invited all primary, secondary and special schools to apply for academy status. "... offering them greater independence and freedom" (DfE, 2010a). The coalition agreement also created a space for the development of new schools, to be established in response to parental and community demand (HM Government, 2010). A rebranded Department for Education has since been engaged in the promotion and development of "free schools", based upon the Swedish model of schools which sit outside of many aspects of mainstream schooling, yet in most cases receive public funding (Bunar, 2008). According to the Department for Education free schools in England "... are all-ability state-funded schools set up in response to what local people say they want and need in order to improve education for children in their community" (DfE, 2013). English free schools have "the ability to set their own pay and conditions for staff; greater control of their budget; freedom from following the National Curriculum; freedom to change the length of terms and school days; and, freedom from local authority control" (DfE, 2010b). In 2011, twenty-four free schools opened in England, with another seventy-seven opening since 2011.

Arguments in support of school diversity often point to a relationship between diversity and improvement, and that different models of schooling will better meet individual needs thereby contributing to an overall social good. However, studies on the practices that have emerged from educational policy that supports school diversity show this relationship is contested and problematic (Bunar, 2008; West & Currie, 2008). Bunar (2008) claims that prior to Swedish reforms in the 1980s the original state-funded free schools were tolerated by the socially democratic state as sites of pedagogical experimentation, the results of which could be fed back into mainstream schooling. However, free schools proliferated as the result of compromise between a dominant socially democratic ideology and the neoliberalism and multi-culturalism promulgated through economic and cultural globalisation. Consequently the symbolic association between free schools and pedagogic innovation changed, and as they increased in number free schools became the focus for complaints about increased social segregation. Swedish free schools tend to attract a more homogeneous population (Allen, 2010), as parents who are imbued with the cultural capital of schooling make fine-grained distinctions when choosing between schools, perpetuating their social advantage (see the work of Reay, 2004). Even though proponents of free schools come from different ideological positions, because they tap into the powerful discourse of choice, free schools contribute to the marketisation of education and have a natural alliance with new right ideologies. This alliance is cemented through the compromises demanded by state funding. "The social function of state schools is predominantly conservative, a compromise that works best for most of the people" (Boyask et al. 2008: 32) so that schools attempting to do things differently often take instrumental approaches because they appear efficient and are easy to implement (Boyask et al. 2008; Quinlivan, Boyask & Carswell, 2008). In Swedish free schools, Bunar (2008) notes that since they are no longer valued specifically for pedagogical innovation and now share few characteristics beyond their economic functioning, there is no proof that they are innately a better form of schooling and there is clear evidence they contribute to social segregation. Similar trends evident within England's academies programme should be a warning for those currently developing policy and practice for free schools (see Curtis et al., 2008, on the academies programme).

West and Currie (2008), writing on school diversity and social justice find that forms of schooling in England that, historically, have sat outside of mainstream comprehensive education (i.e. private schools, grammar schools and religious schools) are undoubtedly contributing to social segregation and stratification. In recent years these schools have admitted very few children who come from disadvantaged backgrounds, thereby denying them the opportunities provided by such forms of education. They conclude that large scale legislative intervention to promote social justice within the school marketplace has had little effect to date, and propose introducing "softer measures" such as "... the government incentivising state-funded schools ... to admit a more diverse range of pupils", and making charitable status dependent upon the requirement that private schools "... demonstrate clearly and unequivocally that they are admitting children from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds" (248). The implication is that in order for school diversity to support social equity there should be much closer attention paid within state policy and legislative reform to the micro-level practices within schools.

While the demands of the market, and its regulation by the state, places external pressures upon schools, there exists within the schooling system examples of schools whose internal practices are already informed by markedly different ideological positions. The types of schools identified by Bunar (2008) as the original Swedish free schools (i.e. Waldorf, Montessori and Reggio Emilia) also operate within the English education system, although until recently they have been independent of state funding (e.g. Michael Hall School and Lewes New School in Sussex, and The Meadows Montessori School in Suffolk). There are also a few schools that identify with other philosophies from outside mainstream education, such as the democratic school Summerhill in Suffolk, the Maharishi

School in Lancashire² with its philosophy of consciousness-based education and Brockwood Park School in Hampshire following the teaching of Krishnamurti. What distinguishes these schools is not just their independence, but that they differ from mainstream schooling through approaching pedagogy, curriculum and assessment from their own set of coherent, foundational beliefs. Is there still potential for such schools to make contributions to a socially just society even though each of them operates within the private educational market and is shaped unquestionably by this macro-location, particularly with regard to their intake? This potential is dependent upon the extent to which their internal practices can support foundational beliefs that are committed to a social good and subvert the inequities transmitted through external ideologies and practices that are aligned closely with individual interests. In other words, it is theoretically possible that if permitted to operate from their own social values some free schools may exercise agency and further social equity, with the school acting as a microcosm to affect the members of its community. The possibility that they may exert agency in relation to their external and macro-level relationships should not be discounted either. To ignore this possibility is to undermine a generative and agentic aspect to social practice, which is not static and can intervene in social structure. In the following sections of this paper these theoretical possibilities are examined within the context of the new free schools, and a comparison is made between the new schools and case studies of several schools that exemplify an explicit commitment to democratic education.

Exercising agency within the free schools policy

In September 2011 twenty-four new English free schools opened their doors to pupils. Each of these schools are shaped through engagement with the free schools policy, with proposers entering into a complex process with a very short time frame to develop and submit applications for assessment against the government's criteria. Statements from Michael Gove suggest the central aims of the policy are improving parents' choices of schooling and raising educational standards of achievement for all young people. I have made an initial investigation of the schools, collating data about each of them gathered from publicly available information such as their websites and prospectuses, briefing material from the Department for Education, the Department for Education's schools database Edubase and news reports to investigate how these aims are being realised. While this material is limited, and the schools warrant further investigation into their intentions, practices and outcomes, it does provide a preliminary illustration of a very new field of schooling. This information was collated under the following three headings: ethos and aims of the school; community involvement (including sponsor and/or partner); and new or established school (and if the latter, including its former funding mechanism).

The latter of the governments' aims is clear within the documentary evidence on the ethos of each school. There are frequent references to promoting high achievement and educational success. Children and young people are entreated to fulfil their potential through the education provided by the school. There is some variation in the nature of parental involvement in the schools since some are parent-led initiatives and others are not; however, references to engaging parents and community are common amongst all of the schools. In light of the prevalence of similar rhetoric in contemporary education discourse, including other schools' publicity materials, it was unsurprising to find these aims expressed in the schools' documentation. In this respect the schools reproduce existing models of schooling.

Through socialisation and education processes individuals acquire their habitus that acts as a "practice-generating grammar" to reproduce existing social structures (see Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990), including social institutions, and explaining the tendency to conservatism in schooling. Similarly, structuration theory accounts for patterns in human action through defining the relationship between the individual and social structure (Giddens, 2004). There is a tendency in using or criticising structuration theories to emphasise the structural, and regard them as limiting the extent of human agency (e.g. Harker et al., 1990). However, this may undermine the relational

aspects of such work. The dialectic between structure and agency is one that enables transformation as well as conservation. While the policy acts to structure the schools, tapping into societal discourses such as privatisation and 'religionisation', there are considerable differences between the schools. For example, in relation to religion the policy requires that all the schools must welcome pupils of all faiths and teach religious education in accordance with statutory guidance (i.e. a locally determined syllabus where Christian values take precedence) unless the schools apply for designation as a religious character school. Six schools have the special designation and are aligned with a faith community, either specific (e.g. Orthodox Judaism, Church of England), or general (e.g. Judaism, Christian, Hindu and Sikh); another four schools identify a "faith ethos" but have no designation; and five of the ten explicitly draw upon their own faith values to express support for religious diversity. Their origins are also diverse. Five of the schools were previously private, fee-paying schools and one of these schools was a private school that has run on donations since 1996 when the state withdrew funding for their community primary school. Important to this research is that the school diversity in evidence shows some marked differences in how each school negotiates or positions itself in relation to the government policy, even while they all adhere to free school guidelines. Their points of difference are expressions of their agency that modifies and changes the structure implicit within the free schools policy. However, it is important to consider whether this agency changes the nature of social relations at a macro-level or is solely directed towards changing the social positioning of individuals.

Bourdieu's notion of agency allows individuals within schools to utilise means of representation such as language and pedagogy to change the relations between themselves and others, and therefore act upon the whole social field of schooling. However, their agency is restrained by their position within the field, how they are positioned in relation to others and the capital they can access within those relations. For example, schools that sit within the private sector bring high social capital to the field of schooling through their classed location and thus tend to reproduce their position and the position of their pupils. In Bourdieu's hands agency allows for changing position within the social field, but maintaining a position of domination and consequently enacting oppression upon others.

Social reproduction theory therefore highlights problems in the government's support and development of free schools. It is and should be a significant concern that the success stories among free schools may be largely captured by middle class parents and used to reproduce class structures by furthering the interests of their children. This is already a concern with reports suggesting that the catchment areas of the new free schools show higher than average social advantage (Shepherd, 2011). While this is a legitimate concern, the analysis of documentation from the schools reveals that the ethos and social organisation of the schools is informed by a range of ideological positions. The underlying aims of choice and achievement are modified through the language and proposed practices of the schools. For example, while two primary schools managed by ARK educational trust relate their aim to raise achievement to self-maximisation and personal success (e.g. "I will stay focused on achieving success"), Priors Free School in Warwickshire wishes to develop "caring individuals" and "maximise links with the community". Building upon the potential of agentic action within structuration theories even while acknowledging constraint, might not such different social relationships, supported by different social practices, contribute to qualitative differences in social structures?

Durkheim proffers two models of social complexity and differentiation, mechanical and organic solidarity, and Bernstein (1975) extends these models into "open" and "closed" schooling (see also Atkinson, 1985). While each of these models structures the positioning and relations between individuals, there is a qualitative difference in their effects. A mechanical society holds together through strong commonality amongst its citizenry, whereas a society that exhibits organic solidarity is "... only possible if each one of us has a sphere of action that is peculiarly our own ..." (Durkheim, 1984: 85). The open school does not function in an orderly fashion in spite of differences between individuals, but because individuality and specialisation is essential to the functioning of the school.

An open school coalesces through co-operative individualism. This implies that individualism is not necessarily the cause of social fragmentation, at least within the internal regimes of schools. But it should also not be discounted that co-operative values may be transmitted from schools.

While discourses of individualism obscure the fact, the learners within schools do not exist as individual entities, and nor do schools. John Dewey (1907) on the relations between school and society suggested we should resist reading schools as individual entities, and recognise their interconnectedness with society. Values are transmitted to schools from the world external to them, as well as schools transmitting values through the citizenry they produce to the world beyond. Krishna-Avanti Primary School in Leicester has six ideals of “Academic Achievement; Character Formation; Healthy Mind and Body; Wholesome Sense of Identity; Social and Community Cohesion; Environmental Responsibility” that are drawn from Hindu Vedic philosophy. The values of this free school extend beyond its boundaries because they are formulated in reference to the values of the Hindu community.

Dewey’s position on education is explicitly socially democratic and intended to further social equity. Prevalent conservative and neoliberal discourses within the free schools and other recent education policy is essentially ideologically incompatible with his position; however, the weakening of the classification of schooling that occurs through privatisation has permitted some space for diversity in school ethos and ideological driver, at least in their establishment. It remains to be seen how successfully the new schools retain their own ethos, or whether those that differ from the dominant ideologies of schooling are normalised.

The following section of this paper considers the possibilities for schools that aim to support mutuality and equity through the free schools policy in the light of historical and existing examples of schooling. While the aim of furthering social equity is expressed in general terms throughout many forms of schooling, it is typical within the democratic schools movement. The individual within democratic schooling is valued for his or her individuality and contribution to an overall social whole, as in the case of Durkheim’s organic solidarity and a Deweyan notion of co-operative individuality. Within two contexts of democratic schooling, state and privately funded, schools negotiate a compromise between their own democratic and agentic ideological drivers, and the structuring, contradictory effects of state education policy. Schools from both these contexts provide useful lessons for those entering the terrain of free school policy, given that the free schools sit in an ambiguous position with regard to their funding status, i.e. their budgets are neither maintained by local government, as has traditionally been the case for state-funded schools, nor are they economically independent of central government.

Democratic Schooling

While democratic values in education are expressed through many types of schooling, the democratic school can be distinguished through its commitment to democracy within its acts of governance and positioning of pupils in relation to administration and decision-making (Beane & Apple, 1999). Established forms of governance within most mainstream schools exert a coercive force upon pupils either within an explicit hierarchy of command or through the manufacture of consent in apparently participatory processes. However, within a democratic school pupils have the right to participate in decision-making. How their right is manifest through school practices varies in response to the external locus of the school (in respect of its situation in educational policy for example) and its own internal character that is developed through the beliefs and commitments of its constituents. It is how a school negotiates its relationship with state policy that is of particular interest when considering the possibilities of the free school policy. Many teachers and school leaders individually express emancipatory beliefs and commitment to democratic values; however, external accountabilities including both national policy and funding have a profound impact upon the extent to which these are enacted through practices of schooling (see Boyask, et al, 2008). While

mainstream schooling is more closely framed by the state, the privatisation agenda within state-funded education has brought the public and private into closer alignment.

Democratic Schools in the Mainstream

Schools that place democracy at the centre of their practice have existed within mainstream state-funded schooling, yet these are more usual in periods when progressive and democratic ideals permeate society more generally (Boyask, 2005, 2006). For example, progressive education in New Zealand was prevalent in the third quarter of the twentieth century at the time when new social movements were reshaping all aspects of social life. This resulted in a large number of progressive experiments in mainstream schools, and a smaller number of explicitly democratic schools in the mainstream sector. For example, in 1953 Oruaiti School, a rural primary school in Northland with an explicitly participatory and child-led agenda was granted experimental school status by the then Director General of Education, C.E. Beeby, in recognition that its practice aligned with the intentions of the New Zealand Labour government's educational reforms (Boyask et al, 2008). Similarly in England, the comprehensive schools movement of the 1960s and 70s brought a policy change that was permeated with progressive and democratic ideals. These ideals were extended within some specific schools, as in the case of Countesthorpe College, Leicestershire, which opened in 1970. Countesthorpe enacted its democratic values and the right of participation through extending the role of governance to its teachers and actively seeking to minimise the hierarchy between pupil and teacher within their learning relationships of an order that was to "... encourage the sense of responsibility and autonomy of the student – his [sic] growing ability to take control of his own learning" (Simon, 1977: 23). In their recent book promoting a radical, democratic alternative to current mainstream schooling, Fielding and Moss (2011) draw upon the case of another mid-twentieth-century secondary school. St-George-in-the-East, a secondary modern school in the East End of London, took the participation of pupils even further through committee and school council processes, to directly include them in school governance with "... responsibility for running various aspects of school life ..." (Fielding & Moss, 2011: 13). Fielding and Moss suggest that these practices were not the tokenistic pupil involvement frequently seen in contemporary, state-funded schools. However, most progressive schools in the mainstream are short-lived, in the case of St-George-in-the-East not lasting much beyond a single decade. As social conditions became less favourable for progressives, with changes of government and global economic agendas permeating national policies, progressive schools were closed down or democratic practices (like school councils) became co-opted into mainstream schooling and diluted (see Boyask et al., 2008). The main function of mass schooling is not to innovate or reconstruct society, but to reproduce society and maintain social cohesion (Fitz, Davies & Evans, 2005). Thus, even radical educational reforms based upon technological or economic rationales have tended to be supplanted by conservative and instrumental practices within the mainstream (Boyask et al, 2008). However, the continual re-emergence in education of progressive ideals and practices casts doubt on a singular, reproductive outcome for schooling.

Democratic Schools in the Private Sector

Within the private sector some democratic schools have endured throughout the unfavourable, economically focused times of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. The private school Summerhill was founded in 1924 yet still continues its education based upon a set of democratic values and practices that have remained relatively consistent (Gribble, 1998). It has faced considerable difficulty to get these values and practices recognised within the current cultural climate; most notably in recent times was a high profile legal dispute where the school contested and won against then Secretary of Education David Blunkett's decision to close down the school in response to a scathing Ofsted inspection report of 1999 that claimed Summerhill mistook idleness for personal freedom (Shepherd, 2007). The dispute was resolved in Summerhill's favour:

The Respondent acknowledged that the evidence produced by the Appellant in the course of this appeal, including evidence supportive of Summerhill by the ex-pupils, parents and independent evaluation of experts demonstrates that there does not now exist a factual situation, which would entitle the Respondent to serve a Notice of Complaint (statement from The Independent School's Tribunal, *Zoë Readhead v Secretary of State for Education*, 20-23 March 2000, Court 40, Royal Courts of Justice, London).

Since that victory and its associated swell of public support Ofsted has returned to the school and made more favourable responses to the school's distinctive character.

The struggle between Summerhill and Ofsted is a manifestation of the relationship between the structuring of the state and the school's own agency to structure its own practices. It demonstrates how structure and agency sit in relation to one another within the compromise of schooling, and how Summerhill's situation within the private schools' sector has allowed this compromise to be made in its particular configuration. In a statement released publicly, and disseminated through the British Educational Research Association, the school's nominated 'expert' Ian Stronach (2011) suggested that "... a 'failing' OfSTED has finally acknowledged the virtues of the school, including uncoerced learning, democratic governance led by the pupils, and freedom in relation to learning and assessment". While Summerhill is now sanctioned by Ofsted, the terms of reference for its sanction are limited to how it fulfils its duties for social care under the *Care Standards Act 2000* (UK) and *Children's Act 2004* (UK). It is not considered in relation to the *Education Act 2005* (UK), which is the usual legislative framework for assessing the quality of schooling. Clearly, it would be untenable for a significant number of schools to operate outside of the *Education Act 2005* (UK), and in light of its tenuous relationships with the usual legislative frameworks for education Summerhill may be seen as an irrelevant anomaly in wider conceptualisations of schooling. However, unlike state-funded democratic schools Summerhill has survived, and a handful of other democratic schools in the private sector also endure, although based upon qualitatively different relationships with state governance than Summerhill.

Recently I have been working with a fee-paying democratic secondary school in England that is assessed by Ofsted within the remit of the *Education Act 2005* (UK). The school community has chosen a position for itself that is marginal within the social field of schooling given its unusual character, independence and espoused commitment to democratic education, yet is more closely allied with state governance than Summerhill. It has chosen to place greater emphasis on pupils attaining school qualifications than has Summerhill, an emphasis which may explain why the school was described to me by one of its pupils as "to the right" of other democratic schools.

The work we did together was an evaluation of some innovations in curriculum, focused upon a short "experiment" of four weeks where the timetable was abandoned and reverted to an open schedule timetable, based around authentic, pupil-directed tasks. The main data collection was through video recording undertaken by student and teacher researchers, but was supplemented through field notes during class and school meetings, a database of documents about the school, recorded conversations with teachers, pupils and student/teacher researchers collected by two university researchers (Boyask, 2012). While the main findings of this research are outside of the scope of this paper, my involvement in the school and the supplementary data has given me some insight into the way the school represents itself and to a lesser extent, how it expresses its commitment to democratic schooling through its work.

Sands is a small privately funded secondary school in a Devon market town that in 2009 had a roll of 68 pupils. Of the 68 pupils, two had statements of special educational needs. There were 40 girls and 28 boys. Most places are privately funded, and a small number funded by a charitable trust or by local authorities. It expresses its philosophy on its website:

We believe that everyone should be treated equally, be happy, and have access to good education. At Sands, no-one has more power than anyone else, the teachers and students are equal, and there is no headteacher. We try to get rid of all the petty rules, making room for everyone to be happy

and free to express themselves in whatever way they feel. The school is democratic, with everyone having their say and equal vote in the weekly school meeting to which everyone may attend (and most do!) (Sands, 2010).

A recent Ofsted inspection at Sands School reported that it provides an education that is good to outstanding, with particular recognition for outstanding provision in the spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of its pupils. While the school is interested in Deweyan ideas about developing curriculum around authentic, situated tasks, and this is what brought us together, its location within the national schooling system has resulted in some compromises. The school adheres to national curriculum and assessment, constructing a timetable that is based generally around traditional school subjects and divided up into discrete blocks of time, allowing pupils to prepare for and sit GCSE qualifications.³ How they approach curriculum does vary somewhat from conventional schools, making curricula decisions that emphasise social responsibility. For example, in history the school offers "... a fascinating syllabus up to GCSE that includes the Arab-Israeli Conflict, the study of a local historical site, the fate of the Native American Indians in the 19th century and the history and evolution of medicine from prehistoric to the modern era ... Kings and Queens do not feature in this Syllabus!" (Sands, 2010). However, it is the pedagogy and administration of the school that is markedly different from contemporary mainstream schooling. To a much greater extent than conventional schools its pupils are involved in decision-making associated with their own learning and with the operation of the school. This is enacted through interpersonal relationships; for example, through a reduction of hierarchy between pupil and teacher like the mainstream state-funded experiments in progressive schooling of the mid-twentieth century. It is also a feature of school governance and administration.

Pupils contribute to school decision-making by way of a weekly school meeting where both students and teachers participate in decision-making. Field notes from the meetings attended by one of the university researchers suggested that equality between teachers and pupils in decision-making was more than rhetoric on the school's website. These meetings provide an opportunity for pupils and teachers to discuss pedagogy, curriculum and learning, and negotiate changes to policy and practice. For example, the curriculum project in our study was discussed regularly in school meetings. In this forum pupils felt able to put forward their views of the project, such as Rosemary⁴ who enjoyed the spontaneity of an open-schedule timetable that changed every day or Jacob who found it difficult and limiting. Jacob "preferred the old timetable", because "you could look at it and see that's what you've got," and he "didn't like running around trying to organise it" (field notes, 6 June 2010).

One of the major tensions that emerged for the project related to the conflict pupils felt between the project-based curriculum and the subject-based curriculum for external qualifications. We noted in meetings that some pupils expressed concern that the curriculum project conflicted with their need to prepare for GCSE. We discussed this with a teacher at the school, Daniel, who was leading the initiative:

Daniel: a majority of the school thought it looked interesting and exciting and that it would give them the opportunity to do things that they might not otherwise have the opportunity to do ... there were a lot of concerns ... mostly about the disruption to what they saw as their academic learning.

Researcher: And that was mostly from the older children who were coming up to GCSE's?

Daniel: ... yeah it was certainly mostly verbalised by the older children, and it seemed before we started the project, it certainly seemed to be the case that the older children were more concerned than the younger ones. I have to say though two weeks into the project ... more of the younger ones are more concerned about it (Interview with Daniel, 16 June 2010).

Discussion in the school meeting resulted in recognition of the concern and the negotiation of a compromise so that the open schedule curriculum included scheduled time and teaching for GCSE

students. While the pupils' agency in this example was pulling the school towards a more central position in the wider schooling field, it does show how pupils participate in structuring practices at the school.

Pupils' agency also extends to their active involvement in decisions usually undertaken by school governors such as staff appointments and facilities management, giving authenticity to their role in decision-making. The engagement of pupils' in decision-making is integrally connected with the schools' espoused values, and is most certainly not the surface compliance witnessed by Rudduck and Fielding (2006) in many schools' enactment of student voice and participation policies.

At work in the school is interplay between the individual and the social that exhibits properties of both mechanical and organic solidarity, resulting in an individuality that does not develop at the expense of collective interest. Individual interest is expressed through participation in the social activity of the school meeting and is integrative to the social good; i.e. individual voices are recognised and incorporated into the working of the school, even while collective values of democracy are promulgated through the participatory process. This is not an ideal process because while there are some social differences between pupils admittedly the school roll is a relatively (although not entirely) homogenous group, thus co-operation could be regarded as easier than in an environment of greater differentiation. While the fees are kept to a minimum and are well below the national average for private school fees (Ryan & Sibieta, 2010), the advantages of this school are generally limited to pupils who can afford to attend. This means that Sands pupils are generally from a socio-economic situation of advantage, a point especially important when considering that the major critiques of school diversity focus upon class inequality in the United Kingdom. It is on this ground that a free school, funded by the state, may have an advantage over a fee-paying private school. It is interesting to note that of the new free schools five have changed from private fee-paying schools, citing equality of opportunity as a major motivation. For example, Moorlands Free School in Luton aims to "... allow our high standard of education within small classes to be accessed by a wider range of families within the community" (Moorlands School, n.d.).

Sands School's external relationships are played out through its internal practices. The school's decision to support pupils' acquisition of national qualifications has a profound impact upon the nature of the education offered, and what is permissible in a co-operative environment when innovations are introduced. That is, while the teachers had intended to run an open schedule timetable based upon pupil interest, it became apparent through the meeting that some pupil interests were centred upon GCSE preparation. From a Bourdieuan perspective, the compromise negotiated shows that even while enacting democracy as an individual and social right, neither teachers nor pupils are released from their position in the social field of schooling and their need to accrue capital to maintain or enhance that position. However, with their situation in the private sector comes more freedom to alter practice than is allowable in a much larger, mainstream, state-funded secondary school. So, when Daniel wanted to collapse the existing timetable to promote more active learning and discussed it with Patrick, his colleague, Patrick's first thought was to support the new initiative:

Patrick: Someone comes up [with an idea] and I think okay, let's go along with that and see how far we can go. We talked and I thought there is plenty of mileage in this – it's an idea for all sorts of reasons (Interview with Patrick, 11 June 2010)

The school website proclaims that many of the "... things that we do naturally have been introduced by successive governments as prerequisites of good education" (Sands, 2010). This includes allowing children to work at their own pace, including practical life skills in the curriculum, recognising the physical and emotional aspects of learning, encouraging children to lead their own learning and a radical form of citizenship education. While these innovations are not necessarily unique to the school or sector, from a Deweyan perspective it is interesting to note that the school claims these practices have developed "naturally", perhaps consolidating and deepening them so that they are integrally rather than superficially enacted. Practices learned thus are more likely to

have a profound effect upon the pupils' learning, and become embedded within the practices of their daily lives beyond the school walls.

The investigation of both Summerhill and Sands suggests that overall weakening the schools' bonds to a central authority through privatisation has permitted a closer interrelationship between the schools' individual ethos and its practices. While both schools are shaped through their external relationships, some suggest that Summerhill has had a small but notable influence upon practices of state governance, in particular Ofsted. Alternatively Sands has managed its relationship with Ofsted through offering an apparently more conventional curriculum. Yet it could be argued that the more profound and long-lasting curriculum at Sands is its participatory form of governance. This is what attracts visitors to the school to study its practice and ties the school to others through the International Democratic Education Network.⁵ Exploring how the school's practice manifests in the lives of its former pupils would make valuable further research, providing insight on what kinds of effects an individual school might have on social structure.

While the policy does not exclude the possibility, none of the new free schools have an explicitly democratic agenda, other than some general aims relating to community involvement. The more important lesson from democratic schools within the private sector is that while it is possible to operate from a school's own ideological driver, very few similar schools currently exist. This is the case even though there have been periods in the history of English schooling when progressive education ideologies have been very influential with numerous democratic schools. Processes of normalisation within schooling are very strong and a free school that differs markedly from the social norm will require great internal strength and stakeholder support to maintain its own identity.

Conclusions

Situated within a national system of schooling, schools are inevitably caught in a compromise between their own particular philosophical drivers and heterogeneous discourses and practices of state policy. Theories of structuration explain this compromise as one where agency is limited by social structure, yet these theories are also quite explicit in their claim that structure is altered through its relationship with agency. Using a lens of social reproduction theory upon recent free school policy suggests that the schools will have practices and outcomes that are underpinned by social relations of domination and oppression. There is also ample empirical evidence to suggest that policies on school diversity tend to fragment and segregate populations within society, with socially advantaged families furthering their advantage through state-funded "experiments" in schooling. However, some suggest that paying closer attention to the micro-level practices within schools may mitigate some effects of social stratification. Taking this proposition seriously requires stepping aside from a social reproduction lens, and looking carefully at the other side of the compromise for evidence of agentic relationships of mutuality within alternative conceptualisations of schooling.

Durkheim's work on divisions within society suggests that a highly complex society coalesces not in spite of individuality but because it has a need for a high degree of specialisation. However, the weaker social bonds of an organic or open society make the transmission of consensual values regarding justice and fairness more difficult. Dewey's work on the relations between school and society suggests that school practices do not necessarily need to position students as either highly differentiated or sharing common values, but may start with the highly motivating force of personalisation and foster commitment to social ideals. There exist within our schooling system examples of schools that function with a high degree of individuation and strong consensus regarding conduct and social responsibility. Such schools tend to develop practices in relation to a clearly articulated ideological position, using their ideology to negotiate between different positions. When considering how schooling in a policy context that favours deregulation might

further social equity, it is therefore useful to investigate schools like the democratic schools that have a strong ideological alignment with issues of social justice.

Alongside policy reform there is also renewed discourse about democratic education within mainstream schooling (e.g. Fielding & Moss, 2011); however, it should also be recognised that mainstream state-funded schooling is always subject to the dominant political ideologies of the day. Progressive schools have endured in the private sector even when progressive schools in the maintained sector have collapsed in the face of governmental change. While schools that express key commitment to democracy or social equity are marginal within the overall private sector, they do exist and provide opportunities to examine how democratic conceptualisations of schooling manifest within a policy framework that the government claims will be similar for free schools. Further research could enhance our understanding of the effects of these schools within the wider schooling field.

While it is possible to speculate on the effects of the free schools policy through analysis of existing school diversity within the Swedish system, and both the mainstream and private sectors in England, we are yet to see what English free schools will actually contribute to the field of schooling. Concerns that the policy as a whole may lead to greater social segregation and inequity should be taken seriously. Evidence from Sweden is that their recent free schools are increasingly driven by economic rationales rather than the coherent educational philosophies of the first Swedish free schools, and there is nothing to suggest as the school numbers increase that it will be otherwise in England. The social effects of free schools at a macro-level must be monitored as free school policy is implemented in England. However, free schools should not be viewed monolithically or as necessarily sharing common values. Throughout implementation attention should also be paid to the nature and quality of different schools and their micro-level practices.

The permissive policy framework of the free schools is not an ideal means to address social inequality. The government's support for free schools is indicative of a wider social agenda of deregulation and privatisation; educators committed to a more inclusive and cohesive social agenda are faced with either opting out of the policy or learning to negotiate between their own commitments and a social agenda where economic values predominate, making use of the weakened classification of schooling afforded through privatisation. This situation is likely to come with some costs, as evident through the examples of democratic schooling in the private fee-paying sector that have used their autonomy to further social interests and minimise their accountability to economic drivers. The make-up, outcomes and processes of governance, curriculum and pedagogy of these private schools, as examined in this research, provide valuable insight for those attempting to negotiate the new territories within state-funded policy.

Notes

1. *paideia*, Greek: education, learning.
2. The Maharishi School was a private fee-paying school that during the writing of this paper has converted to a state-funded free school.
3. While curriculum at Sands School is structured around GCSE curriculum, GCSE attainment is variable. Performance in 2010 was well above the national average, whereas 2011 and 2012 was well below (see DfE performance tables Retrieved August 7, 2013 from <http://www.education.gov.uk/cgi-bin/schools/performance/school.pl?urn=113619>). I do not have any data that explains this variability, other than the very small class sizes (8-15 pupils) and pupils' rights to opt out of classes or examinations.
4. Pseudonyms are used when referring to research participants to protect their anonymity.
5. Information about the International Democratic Education Network can be found at their website: <http://www.idenetwork.org/index.htm>.

References

- Allen, R. (2010). Replicating Swedish Free School Reforms in England. *Research in Public Policy (CMPO Bulletin)*, 10, 4-7.
- Atkinson, P. (1985). *Language Structure and Reproduction: An introduction to the sociology of Basil Bernstein*. London: Methuen.
- Ball, S. (2010). Infrastructures, Consolidations, Interests and Careers: Towards a post-state education landscape in England, paper presented at *Education after the Election* BERA Social Justice SIG Seminar, 10 June, Birmingham City University.
- Ball, S. with Junemann, C. (2011). Network Governance and Coalition Education Policy. In Hatcher, R. & Jones, K. (Eds.), *No Country for the Young: Education from New Labour to the Coalition*. London: Tufnell Press.
- Beane, J.A. & Apple, M.W. (1999). The Case for Democratic Schools. In M.W. Apple & J.A. Beane, (Eds), *Democratic Schools: Lessons from the chalk face* (pp. 1-29). Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Bernstein, B. (1975). *Class, Codes and Control: Volume 3. Towards a Theory of Educational Transmissions*. London; Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Bourdieu, P. & Passeron, J.-C. (1990). *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture, Second Edition*. London: Sage Publications.
- Boyask, R. (2005). The Constitution of Democratic Identities in the Context of New Zealand Art Curriculum. *Welsh Journal of Education*, 13(2), 17-32.
- Boyask, R. (2006). Embodied Pedagogy: Examples of moral practice from art education. *ACCESS: Critical Perspectives on Communication, Cultural & Policy Studies*, 25(2), 44-56.
- Boyask, R. (2012). Participatory Approaches to Curriculum Decision-making in an Education Market, paper presented at *Social Justice and Marketisation in Schooling* symposium, Plymouth University, 12 October.
- Boyask, R, McPhail, J.C., Kaur, B., O'Connell, K. (2008). Democracy at Work in and Through Experimental Schooling. *Discourse*, 29(1), 19-34.
- Bunar, N. (2008). The Free Schools 'Riddle': Between traditional social democratic, neo-liberal and multicultural tenets. *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research*, 52(4), 423-438.
- Cranston, N., Kimber, M., Mulford, B., Reid, A., Keating, J. (2010). Politics and School Education in Australia: A case of shifting purposes. *Journal of Educational Administration*, 48(2), 182-195.
- Curtis, A., Exley, S., Sasia, A., Tough, S., Whitty, G. (2008). *The Academies Programme: Progress, problems and possibilities*. London: Sutton Trust.
- DCSF (n.d.). 'Specialist Schools'. *The Standards Site, Department for Children, Schools and Families*. Retrieved April 15, 2010, from <http://www.standards.dcsf.gov.uk/specialistschools/>.
- Dewey, J. (1907). The School and Social Progress. In *The School and Society* (pp. 19-44). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Dewey, J. (1916). *Democracy and Education: An introduction to the philosophy of education*. New York: The Macmillan Company.
- DfE (2013). *Free Schools*. Retrieved August 5, 2013, from <http://www.education.gov.uk/schools/leadership/typesofschools/freeschools>.
- DfE (2010a). Michael Gove Invites all Schools to Become Academies. In *In the News*. Retrieved October 18, 2010, from <http://www.education.gov.uk/inthenews/inthenews/a0061072/michael-gove-invites-all-schools-to-become-academies>.
- DfE (2010b). *What are Free Schools?* Retrieved October 18, 2010, from <http://www.education.gov.uk/schools/leadership/typesofschools/freeschools/a0061428/what-are-free-schools>.
- DfEE. (2001). *Schools: Building on success – Raising standards, promoting diversity, achieving results*. Norwich: The Stationary Office.
- Durkheim, E. (1984). *The Division of Labour in Society*. London: Macmillan.
- Fielding, M. & Moss, P. (2011). *Radical Education and the Common School: A democratic alternative*. London; New York: Routledge.
- Fitz, J., Davies, B., & Evans, J. (2005). *Educational Policy and Social Reproduction*. London: Routledge.
- Giddens, A. (2004). *The Constitution of Society*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Gribble, D. (1998). *Real Education: Varieties of freedom*. Bristol: Libertarian Education.
- Harker, R., Mehar, C. & Wilkes, C. (Eds) (1990). *An Introduction to the Work of Pierre Bourdieu: The practice of theory*. New York: Saint Martin's Press.
- Hatcher, R. (2010). Marketisation, Privatisation, Autonomy and Democracy. *The Journal for Drama in Education*, 26(2). 50-61.

- Hatcher, R. (2011). The Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition Government's 'Free Schools' in England. *Educational Review*, 63(4), 485-503.
- HM Government, (2010). *The Coalition: Our programme for government*. London: Cabinet Office.
- Lubienski, C. (2003). Innovation in Education Markets: Theory and evidence on the impact of competition and choice in charter schools. *American Educational Research Journal*, 40(2), 395-443.
- Moorlands School. (n.d.). *Moorlands School, Luton, Bedfordshire: Home Page*. Retrieved February 9, 2012, from <http://www.moorlandsschool.com/>.
- Parker-Jenkins, M, Hartas, D. & Irving, B.A. (2005). In *Good Faith: Schools, religion and public funding* (pp. 11-36). Aldershot, UK; Burlington, USA: Ashgate.
- Quinlivan, K., Boyask R., Carswell, S. (2008). Dynamics of Power and Participation in School/University Partnerships. *New Zealand Journal of Education Studies*, 43(1), 65-84.
- Reay, D. (2004). Exclusivity, Exclusion and Social class in Urban Education Markets in the United Kingdom. *Urban Education*, 39(5), 537-560.
- Rudduck, J & Fielding M. (2006). Student Voice and the Perils of Popularity. *Educational Review*, 58(2), 219-231.
- Ryan, C. & Sibieta, L. (2010). *Private Schooling in the UK and Australia*, Institute for Fiscal Studies. Retrieved March 8, 2011, from <http://www.ifs.org.uk/bns/bn106.pdf>.
- Sands School (2010). *Sands School*. Retrieved October 19, 2010, from <http://www.sands-school.co.uk/>.
- Shepherd, J. (2007, Saturday, December 1). So, Kids, Anyone for Double Physics? (But no worries if you don't fancy it): Official approval at last for school where almost anything goes. *The Guardian*, Retrieved October 10, 2011, from <http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2007/dec/01/ofsted.schools>.
- Shepherd, J. (2011, Monday, November 14). Free Schools Taking Lower Numbers of Deprived Pupils, Data Shows: Findings at odds with the government's claim that free schools are empowering working-class families. *The Guardian*, Retrieved February 8, 2012, from <http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/2011/nov/14/free-schools-lower-number-deprived-pupils?intcmp=239>.
- Simon, B. (1977). Countesthorpe in the Context of Comprehensive Development. In J. Watts (Ed.), *The Countesthorpe Experience* (pp. 17-26). London: George Allen & Unwin Education Books.
- Stronach, I. (2011, Thursday, October 27). *Ofsted's Opinion of Summerhill School: From pariah to paragon: Public statement*. Unpublished Paper.
- West, A. & Currie, P. (2008). School Diversity and Social Justice: Policy and politics. *Educational Studies*, 34(3), 241-250.