

The Free-School movement in England: fairness and democracy

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Anyone who thinks that a young person failing to get a place in such a school would not conclude that this is a negative reflection on their long-term life chances should sit in the corner of the classroom for an hour wearing a pointy hat with a big letter D on it.

The UK government still seems insistent of pushing the introduction of free-schools in England despite a survey from the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER)¹ which seems to suggest that teachers don't think it's a good idea – an interesting contrast compared to Sweden where the loudest voices for free-schools seemed to have come from the teaching profession.

The biggest concern of UK teachers when questioned about this were that they felt it would not lead to a rise in standards, would do nothing to tackle current inequality in education, and would simply divert existing resources. Michael Gove, the Education Secretary, disputes this promoting the success of the free school system in Sweden. However, an independent report on the impact of Swedish free schools produced by the Institute of Education (IoE) at the University of London suggests this enthusiasm is a mistake.² Significantly, many of those concerns raised in the NFER survey mirror the reality of what the IoE report found in the Swedish example.

As one who was living and working in Sweden when the free school system was introduced there I can add a personal view: their introduction did indeed lead to a diversion of resources into newly established free schools and they were frequently renting space from existing schools in the state sector on the same site as the local school which was losing out on funding. Worse still, they resulted in a change of attitude among parents, creating a hitherto non-existent competition as to which school to get your child into. It introduced nothing short of a level of class consciousness that simply did not exist to any extent in Swedish society before. This latter point did not go unnoticed and significantly the two Swedish free schools of which I have personal experience are now back in the state school sector.

At the moment it would appear that the (English) government is not listening to well founded argument against the idea of free-schools both on principle and in practice. This gulf, I predict, will only get wider. In educational terms the introduction of free schools in England will lead to a rise in 'standards' – but not for the many. It will benefit the few at the cost of fairness by introducing an additional tier of inequality in our already unfair system by giving artificial 'status' to some schools at the expense of others.

Anyone who thinks that a young person failing to get a place in such a school would not conclude that this is a negative reflection on their long-term life chances should sit in the corner of the classroom for an hour wearing a pointy hat with a bit letter D on it. To subject an individual to such a personal sense of negativity at this crucial stage in their lives is simply unfair and undemocratic.

¹ See the original report *NFER Teacher Voice Omnibus November 2010* (2010) NFER <http://www.nfer.ac.uk/what-we-offer/teacher-voice/PDFs/Sutton-Trust-Nov2010.pdf> [accessed 22 April 2011]; and 'Teachers' survey: Schools changes 'won't benefit poor' ' (21st April 2011) *BBC News* [online]

² Wiborg, Susanne (2010) *Swedish Free Schools: Do they Work?* The Centre for Learning and Life Chances in Knowledge Economies and Societies. LLAKES Research Paper 18 <http://www.llakes.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/09/Wiborg-online.pdf> [accessed 22 April 2011]

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