
BOOK REVIEW

Walford, G. (ed.) *Privatisation, Education and Social Justice* (2015). Routledge, Oxford, New York

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People before profit?

Can privatisation of education lead to equity?

This volume was born twice: initially as a special issue of the *Oxford Review of Education* (Volume 39, Issue 4) in 2013, and then as a book in 2015 (not to mention its third incarnation as a paperback a year later).¹ This particular genesis may indicate its significance, as it has served since then as a frequently quoted reference in educational privatisation research.

While time has passed since then, its topic and chapters are more relevant than ever, as the marketisation of schooling has become a global phenomenon and privatisation policies are becoming increasingly widespread (Cone, L., K. Brøgger, 2020; Santos, M., & Neto-Mendes, A., 2022), even in the strongholds of the welfare state (Cone, L., & Moos, L., 2022). This tendency can be explained by various reasons, including the pandemic (Williamson, Ben & Hogan, Anna, 2020), the rise of neoliberal governance (Capano, G., Zito, A. R., Toth, F., & Rayner, J., 2022), and the rise of right-wing religious populism (Neumann, E., 2024). A recent study that reviewed 18 French-speaking countries from Haiti to Senegal also points to the “rapid growth of the private sector” in education (Lange, M-F., 2021), almost regardless of the local political-ideological context. Most authors suggest that the churchification of schools is also a privatisation process (Neumann, E., 2024); in both France and Hungary, most private schools are run by various churches, primarily the Catholic Church (Ercse, K., & Radó, P., 2019; Pellet, S., 2012). In the case of France, Chloé Tavan shows that, in terms of sector equity or the ability to reduce socially based inequalities, the results can be contrasted. While recruitment does reproduce social inequalities (but less so in areas where the private sector’s weight in local school supply is high), the private sector does seem to display smaller differences in school success by social milieu, thus reducing inequalities in social mobility for those who make it into those schools (Tavan, C., 2004). Others argue that inequalities are fostered by privatisation (Verger, A., 2023).

¹ The page numbers referenced in my article correspond to the version of “Privatisation, Education and Social Justice” as published in the *Oxford Review of Education*.

The volume's greatest accomplishment is probably its diverse yet coherent approach. It does not oversimplify the concept of privatisation but rather shows its multifaceted nature. Not only is the functioning of private schools very diverse from one educational system to another, but the private sector can also play roles beyond running the schools, such as providing school food, equipment, etc. As a paper with somewhat similar aims states: this "complex phenomenon should not be oversimplified [...]. The results, drawn from a European-wide survey, portray a nuanced pattern of privatization at this regional level in which public funding and ownership remain important, but schools are commonly adopting a wide range of 'private-like' practices" (Winchip, E., Stevenson, H., & Milner, A., 2018, p. 81.). This is what the authors of this volume also do, including references to intersectionality (gender differences within given social classes) in order to grasp the complexity of the phenomenon. The only major criticism we may express is that a more systematic state of the art is missing, as partial reviews in each of the individual articles or chapters cannot replace a comprehensive literature review.

In the first chapter of the volume (that I present in more detail because it is the most ambitious and comprehensive one), Susan Robertson and Roger Dale explore both the privatisation and globalisation of education. They argue that a traditional Rawlsian view of social justice is limited: critical theory of justice would thus be equipped to evaluate a plurality of social structures and not only the distributional alternatives they circumscribe; that's what they call a "social connection model". Whatever the theoretical framework, the authors present a varied set of examples of policies mitigating the excesses of privatisation, for example, in India, with 25% of places in private schools (including elite private schools) going to the very poor (see in details below), or limits on the fees schools might charge so that they do not act as a mechanism of selection and stigmatisation. Also, governments can, at least in theory, design Public Private Partnership (PPP) contracts and regulate them to bind the contractor into delivering to that specification. But the authors also show the empirical limits of privatisation with regard to inequalities, as well as the intersectional implications: "a growing body of empirical work has found that these schools do not include the very poor [...] and when family incomes are limited, it is more likely to be the boy child who is chosen above the girl child [...]. From here we could argue those promoting low-fee places in private schools not only exploit the aspirations of the poor, whilst the entrepreneur makes a profit from a social group least able to afford to pay, but that such practices reinforce gendered divisions of labour." (p. 431.) Charter schools and education vouchers are defined as PPPs, promoted in developing countries too by the World Bank; while Charter Schools in the United States – when demographic data (social class, race, gender) are taken into account – actually perform less well than public schools. Hence, while the results are contrasting, to conclude, the authors seem to subscribe to Ball's negative view of privatisation, based on his British findings: "The »reform« of the public service sector is a massive new profit opportunity for business ... the outsourcing of education services is worth at least £1.5 billion a year". They insist on this point further: "markets alone, being inherently competitive [...] are incapable of providing socially-just outcomes, or even outputs." (p. 440.) The theoretical developments of the chapter are less convincing than the empirical ones, since they demonstrate the negative impact of educational privatisation without demonstrating that Rawls' theory of social justice cannot grasp this phenomenon, rather the contrary.

The following chapter by James Tooley uses the example of low-fee private schools to question definitions and realities of social justice. He shows that low-fee private schools are greatly expanding in poor areas of sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia and elsewhere, and that they are serving many poor and even very poor families. Hence this paper contradicts Robertson and Dale in a very inspiring way, showing the heterogeneity of local contexts, including the opportunities offered (or refused) by private education institutions.

Sally Power and Chris Taylor's chapter challenges the neat representation of the public and the private spheres being aligned on either side of a battle between left and right, the state and the market, and where social justice is commonly seen as the prerogative of the public sphere. It shows how the language of what counts as public and private in education is historically specific, culturally contingent and ideologically loaded. They also argue that, just as the public and private spheres are multi-faceted, so too is social justice. Drawing on the work of Nancy Fraser, they distinguish between the three dimensions of social injustice – economic, cultural and political – and their respective politics of redistribution, recognition and representation. They argue that while the state may be able to promote social justice along some dimensions, it may exacerbate social injustice along others. For example, in some contexts, recognition of minorities is lacking in public education, hence "In the USA, it was black Democrat activists that lobbied for the introduction of vouchers in order to break the public sector control of education which they saw penalising black children."

This is followed by a chapter by Mark Bray, who in the last decade has become the most significant researcher into private supplementary tutoring, or "shadow schooling". While international organisations state that everyone has the right to education and that education should be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages (at primary school-age), the volumes of private supplementary tutoring increase around the globe. In some societies, investment in tutoring has in effect become obligatory for families with visions of even modest social advance. (Robertson and Dale's chapter above shows that shadow schooling, i.e. fee-paying tutoring in academic subjects has become a major enterprise in several EU Member States, attaining approximately 17% and 20% in Cyprus and Greece respectively of the government expenditure on primary and secondary education; similarly, in Asia – from China to Bangladesh –, private tutoring represents a major family investment in education.)

Christopher Lubienski's focus is on American Charter Schools. Over the last two decades, US policymakers have advocated this particular form of independently managed school in the hopes of fostering more equitable access to quality educational options, particularly for disadvantaged children, through increased market competition. The chapter first discusses the ways in which charter schools can and cannot be seen as privatisation. While critics see charter schools as a form of privatisation, proponents argue that they are public schools because of government funding and accountability procedures. The chapter reviews the empirical evidence on charter schools and shows that the marketised environment that they are intended to nurture serves as a route for profit-seeking strategies; over time, the competitive conditions cause many schools – including those established with a social justice ethos – to adopt practices that limit access for disadvantaged students.

The chapter by Henry M. Levin, Ilja Cornelisz and Barbara Hanisch-Cerda provides a framework for analysing quasi-markets in education and for considering the potential

effects of privatisation. It then applies this framework to the Netherlands, a school system where two thirds of the schools are privately sponsored. Results show that the socioeconomic achievement gap in the Netherlands is comparable to those of other industrialised countries. A notable difference is that the deleterious effect of socioeconomic status (SES) on achievement is initially low for lower levels of SES, which is positive, but on the other hand, while “Non-Western immigrant students [...] perform relatively well in primary education, but fall behind their international peers in the tracked secondary system [...] a system of early tracking is likely to increase the socioeconomic achievement gap [...] The Netherlands sponsors a school system that is among the most ethnically and socioeconomically stratified in Europe, particularly at the tracked secondary level [...]. Such segregation has generally been attributed to a combination of residential sorting and universal school choice by parents [...]. We believe that privatisation and choice enhance these differences [...]”. (pp. 525-526).

The contribution by Geoffrey Walford compares two schemes designed to help the poor in very different countries. The Indian Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, adopted in 2009 enforces the reservation of 25% of the entry-level seats in all private schools for students from economically and socially disadvantaged families. The Indian government pays schools a per child fee. There are many similarities between this scheme and the Assisted Places Schemes that ran in Great Britain from 1980 until 1997. It examines the similarities and differences between the two schemes and draws conclusions about the potential effects of the Indian scheme on social justice based on the evaluations of the British scheme: “The government schools will thus lose some students who come from these supportive homes and who have some understanding of schooling. It is thus likely that the differences between the government sector and the private sector will increase and social justice worsen.” (p. 544.)

The final chapter from Joanna Härmä examines schooling in Lagos, Nigeria, which is home to over 12,000 private schools catering to families from the ultra-rich to the relatively poor, with many schools targeting those of lower socio-economic status. Government schools were intended to provide a just and equitable option for all; however, they have not kept pace with demand in terms of both capacity and quality, causing concerned parents to look elsewhere. Parents living in slums are prepared to pay a high proportion of their incomes to access fee-paying primary education for their children. Härmä discusses the equity implications of this situation. The chapter shows that parents choose private schools because government schools are perceived to be failing, but that these parents have higher expectations than what can be met by private schools run on incredibly tight budgets with often untrained teachers. It is thus highly questionable that under such circumstances social justice can be served through this scenario.

Two mainstream understandings of the role of the private sector in education have coexisted for decades. One –the conservative and neoliberal view – argues that a meritocratic system can and should be achieved through privatisation, as the market is more efficient than the state in supporting talents. On the other hand, proponents of social justice argue that privatisation reinforces disparities, early selection, and thus inequalities.

This book defends a third point of view. While subscribing to the fundamental value of social justice and criticising a number of cases where privatisation leads to increased inequalities, it also highlights some good practices in privatisation, such as the privatised

primary schools in the Netherlands, where immigrant children perform well. In fact, privatisation can be successful as long as it respects several conditions: being available to all, avoiding tracking and especially early selection, maintaining affordable fees, and being compatible with state-run schools, among others. However, while we can commend the authors' openness to out-of-the-box thinking and their lack of prejudice towards private schools, only a few empirical findings support this theory, unless we consider that cultural recognition of minorities, like in many charter schools in the US, is a form of social justice.

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