

A ‘Capability Approach’ to school choice: rescuing school improvement from the distraction of marketisation

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A stranger in a town asks a bystander, “*Can you direct me to the railway station?*” “*Certainly,*” answers the native, pointing in the opposite direction, towards the post office, “*and would you post this letter for me on your way?*” “*No problem*” says the stranger, resolving to open it and steal its contents! Amartya Sen constructs this scenario to demonstrate the absurdity of the idea that selfishness by individuals necessarily results in the collective good being served: the letter is never posted; the railway station never found; there is nothing of value in the letter.

So it is with schooling, says the Left. The state must purge the marketplace of choice because choice is a selfishness that serves ill the common good. Yet in developed countries like the UK and the US, where there is still a near monopoly of state-funded schooling despite an emerging consensus that is moving public service provision towards a mixed economy, an emerging body of research suggests that individuals for whom public education is a necessity are also those best served by its alternatives. Thus is a tension emerging between the rhetoric of the public good and the actualité of everyday personal disadvantage; or as Chomsky would say, between doctrine and reality.

The Right also proclaims its dissent, positing that the new mixed economies in schooling are destined to failure because choice programmes do not go far enough. They defer to historical passions on the Left, it is claimed, whereby failing state schools continue to be supported by the public purse without any realistic expectation of improvement. Whatever the rights and wrongs of these arguments, the school improvement ‘movement’ needs to get a grip on the fact that for disadvantaged communities, half-hearted little-understood choice policies are absurd: having a choice between a poor school and a good school, whereas previously there was only a good one, does not increase well-being; neither does having a choice between *three* poorly-performing schools as opposed to *two*. And what use is the freedom to attend *any* school in a city for those without the wherewithal to organise family life around travel?

Fundamentally, school choice is *not* about marketisation. It is about freedom. The latter is a complex notion; the former merely instrumental. The disappointment to date and the difficulty for school improvement is that fieldwork and theory has concentrated on marketisation and a forthright debate about school choice as freedom has not been had as school improvers rush to action on behalf of concerned governments facing the prospect of societal and economic decline as a result of inadequate public schooling. Most school improvement policies in the UK over the last fifteen years, for example, have involved efforts simply to marketise education because (it is claimed) the exigencies of competition *ipso facto* make public school systems more responsive:

Since 1997, there have been two stages of reform. In the first, we corrected the underinvestment In the second stage, essentially begun in 2001, we added another dimension. We started to open the system up to new influences and introduced the beginnings of choice and contestability We are now at the

crucial point where the reforms can be taken to their final stage In both the NHS and in education, there will in one sense be a market. The patient and the parent will have much greater choice. (Tony Blair, Speech at 10 Downing Street, 24 October 2005).

The theoretical assumption here is that a market can more effectively provide the range and quality of education demanded by parents and needed by students, and lead to system-wide Darwinian improvement. To opponents of choice, this notion that education can be treated as a commodity, tradable using commercial rubrics, is unacceptable. While understanding that there might be some benefit to be derived from a degree of competition, they are concerned that access and equity across the social divide is necessarily jeopardised by market forces. Schools are not supermarkets, they say, and education is not a commercial product but a basic human right. However, these are tired arguments about the wrong thing! They are arguments about the application of *marketisation* policies and not about freedom and student capability. Whether tacitly accepted or formally proscribed in the political shibboleths of both Left and Right, the subtleties of the distraction are a nice mixture of erudition and hypocrisy: to paraphrase Chesterton, it is the function of progressives to make mistakes and the function of conservatives to prevent those mistakes being rectified. Some children have always had the facility to choose schools; what is new today is the desire among policy-makers to extend to the public sector what has long been available in the private sector. Yet even that putative dichotomy, occasionally made in the school improvement literature, is a tired over-simplification. England's fee-paying schools, for example, are full of students who cannot afford to be there; and many middle-class families cannot avail of 'free' public education because they cannot play the 'postcode lottery' that would enable their children to attend good schools.

As a result of the misplaced focus on marketisation, our understanding of school choice and its impact on student well-being has become under-theorised. Research is inconclusive in respect of the theoretical complexities involved in the way choice is offered, understood and actualised within families, and the way society and students are thought to benefit from it. School improvement would benefit from purchasing a more open and complex theoretical framework for understanding school choice and its relationship to student well-being, and Sen's Capability Approach is one possibility. The provenance of that approach in economics is rooted in its attempt to understand poverty, but even in that paradigm Sen included educational attainment as one of his three indicators. In every sense - economically, politically and socially - education impacts on the freedom and ability of people to participate in society, and one of the outcomes of Sen's work as adapted to education might be to shift the emphasis away from marketisation and material well-being - schooling as a preparation for employment through a curriculum driven by economic imperatives - to the broader concepts of freedom and choice - education as an intellectual entitlement and a preparation for individual empowerment - without which a person cannot have a good quality of life. Of course, adapting a Capability Approach to school choice and school improvement research of itself would not offer a simple answer to the all-important question of how best to run schools so that no one is disadvantaged, but it would make more realistic our theoretical framework and add a little to our understanding as we search for a better answer.

Tony Kelly's new book, *School Choice and Student Well-being: opportunity and capability in education*, is published by Palgrave MacMillan.