

The Necessity of Reforming Britain's Private Schools

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Abstract

The existence of extremely expensive private schools – about one in ten of all our schools -- presents a major problem for Britain's education system. A new public education system could not coexist with the current, unreformed, private school system: therefore reform is a necessary condition for this project. Private schools are, on the whole, good schools, owing their successes largely to a massive resource input, some three times that of the state sector. But this distortion of our educational resources, is enormously unjust, as well as inefficient and supportive of a democratic deficit in British society. Some solutions are noted; while not dogmatic about which should be adopted, we explain why our preferred solution is a partial integration of the sectors, in particular what we term, in our book *Engines of Privilege*, a 'Fair Access Scheme'.

The existence of extremely expensive private schools – about one in ten of all our schools -- presents a major problem for Britain’s education system. We argue in this paper that a new public education could not coexist with the existing, unreformed, private school system. If private schools remained untouched, their presence would persistently undermine the desired new public education system.

Britain’s private schools offer, on the whole and with one important proviso, a good education in the broadest sense. The left has sometimes found this fact difficult to accept, in the context of supporting public education; nevertheless, the evidence is compelling. In academic terms, private schooling is shown to improve children’s performance in both low-stakes tests and high-stakes public exams (O’Donoghue et al., 1997; Parsons et al., 2017; Dearden et al., 2002; Sullivan and Heath, 2003; Feinstein and Symons, 1999; Sullivan et al., 2014; Graddy and Stevens, 2005; Ndaji et al. 2016; Sakellariou 2017; Smith-Woolley et al. 2018; Hannay, 2015; Crawford and Vignoles, 2014; Henderson et al., 2018). The improvements are found after netting out – i.e. controlling for – the undoubted advantages that come from an affluent family background, often with more highly educated parents. At every stage of education the gains are modest but palpable: typically, a child moves a few points up the rankings compared with an otherwise similar state-educated child. Cumulatively, over the course of a childhood in private school, the gains build up to a substantial advantage. With the added help, in sixth forms, of high-quality advice and assistance with working the system, the private school child of professional or managerial parents is twice as likely as a similar state-educated child to find a place in one of Britain’s elite (Russell Group) universities (Green and Kynaston, p.14) On top of academic educational achievements which are crucial for progression to university and later success, private schools generally provide a broader educational package with multiple extra-curricular cultural and sporting activities; they take children who already have a relatively high self-esteem, and add to their ‘locus of control’ (the extent to which they sense that life events are determined normally by their own actions) (Green et al., 2018).

The proviso is that what the schools do not provide is a peer group of children drawn from a cross-section of the community in which they will live: the social exclusivity of the schools – driven by the high fees – is the reason why some choose not to send their children for private education even if they could afford it. Of course, this is also the reason why others *do* choose the private sector, so that their children do not mix with children of a different class (West et al., 1998); many parents are found to have ambivalent sentiments on private school choice (Ball, 1997).

Yet, the main point holds. While there is variation within the private sector, as there is among state schools, these are good schools. This does not reflect negatively on comprehensive education, because the main reason for the private schools’ continued success in modern times is their enormous material advantage. While only one in sixteen children attend private schools, the schools deploy one in seven of our teachers; one pound in every six educational pound in Britain is devoted to private school children. In effect, the resource gap per child between the two sectors is roughly three to one. Formal evidence now confirms that resource differences much smaller than this do make a notable difference to learning and educational outcomes (e.g. Fredriksson et al., 2013).

As we argue in our book, *Engines of Privilege*, the enormous unfairness of this resource gap is, perhaps, the most glaring aspect of the problem that private schools pose for Britain’s education system. It is incompatible with a society that offers equal opportunities for all to flourish and develop. This unequal education feeds into the well-known major inequalities in this country. For example, the latest evidence is that a private education delivers an average wage premium of 17 per cent even at age 25 for the millennials generation, and the signs are that this ‘premium’ will only increase as this cohort goes through life. Notably, for the children of high-class families a private schooling is associated with

significantly diminished risk of downward occupational mobility between generations (McKnight, 2015).

Not only that, the dominance of privately-educated people in positions of public influence – notably in politics where in 2016 a half of the cabinet and a third of MPs were educated privately, but also in our courts (three quarters of judges), in Whitehall (a half of top civil servants) and in business (a third of FTSE CEOs) (Kirby, 2016) – constitutes a veritable democratic deficit.

From the overall perspective of the education system, the distortion arising from the private-state resource gap is enormously inefficient. Each additional pound should be spent where it could have the most effect. Given that educational inputs have diminishing marginal value – to borrow from the economists' jargon – the additional pound has least effect in areas where the expenditure is already high. A rebalancing of educational inputs would normally improve overall educational outcomes. Moreover, a good deal of private educational expenditure must be regarded as 'positional': pushing one set of children up the rank order, and another set down. Thus, for example, among those private school children squeezed into Russell Group universities (including Oxford and Cambridge colleges) there are undoubtedly many – hard to estimate how many – who have in effect displaced equally bright children from state schools. From society's perspective, this part of the expenditure of private schools is a social waste, even if it is good for the private school beneficiaries.

It might be argued that, notwithstanding the undesired inequalities, private school children are nevertheless in a small minority, and therefore do not matter all that much for the construction of a good public education system. Interestingly, the idea that the sector is tiny and therefore has no system-wide significance is stressed by private school leaders, maintaining that they cannot be expected to right the wrongs of the rest of the system. It is a claim that sits oddly alongside some of their other propaganda, wherein it is proclaimed that they have substantive economic impacts on employment, income and tax revenues (Oxford Economics, 2014). Nevertheless, in some parts of the country, away from London or Edinburgh, private schools are quite scarce. From a non-metropolitan perspective, private schools may not seem to be such an issue; and the private schools are right that they cannot be held responsible for all the problems of state education.

Yet for several reasons the smallness of the proportion of privately-educated children does not justify ignoring the problem. First, the share becomes much larger – 17 per cent – when we look at the sixth form, the gateway to top universities and well-paid jobs thereafter. We have also already noted the unbalanced take-up of resources – far greater than their pupil numbers imply. And these grotesque differences show up glaringly in the post-school outcomes, notably the disproportionate occupation by the privately-educated of places at high-status universities. In terms of what matters for gaining high rewards in adult society, the private sector is far from small.

We have also noted already the evidence that privately-educated individuals enjoy a hefty wage premium in the labour market, and a diminished risk of downward social mobility. This evidence for individuals, moreover, underestimates the full contribution of private schools to Britain's low social mobility and high inequality in this country, when examined from a holistic perspective. A reformed private education system in which the benefits now enjoyed by the few were spread across the population, would deliver more than the sum of its parts. The hard-to-estimate effects of parental push and encouragement, now concentrated so much in one sector, would become available to the public education system generally. The importance of state education for the development and flourishing of our society would stand a much better chance of being recognised when more of our policy makers had a stake in it, and brought with them to their positions of influence their own personal experiences of a non-privileged schooling. Despite Blair's emphasis on 'education, education,

education’, the promotion of public education is unlikely ever to be taken seriously enough in a sustained way across generations, while so many of our senior politicians do not themselves experience the public education system.

Despite its apparently small size, then, the reform of the private school sector is a necessary condition for the development of a great public education system. In its unreformed configuration, it stands as a beacon of inequality. We applaud efforts for the improvement and transformation of state schools, including addressing issues of postcode lotteries and other inequalities; but these efforts will continue to be undermined and hard to sustain while the private/state school resource gap is maintained. Moreover, while there are many legitimate and important concerns about our remaining grammar schools and other forms of academic selectivity, it should be remembered that there are some fifteen times as many private schools as there are grammar schools.

What do we mean by reform of private schools? For a long time, reform for some on the left has been synonymous with ‘abolition’, and from the late 1950s it became the policy of the Labour party in opposition to effect a full integration into the state sector (Green and Kynaston, 2019, pp 39-50). However, following the widely-derided report of the Newsom Commission, and the failure to act under the Wilson and Callaghan governments, that policy or any other substantive reform was sidelined. Throughout the Thatcher-Major period the Labour Party confined itself to sustaining a consistent opposition to the Assisted Places Scheme in which children from supposedly low-income families – but usually distinctly middle-class – were funded by government to attend private schools; the scheme was soon abolished under New Labour.

In recent years, isolated calls for abolition or full nationalisation persist.¹ Yet, abolition as a strategy would have to contend with both political obstacles (concerted opposition from vested interests) and legal impediments (the right to start a private school, enshrined in the European Convention of Human Rights). Moreover, their outright full abolition is hardly necessary to support the building of a great public education system; it would be better to draw on what are, nowadays, good educational institutions (rather than ‘bulldoze’ them), and use them for the public good.

A reform strategy needs to be both feasible and effective. In our book *Engines of Privilege* we consider a number of proposals that fit this bill. On the one hand, one can attempt to diminish the demand for private schooling by parents, to the extent that many schools would have to close or transfer over to the state sector. Taxing school fees is the most direct method, for example through the imposition of VAT; removing Charitable status is another (though this also comes with considerable obstacles, and would not make much difference beyond the symbolic); imposing strong contextual admissions requirements on elite universities would also have a notable effect.

On the other hand, one can introduce a form of partial integration of the state sector and the private sector. Our preference is for what we call a Fair Access Scheme, in which all private schools will be obliged to take a proportion of their intake from the state sector – initially a third, subsequently more. These places can be funded by government at the same rate as all other places in the state sector (therefore not imposing a direct additional cost on the exchequer). Selection of children should conform to Schools Admission Code criteria, and no overall extension of academic selection should be permitted.

This proposal has some points of similarity with other schemes proposed by reformers, and even by leaders from within the private school sector. For example, the Sutton Trust proposes an ‘Open Access Scheme’ in which the top ninety or so private day schools, with state funding, would voluntarily open their schools to all children, to be selected on academic merit.² The private sector itself has proposed

a scheme whereby the government would co-fund 10,000 children to attend private schools.³ We are not dogmatic about the precise form of partial integration needed. We appreciate that the Sutton Trust scheme would make a difference, while noting also the valid fears of critics that the scheme risks giving vent to the desire for more academic tracking and creaming off especially able children from the local state school community. Nevertheless, two principles explain our preference for the Fair Access Scheme: that the reform should be substantial enough to alter the balance and the social dynamic within *all* schools, not just a select minority; and that admission to (and, incidentally, exclusion from) the schools should be *socially* controlled. In this partially integrated system, the places in private schools will become an extension of the state education sector; indeed, the border-line between the state and the private will be blurred.

Other proposed schemes, to date, are too small in scale to have a major effect on the problems of the system. The Sutton Trust scheme would be important, but only for a select group of exceptionally able working class children; it is not designed to help the large majority. The private sector scheme would initially involve no more than 2 per cent of the private school population: only a few thousand more than are currently in receipt of full bursaries. A potential problem with, simply, taxing private schools is that many of them would survive, and would become even more socially exclusive. A partial integration with social control, and of sufficient scale, ensures the opposite. In addition to the admissions protocols for the state-funded places, the state's representatives (local or otherwise) would also need to participate in the schools' governance, with a remit to monitor and ensure adherence to the Schools Admissions Code and a proper treatment of children chosen to fill the state-funded places.

In sum, we are arguing two points: first, that a reform of Britain's private schools is a necessary (though of course not sufficient) condition for the development of a great public education system. Second, we contend that the reform must be of sufficient magnitude to be a game-changer, in terms of the resource gap between schools and their social composition.

It could be tempting to avoid the issue. Another way of reducing the influence of private schools, it might be argued, would be to improve state schools to such an extent that none but a minute section of the population (our royal families, perhaps, and a few more) would choose to pay for something they could get for free. The case is supported by evidence that dissatisfaction with the quality of state schools is one of the substantive motives for parents opting to pay for private education (Green et al., 2018): perhaps, then, if a new and more satisfactory public education system could be created, the problem of private schools would wither away. Yet this would be a highly risky strategy. It ignores the extent to which a contented private sector, which holds so many keys to educational advancement, could stand back, maybe even hinder, the progressive improvement of the public education system. It underestimates the extent to which private schools could duck, dive and adapt to preserve the privileged paths of their clientele. But above all it ignores the lessons of history: hopes of a natural dissolution, absent a determined political will to bring about change, have proved forlorn on multiple occasions. The adoption of this argument has become, rather, little more than an expression of the lack of an adequate political resolve for reform.

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¹ In a recent opinion piece ('What did I learn at private school? They should be abolished', *Guardian*, 12/12/2018) Angus Satow, deriding piecemeal tax reform, advocates abolition as the only way to end the entrenchment of privilege through education. However, he does not consider the possibilities of partial integration of the sectors.

² The Sutton Trust *Open Access: Democratising Entry to Independent Day Schools*, update March 2015.

<https://www.suttontrust.com/research-paper/open-access-democratising-entry-independent-day-schools/>

³ Independent Schools Council, *Manifesto 2017*. <https://www.isc.co.uk/media/4092/68538-4.pdf>