

# Free Schools in England: ‘Not unlike other schools’?

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Researching free schools is problematic. While independent researchers can access data on free school lists, individual school web sites, and generic support services, those wishing to study the internal processes of schools rely on the cooperation of schools. Appreciating the pressures of starting up a new school, we are therefore very grateful to the free school head teachers who generously afforded us their time in interviews and to those who kindly responded to our online survey. We are also thankful to the UCL students Annie Hemphill and Lindsey Waive for helping us with data collection.

## **Abstract**

The aim of this article is to investigate the argument that choice and competition will unleash entrepreneurial innovation in free schools. Free schools were introduced as a subset of the Academies by the Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition government, following the General Election in 2010. The government made it possible for non-state providers to set up their own independent, state-funded schools in order to create more choice, competition and innovation. We conclude that a higher level of substantive innovation is taking place in regards to management practices than in respect of curriculum and pedagogical practices. Innovation in curriculum and pedagogical practices is very limited. Creating a free school offer that seems to differ from other schools appears to be done through marketing and branding rather than innovation. We argue that parents, OFSTED, and the relative isolation of free schools constrain innovation from taking place.

## **I. Introduction**

The aim of this article is to investigate the argument that choice and competition will unleash entrepreneurial innovation in free schools. Free schools were introduced as a subset of the Academies by the Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition government, following the General Election in 2010. The government made it possible for non-state providers to set up their own independent, state-funded schools in order to create more choice, competition and innovation (Higham 2014a). In the words of the free school initiator in England, former Education Secretary of State, Michael Gove, ‘Innovation, diversity and flexibility are the heart of the free schools policy...’ ( House of Commons Hansard Debates for 15 Nov, 2010). The drive for greater innovation starts from the premise that government controlled schools are constrained by bureaucratic regulations, which inhibiting change, enforcing uniformity and inhibit achievement in education. Politicians and policy makers argue against a ‘one-size-fits all’ or ‘bog standard’ model for education – that is, local authority controlled schools – and assert that market-style mechanisms

of consumer choice and competition between autonomous schools will create diverse and innovative approaches. Non-state providers will be able to experiment with new types of education provision if monopolistic control of state education is removed. Policymakers expect these dynamics to create new ways of educating pupils, including those traditionally marginalised in the state system, giving more options for parents and inducing higher achievement. Free schools are typically cast as ‘powerhouses’ or ‘laboratories’, generating new forms of governance, curricular and pedagogical approaches.

By the Spring of 2016, after six years of the new policy, some 384 free schools had been established. Yet little is known about actual practices that have been introduced in these schools, and whether they differ substantially from those found in other schools. The few studies of free schools that have been conducted are concerned with types of free schools’ proposers and providers (Higham 2014a; Walford 2014a; Walford 2014b), governance of the free schools (Hatcher 2011; Higham 2014b), the policy and politics of free schools analysed from a comparative perspective (Wiborg, 2015; Hatcher 2011), and selective access to free schools (Morris 2014; Green *et al* 2015; Gorard 2016). Hypotheses about the effects of free schools on pupils’ educational and other achievements will be evaluated when pupils complete their trajectories through school life. In the meantime, this article contributes to free school research, reporting on perceptions of innovation in its diverse forms across a range of free schools.

Specifically, we seek to understand if the move to introduce market mechanisms into the education sector through a modified institutional structure – that is, giving substantive institutional autonomy for schools and adding more choice for consumers – sparks innovation within the free schools in ways impossible in local authority schools. Since such innovation is intended to be the key mechanism through which free schools are to “raise standards”, an understanding of the extent and form of innovation will contribute to our understanding and expectation about what achievements to expect from the pupils of free schools in the long term. We use a mixed-methods approach, combining in-depth qualitative interviews with a quantitative survey of a small number of schools.

In the next section we review the aims and expectations of the Coalition government (2010-2015) behind the free schools, and consider the innovative potential in free schools. We then discuss the concept of innovation, and consider institutional constraints which may hamper free schools from unleashing their innovative potentials. Section III describes our methods and sources of data. Section IV sets out our findings about innovation in free schools under two categories: innovation in management, and innovation in curriculum and teaching methods. Section V takes up the issue of potential constraints limiting the extent of innovation. Section VI then concludes with a consideration of what our findings imply about future evaluations of the contributions made by free schools.

## **II. Innovation as a policy goal for free schools**

With the intention of promoting novel approaches to schooling, the Coalition government set out to significantly reduce bureaucracy, and increase school autonomy. In the White Paper (2010) bureaucracy is heavily criticised for curbing education development in English schools. Local

government in particular is seen as dominating the provision of education is viewed as moribund, inflexible and inefficient. The paper stated that:

the ability of schools to decide their own ethos and chart their own destiny has been severely constrained by government guidance, Ministerial interference and too much bureaucracy. While Academies and City Technology Colleges (CTS's) have taken advantage of greater freedoms to innovate and raise standards, these freedoms too have been curtailed in recent years. Meanwhile, it has been virtually impossible to establish a new-state-funded school without local authority support. We want every school to be able to shape its own character, frame its own ethos and develop its own specialisms, free of either central or local bureaucratic constraints (2010, p.11-12).

According to the 2010 Academies and Free School Act, free schools were thus allowed to operate outside Local Authority control. Instead they should be run by different providers such as charities, independent schools, community and faith groups, teachers, parents, and non-profit businesses. Free schools must comply with the statutory admissions code (unless they have agreement of the Secretary of State to vary this when there is “demonstrable need”). However, they do not need to comply with the National Curriculum, and their teachers need not have Qualified Teacher Status. Furthermore, they can set their own pay and conditions for staff and while every school governing body (including state maintained) can change the length of the school day, the law regulating the school day and school year (e.g. determining minimum days per year) does not apply to academies or free schools.

School autonomy is held, not only to counter local authority bureaucracy but also to provide a remedy for unwanted uniformity. On their introduction, free schools were premised on individual choice, which was thought to best reflect the diverse preferences of the consumers rather than the dictates of monolithic bureaucracies. Free schools were to be the vehicle for delivering greater choice, which had hitherto been inhibited. The Prime Minister stated in 2011 that where parents were not satisfied with local provision, it had been very difficult to ‘club together and start a new school’ (Cameron 2011). To this end, Government needed to ‘clear the obstacles out of the way’ as ‘there are too many ways in which trade unions or local authorities [...] can sort of frustrate these things’. In the event that local provision failed to meet the diverse needs of, parents, now reconfigured as ‘consumers’, were to be given the right to seek satisfaction of their education preferences elsewhere.

Free schools thus bear the unmistakable imprint of market theory in the diagnosis of the pathologies of state provision and advocacy of alternative institutional arrangements (Friedman 1955; Chubb and Moe 1990; Lubienski 2009). Politicians and policy makers believe that the bureaucratic local authorities are too constrained to innovate, whereas consumer choice and competition between autonomous providers offer the opportunity and incentives for bringing about rapid and substantial changes in education. The number of free schools has grown rapidly, from none in 2010 to 384 by April 2016, with government plans for 500 by 2020., Combined with a programme of allowing existing local authority controlled schools to become autonomous Academies - amounting to more than half of all secondary schools in England – this has resulted in a remarkable roll back of the local state in education over the last six years. In comparison with other OECD countries, England has gone much further towards creating a system of locally

autonomous schools, seemingly representing a unique case to study in relation to innovation, change and performance in education.

### **Innovation in education**

To study the manner and extent of the envisaged (perceived and actual) innovations in free schools, it is useful first to consider the concept in general and how it can be conceived and applied within education. Innovation can be defined simply as a new idea, product or service, or as an application of better solutions that meet new requirements or existing market or societal needs (Christensen *et al* 2008). The core issue is whether the innovative idea has the potential to lead to new products and services. In the organisational context, innovation is closely linked to positive changes in efficiency, productivity, quality, and competitiveness. Scholars studying innovation (Christensen *et al* 2008; Edquist 1999; Johnson *et al* 2004; Salge *et al* 2012) emphasise that innovation does not occur in isolation. Innovation emerges through the learning processes and interaction with a network of relevant institutions. It is a *collective* outcome, combining the elements of the system and the relations between them. Therefore, a perception of a system of innovation must be more than simply an enumeration of its elements; it is important to study the associations between them when assessing if innovation is occurring and can be sustained (Edquist 2001; Johnson *et al* 2004).

Using this general approach to innovation and applying it to education, the OECD (2005) suggests two categories of innovation in schools. One category of innovation concerns management innovations in areas such as governance, work organisation, employment relations and contracting. It also includes marketing innovations, particularly those that affect the position of a school within an education market through new advertising strategies or admission policies (Lubienski 2009, 20). The other category involves both product innovations and process innovations. Defining product in this context may be complicated by disagreement over the objectives of education and the balance between social, physical and intellectual development and achievement of qualifications. In general, product innovations include a new or substantially different service offered to students, such as a curriculum package. Process innovations involve production and delivery of techniques, e.g. e-learning or improved pedagogical approaches, which can produce gains in efficiency. For this paper, while drawing on this OECD typology of innovation in schools, we note that in addition it is also relevant to study the interactions between schools in a school district and sponsors as well as government bodies, all of which help to determine the extent of innovation. In practice, SATS, OFSTED inspections and examination systems impose severe constraints on innovation in education, notably at the secondary level. Empirical research needs to take account of this context. Existing high-performing networks for instance can offer incubation space for new entrants free schools, benefitting from their innovations while providing a venue for rapid prototyping and improvement.

The policy-makers who brought in the new system expected that competition with other schools, together with free school head teachers' liberty to follow their own leads without having to consult local authority officers, would incentivise and unleash more of both management and product/process innovations. However innovatory outcomes may be limited because of systemic constraints. Free schools in aggregate now constitute a recognised area of institutional life, where the key institutional actors, with varying degrees of power, include the Department for Education,

the New Schools Network, local authorities, OFSTED, teacher unions, and parents. Being dependent on the activities of these actors and the relations between them, schools may evolve strong self-reinforcing and self-perpetuating characteristics, which can persist and be hard to divert from. As in other systems, these actors or coalitions of them can function both as enablers as well as inhibitors to innovation (DiMaggio and Powel 1991; Meyer and Rowan 1992; Immergut 2005; Mahoney 2000). Unlike schools that convert to become academies, where historical precedent might inhibit change, free schools are start-up schools; nevertheless, the very newness also brings challenges and high set-up costs which might also limit the space for experimentation with innovative teaching strategies. Where schools are part of a sponsoring academy chain the degree of innovation is likely to be determined by the policies of the chain's senior management which, in turn, are embedded in an institutional and competitive environment. Where schools are converted private schools, the original objectives of those schools and their governors need to be taken into account.

The outcomes for innovations in both categories is therefore an open question that requires an empirical answer. The evidence from other countries suggests that the constraints on innovation are very relevant. Research on the effects of comparable reforms in other countries such as the Free Schools (*fritstående skolor*) in Sweden and Charter schools in the USA indicates that choice and competition can lead to innovations in organisational practices (mainly by adopting more business-like methods), whereas class room practices are relatively familiar and often revert to traditionalist modes of curriculum and instruction. In competing for students, schools in these countries tend to copy established practices of schooling rather than use their autonomy to try substantively different approaches. In the case of Sweden, Vlachos (2011) has shown how parents constituted a factor in Free Schools reverting to standardised practices. Parents were concerned about grades, exams and access to higher education, which in turn made Free Schools adopt established instruction methods. Lubienski (2009) who has investigated the Charter schools concludes that although some schools could be seen as engaging in different or new practices, innovation in general was absent. Charters do not appear to be engaging in practices that are new or even different from practices already evident in district governed sector of the nation's publically funded school system. This has even been the case in Arizona, which has been the leading state in the charter movements in terms of numbers of schools and their institutional autonomy. In their study of 75 Arizona charter schools, Stout and Garn (1999) demonstrated that they are not achieving expected classroom innovations. Likewise, in Michigan, a state where inter-district choice have substantially empowered parents as consumers, Horn and Miron (2000, 26) concluded in a study that 'overall, innovations are not occurring in Michigan charter schools.'

To what extent have previous studies of English free schools, in the first five years of their existence, generated useful evidence about the extent to which innovation has emerged and spread? While extant research has touched on this issue indirectly through considering critically the democratic credentials of free school governance, in particular the way that powerful groups can mould state education in their own interests (Hatcher, 2011; Higham, 2014b), only one study has hitherto examined what free schools actually do in respect of innovation. In 2014, the government's Department for Education published its own assessment (Cirin, 2014), which presented a very positive picture, endorsed by the Education Minister, of how different and innovative was the first set of free schools that had opened by the 2013/14 academic year. In its

survey of 74 schools it reported that "a large proportion of free schools are developing innovative approaches" (ibid. 7). It found, for example, that 57 percent of free schools operated an extended school day. Other "innovations" emerging quite widely included: different term dates, use of unqualified teachers, setting own conditions of service (including some performance-related pay), departures from the national curriculum, "our particular style/ethos", offering extra-curricular/enrichment activities (such as sports, performing arts etc.), and seeking parental feedback. Several further differences were also reported under the heading of innovation, each in a small minority of schools. Finally, the report also finds that a majority of free schools were "supporting" other schools, collaborating with them or planning to do so.

Leaving aside its somewhat uneasy status as a study evaluating the Department's own policy, this study can be criticised in that it made no attempt to conceptualise innovation within schools. The study does not discuss which practices genuinely set free schools apart from activity elsewhere as it relies uncritically on head teacher's assertions on what makes their free schools special. This is a problem: many practices, including some noted above, would appear to be commonplace in local authority state schools. No analysis is offered as to whether innovative practices differ according to whether schools are part of larger academy chains – presumably an important constraining influence on head teachers.

### III. Aims and Method

In view of these problems, and of the ongoing inauguration of many more free schools that may have emerged with somewhat different behaviours from the early ones studied in 2014 by the DfE, this paper reports findings from a new study of innovation in free schools and of the constraints to innovation that head teachers face. Its focus is on head teachers' perceptions about innovation. The aim was to seek to analyse the following questions:

- 1) What forms of innovation (not found in local-authority-maintained schools) do free school head teachers perceive they are deploying in relation to management (broadly considered)?
- 2) What forms of innovation (not found in local-authority-maintained schools) do free school head teachers perceive they are deploying in relation to curriculum and pedagogical practices?
- 3) What forms of collaborative networks are there for free schools to learn about, absorb and disseminate innovatory practices?

To address these questions, we used a mixed-methods approach, combining new qualitative and quantitative data. Our primary source of information is the data we collected from semi-structured in-depth interviews conducted with nine free school head teachers in primary (3) and secondary (3) and all-through (3) schools in England. We also conducted interviews with one private school that was sponsoring a free school, one parent founder and with a free schools support agency. Recruitment for interview participants was done through email invitations and through professional networks. The interviews were exploratory in nature, gaining details about the local educational context, the defined "need" on which the free school case was made, who was involved in the setup of the school, the distinctive features of the school in comparison to neighbouring schools (as perceived by the head teacher) and the pros and cons of the school's greater autonomy

and its effects. Innovation was developed as an important theme, and the interview transcripts provided the material for an in-depth analysis of how head teachers perceive innovation.

The analysis was supported by a follow-up survey which, given that innovation is seen as a positive attribute, eschewed the term innovation in favour of asking survey respondents to compare their governance, curriculum and teaching practices with what they understood to take place in the rest of the state sector<sup>1</sup>. This survey had two aims: first, to provide a check that views expressed in our interviews were not idiosyncratic; second, to explore patterns of variation in the perceptions that would not have emerged in a small number of interviews. Recruitment was carried out by email and a telephone campaign from all extant free schools in December 2015 with functioning websites and contact details (269 in total). We received 39 responses. Despite the low response rate (13%), respondents were representative according to region, school type (mainstream/special) and age range, with secondary/sixth-form schools comprising 63%, primary 26% and all-through schools 11% of the sample. We found, however, that a school's age range had no significant influence over its propensity to innovate.

These sample sizes are smaller than would have been preferred, owing to access problems. There are several potential reasons for the low take up for both methods. Free school head teachers were under extreme pressure, especially time-pressures, with skeleton teams in their start-up schools. Secondly, free schools have received a great deal of negative press in the British media, which may have made free school head teachers particularly wary about being included in research. Thirdly, since it takes time to achieve a school's objectives some head teachers may not have felt ready for outside scrutiny. These issues need to be borne in mind when considering how robustly the quantitative findings we report about the sample of respondents can be generalised to the population of free schools in 2015.

## **IV. Findings**

### **Management**

Consistent with Cirin (2014) free schools, being start-up schools, have been introducing new management practices, and some of these contrast with those commonly found in local authority schools. As expected from their formal freedoms compared with local authority schools, head teachers tend to have more control over their budgets and direct resources in response to local needs and conditions. A number of the free schools in our sample were experimenting with a range of approaches to governance and financial practices. However, we found both from our interviews and from the survey that the main perceived form of management innovation is in relation to employment practices.

One notable reason as to why this may be the case is the fact that free schools can circumvent teacher unions (Wiborg 2016; Moe and Wiborg 2016). The move toward schools becoming single-employer institutions alters the ways in which pay and working conditions are determined. As a result the schools are able to implement their own teacher contracts for pay and working conditions, and need not deal with trade unions. As one head teacher stated: 'I think probably actually one of the biggest things is we don't negotiate with unions ... over pay and conditions...I

have worked in schools where unions can be major blockers, and so we don't negotiate with unions at all here'. The perceived advantage lies not only in terms of pay setting, but also in terms of improved efficiency through greater freedom to manage. Another head teacher noted: "That's part of the appeal, that you're not dealing with a structure that's been in place for a long time, you are not dealing with unions or someone "we don't want that here", it's actually about creating a learning environment". Another respondent planned to relate annual reviews of teachers to performance pay, with contracts involving such procedures for 'every member of staff [...] a probationary period, its performance related progression in terms of pay reviews at the end of the year.' This finding is again consistent with Cirin (2014) which found that three quarters of free schools report linking pay explicitly to performance.

One innovation that is simultaneously a change in both employment practice and in students' experience of schooling is the extension of the school day, relative to that in typical local authority schools. In our sample, 22 out of 39 schools had extended the teaching day, a proportion similar to that reported in Cirin (2014). In 9 cases this extension was by 2 hours or more.

While the consequence of these changed employment practices in terms of efficient management cannot be assessed here, we can assess the consequences for teachers' rewards. According to our survey data pay was inferior, relative to the national Pay and Conditions, in 13 schools out of 38 (34%). This was brought about, in the main, through extending working hours without pay compensation, rather than through a pay cut. The hours extension itself was commonly driven by extending the teaching day: in half of the schools where this happened teachers' hours were increased. The lowering of hourly pay was, we found, more common in the stand-alone free schools, in comparison with free schools that are part of bigger chains of Academy Trusts. We found that 11 out of 23 stand-alone free schools offered poorer pay while only 2 out of 15 chain-attached free schools did so.

After employment practices, marketing emerged from our qualitative interviews as another significant area of differentiation from the preoccupations of local authority school leaders. While all schools, whether local authority controlled or otherwise, have to market themselves and attract pupils, our free school head teachers reported a strong desire to differentiate their schools significantly from neighbouring schools. Thus all the heads we spoke to put significant emphasis on promoting their school brand – as one stated 'Basically marketing the school was a huge thing'. Websites and symbols such as uniforms and school emblems formed a core part of this. As another head teacher stated: 'The uniform is smart and we place a lot of emphasis on it'. This emphasis could be in part due to the application process which requires free schools to establish that there is a 'need' in their local area. Need can be defined either by lack of places in general, or by a lack of a specific educational approach or form of provision such as faith based. Free schools also have to demonstrate that there is local support – i.e. parents who will commit to sending their child/ren to the school. Our interviews revealed how crucial a school's reputation is for attracting parents, particularly for new schools that do not have the historical record of exam results and test scores. Smart uniforms and a clear school identity help to demonstrate this to parents.

## **Curriculum and instructional methods**

Changed management practices may bring the prospect of more efficient running of a school, and decreased costs. An extended working day might also be beneficial for pupils, depending on how the extra time is spent. However, it is through innovatory practices in the classroom that direct effects on pupil performance might be expected, according to market theory, to "raise standards" as envisaged in the 2010 White Paper. Free schools, exempted from following the National Curriculum, are expected to innovate with teaching methods and offer new curriculum packages.

Our survey shows that while relatively few (12 out of 39) reported curriculum differences, just over half (21) reported that they were 'using teaching and learning practices not found in local authority controlled schools'. Again, in our survey we found a striking difference between chain-attached free schools and stand-alone free schools. The chains show significantly fewer deviations from the National Curriculum and fewer departures in class room methods than the stand-alone schools.

This apparent prevalence of classroom differences and departures is broadly consistent with the picture of widespread "innovation" described in Cirin (2014), which reports many ways in which schools perceive that they are delivering their curriculum in new ways and in new subjects. However, the inference of "innovation" from "difference" is problematic in these surveys. On one hand, the differences when teased out are often small, not warranting the term "innovation"; on the other hand, there is some question about the extent to which the perceptions of head teachers are accurate, when comparing with local authority schools. Much of what passes for innovation is arguably not at all different from practices permitted and practised in local authority schools. In our survey, the free schools that reported a high level of innovation, listed the following practices as examples: 'preparation periods for independent study', 'small teaching groups', 'emphasis on employment skills', 'effective assessment and feedback', 'homework done at school', 'character building', 'key focus on systematic routines', 'All English and Math lessons mixed ability and are supported by a second qualified teacher', 'project-based learning', and 'action research approaches to find out what works, e.g. assessing skill development'. Furthermore, free schools have reported they innovate by offering 'bilingual' teaching, emphasising 'discipline codes', 'citizenship training', and 'soliciting parental involvement'. Few of these examples could be claimed to be entirely new, or even substantially different from practices found in local authority schools where resources allow. On closer inspection, therefore, our survey suggests, if anything, that substantive innovations in curriculum and teaching methods are relatively rare.

This finding was confirmed in our quantitative interviews, where we learned that free schools were not always keen to innovate *substantially* with teaching methods, nor even that much with new subjects, instead conforming to standard practices. As one free school head teacher told us: 'Oh well, we're not really doing anything that's that much different'; while another head teacher said that, 'We don't have any desire to be particular different, it's just about the offer'.

Overall we have been unable to identify new innovations, as expected by the reformers, in the reported pedagogical practices of the free schools. Notwithstanding the market theory critique of local authority governance and the innovation expectations, there are few teaching and learning practices developed in free schools that were not already available outside the free school sector. The New Schools Network - a charity which supports setting up free schools - articulated a similar conclusion when our respondent reported to us that: 'I don't know if they [free schools] would

want to admit this, but they are not unlike other schools really [...]. The comments that most of them made were that actually they could have always done these things, or most of these things, in other schools they have worked at'.

Only in the minority of schools following particular educational philosophies, such as Steiner or Montessori (which while not novel were previously only available in the fee-paying private sector), could one expect to see something quite different in a free school. Elsewhere what might be seen as novel is that the free schools offer something slightly different by replicating and mixing education practices from other schools, offering them for the first time in a new local context. According to our interviews, some free school head teachers were engaged in adopting practices from elsewhere, perhaps more extensively than in the maintained sector, given that they are start-up schools. The countries they gleaned ideas from include the Nordic states (especially Sweden and Finland), Canada, and the USA. And while English private education was seen by one informant as a role model, others were also looking at practices in state-funded schools. The comment from one head teacher perhaps exemplifies this broad approach of, 'We try to replicate... a lot of practices from other schools – including charter schools in the US as well as from the state sector, the independent sector, even from business... I don't proclaim that anything I've done here is my own idea, I've just tried to take the best ideas and try to package it in a way and try to implement it well'.

In sum, we can observe that in our samples a higher level of substantive innovation is taking place in regards to management practices than in respect of curriculum and pedagogical practices. Creating a free school offer that seems to differ from other schools appears to be done through marketing and branding rather than innovation. It transpired from our interviews that free schools put much stronger emphasis on marketing their 'offer' and differentiation than on the desire to innovate. It was evident that heads used marketing as a way of distinguishing their services through symbols rather than through substantive innovations in core practices. Consequently, free schools shape their intake through image presentation rather than allocating resources to innovation in the production process itself. Adopting well-known practices based on 'profiles' or 'images' may be a more effective and less risky option for free schools than experimenting with new approaches. The process of diversification may be enhanced by free schools targeting particular education markets – for example by offering options such as 'core subjects and discipline', 'child-centred learning and mixed ability classes', or 'faith-based learning'. Such promotions would result in diversification based on social characteristics of student intake, not on innovation. Meanwhile, free school leaderships are also using their freedoms, not only in procurement markets but also in their employment relations practices to begin to restructure traditional relationships with teachers.

## **V. Discussion: constraints on innovation in free schools.**

Innovation in curriculum and teaching methods is limited in the free schools in our qualitative and quantitative samples, echoing the similar findings noted earlier in studies of similar school types abroad. In this section, we discuss some possible reasons, framed as forms of constraint on change, with evidential support from our interviews.

The ability to change and bring about substantial innovation may be constrained in great part by the school environment. Research of institutional environments suggests that, within an organisational field, organisations inhabiting the same environment experience similar pressures and common constraints. Consequently, they adapt their internal structures in similar ways even though environmental conditions shape the distribution of the populations of organisations (Meyer & Rowan 1992; Hanson 2001). As accommodations are made between the numerous organisations in a schools' field, a powerful field of forces emerges that acts like a network of constraints and tends to 'trap' schools in their place (Hanson 2001). While market-like conditions may engender uncertainty for organisations, Brown (1992) describes uncertainty as a product of providers' and consumers' imperfect information on school production processes and of 'bounded rationality', that is the inability to know beyond the horizon, about potentials and further market conditions. Schools accommodate and try to minimise consumer concerns by standardising core services in the classroom practices, methods, and curriculum across sectors, resulting in uniformity (DiMaggio & Powel 1991). Even though free schools are supposed to be an entirely new and different provision driven by innovation, they become more entrenched in a 'structuration' process, which pushes them to adopt similar practices to other schools.

Free school founders may also face barriers of their own, making them averse to taking risks. Most of them would have attended traditional schools that act like an unconscious 'script'. This could explain why free schools resembles traditional local authority schools by having for instance the same organisational structure, with a head teacher, a set of teachers assigned to specific class rooms, and various support and administrative personnel. These forms may be so ingrained in some of the school founders' mindsets that they don't consider challenging those institutional forms. Furthermore, teachers also do not want to be viewed as 'experimenting' with students by subjecting them to ideas that are not rooted in tried and tested practices. Hence, free schools model themselves after other schools. This may be exacerbated when schools face uncertainty. As one free school head teacher explained, innovation is not necessarily the end goal, 'It's trying to get the best full education but not to be too innovative, because ...you're not offering stability to children, so practice we are doing is practice which has actually been done and known to succeed, rather than something which is totally new'. Providing the best education possible, and attracting pupils to the school was at the forefront of all the head teachers' approaches, rather than experimentation.

Parents can also be inhibitors of change, rather than the dynamic agents who through their consumer choices, or their participation as founders, governors and pressure groups, would reshape the marketplace as envisioned by policymakers. In contrast, parents are often experienced as an 'inherently conservative clientele' who tend to view schools as overly innovative when they seek to embrace progressive reforms (Whitty *et al* 1998). While free schools may empower teachers as professionals to establish a school around a shared educational philosophy or innovative idea, they may run up against such tradition-oriented parents. The 'blocking power' of parents is particularly pertinent to free schools as parents are strongly encouraged to run or get involved in the work of these schools. One free school founder reported that: 'Our school is located in a conservative area and parents constrain our freedom to experiment with teaching. They put strong pressure on us to provide a traditional curriculum and keep discipline in class rooms. We wanted a relaxed environment for children to grow and learn, but that has now gone also thanks to a newly appointed head teacher who enforces discipline in a way contrary to the initial wishes of the parent

founders'. We do not know to what extent parents' act as a constraining force within the free school sector – more research is required - but that parents tend to gravitate toward traditional school models and thus constrain innovation (Whitty *et al* 1998; Lubienski 2009).

Another constraining factor may be related to the relative isolation of free schools. According to innovation theory as described earlier, innovation does not normally occur in stand-alone organisations. Interaction and interdependence with other organisations is seen as one of the most important factors behind novel improvements. Hence, a strong emphasis is put on schools by reformers to collaborate with other schools in order to drive and implement real changes and bring these to scale for a district.

According to the government survey, free schools widely engage in supporting other schools, through externally-run Continuous Professional Development courses, joint practice development, and/or "formalised partnerships", each in about half of free schools (Cirin, 2014). From this it is concluded that "free schools are not working in isolation but are collaborating with and supporting other local schools, helping to fulfil the government's vision of a self-improving, school-led system" (ibid. 5). Our research contrasts with this picture, finding that free schools are often quite isolated and that interactions are occurring primarily between the free schools themselves, rather than the wider school system. Whatever the reality lying behind the "partnerships" referred to in the government survey, it transpired from our in-depth interviews that free schools perceive themselves to be poorly integrated into local school networks.

One reason behind this finding is that some free schools focus solely on the process of setting up their schools and therefore display little interest in or put resources aside to engage with other schools. One head teacher explained, 'I think some of the constraints are that when you're starting a new school and it's a totally stand-alone free school, you're doing everything so your areas of expertise are stretched very, very quickly... ..'. Other free schools claimed they lacked sufficient support from schools in their neighbourhood as well as from sponsors or local authorities to help them develop their schools. Relying only on the school itself caused problems according to another head, who said that, 'There's no-one in the school with the expertise who can pass that expertise down ...'. The lack of external support resulted in some cases from suspicion and hesitation by local stakeholders to engage with a new school entering 'their' district. A head teacher confessed that, 'The authority was so anti-free school, so we had really a hard time'. Another lamented that their new freedoms came with a lack of assistance: '...if we have been part of the local authority it would have been far easier, or if the support had come from DfE it would be so easy. But I didn't feel the support was there.' Yet another referred to existing school networks that were unfavourable to a new school's integration: 'There is the threat of being the new school. But it's also got to do with the local education dynamic, which is that we're based between two large towns, one of which has a track record in the last five years of either enforced academisation or larger chains coming in, and ...the other, of people trying to resist academisation...'.

A result of these dynamics working against free school integration is that free schools are compelled to create networks within the free school sector itself, separate from local partnerships and networks. Rather than trading expertise with neighbouring schools, free schools relate more easily with other free schools – a process that has been facilitated by the New School Network.

A further factor holding back innovation is that the regulatory structure does not reward it, and may even disincentivize it. Free schools remain subject to government accountability and assessments systems, which tend to focus on schools success in raising students' math and reading scores, distracting attention from divergent educational goals. OFSTED inspections act as a homogenising force as the accountability regime coerces schools to comply with recognised and standardised methods and curriculums. There remains a tension, therefore, between the aims of the broader free school project and the principle of public accountability as currently practised.

One head teacher commented: 'We are judged like every other school. And that's an interesting one because free schools want to innovate, and in essence what we are picking up on the grapevine is that actually innovate but not too much... I am aware of some Academies and free schools that have moved away from that [GCSE results and student progress scores] and its totally blown their OFSTED...'. Another head teacher told us that 'I know of other schools that have done quite innovative things, or haven't done certain things, and then OFSTED have wanted to know why'. Another head teacher told us that '...the biggest relief is getting OFSTED out of the way. Because actually the six months in the run up to it, everything was about "well how are we going to play that for OFSTED" rather than "what's going to work for our kids"....' Testing and schools' concerns about their position in league tables, are also perceived to constrain innovative efforts. As one head teacher stated 'All the tests that we have, ... you stop everything else and you focus on the tests because that's what you have to do'.

## **VI. Conclusion**

380 free schools had been established by mid-2016, with more than 200 in the pre-opening stage and others expected to follow. Free schools have become a significant if small part of the institutional landscape in the English school system, alongside the many schools that have converted from local authority control to become academies. Despite their controversial status, free schools' growth has been facilitated by lack of any concerted national opposition (despite local controversies (for example, Miller, Craven and Tooley, 2004). , arguably because of their good fortune to have emerged at a time of rapidly growing population. At least at the primary level, despite the fact that free school openings have never been explicitly tied to population needs, few schools can have been forced to close as a result of free schools opening up in their locality.

Success in implementation should not be confused, however, with the attainment of long-term policy objectives, and it will be important in future to secure independent evaluations of the free school model as a vehicle for educational improvement. While such evaluations will emerge in due course, in this paper we have sought to contribute with some new evidence about the mechanism through which improvement in free schools is hoped for, namely through substantive innovation. For this we have combined in-depth qualitative interviews with a small but up-to-date survey.

Our main finding is that the extent of substantive innovation in teaching and curriculum matters appears to be relatively limited. In contrast, we found more evidence of genuine differences from other state schools in respect of areas of management and governance, not least in the field of employment relations and in the emphasis given to a school's market function. This finding is quite similar to what has been observed in Charter Schools in the United States and Free Schools in

Sweden. Here, we have detected signs that the extended teaching day introduced in several of our free schools is being introduced at the expense of long hours worked by teachers. However, we did not find convincing evidence of any substantive communication and interchange of ideas between free schools and local authority maintained schools, such as might be needed to sustain an innovatory system that allowed new ideas to be disseminated and absorbed. Our survey also revealed significant differences between those that are stand-alone – many of which risked remaining quite isolated – and those that are part of academy chains, with the former being notably more innovative. If as expected new waves of free schools are driven especially by pre-existing academy chains' plans to expand into new areas (Higham, 2014b), extrapolation would suggest that innovation would continue to be constrained by the policies of those chains.

We do not claim that our study methodology is ideal. Indeed the relative isolation of many free schools from existing schools is simultaneously something that limits outsiders' (including researchers') knowledge of their internal processes and a contributory factor lying behind our main finding of low innovation in the classroom. Nor would we assert that our evidence is the final word: as free schools mature and head teachers are no longer grappling with set-up costs, the fruits of their freedoms, beneficial or otherwise, might become more apparent. The data nevertheless provide a significant new source of knowledge about free schools, given the dearth of independent empirical evidence in this field and the vaunted centrality of innovation to the free school policy.

Whether the innovations that are introduced are indeed beneficial for free school pupils' performance – and indeed for pupils throughout the system if the innovations are spread and absorbed in other schools – is beyond the scope of this paper. The assumption that innovations in curriculum and teaching methods would have positive outcomes, may be questioned, especially where there is reduced scope for scientific evaluation of innovations carried out in isolation. The main conclusion we would draw from our findings is that one should not expect dramatic differences over the short to medium term in pupil performance from the introduction of free schools. This null finding could be overturned if a large number of small changes in classroom practices are brought about by the policy, and if these cumulatively engender improvement in the long term. The extended school day could also have a significant effect on performance if this change becomes generalised and embedded. Yet any assessment of the effect of free schools on pupils' academic and subsequent labour market performance must take into account social selectivity in free school access, according to both family resources and prior educational achievement. By contrast, it seems more likely that the changed management practices will become a feature of the new free school environment: if so, it would suggest that we may expect to see increased use of performance-related pay as a management tool in schools, as well as a lengthening of teachers' hours to meet the pressure for an extended school day.



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<sup>1</sup> We used a mix-method approach, combining new qualitative and quantitative data. Our primary source of information is the data we collected from semi-structured in-depth interviews conducted with nine free school head teachers in primary (3) and secondary (3) and all-through (3) schools in England. We also conducted interviews with one private school that was sponsoring a free school, one parent founder and with a free schools support agency. Recruitment for interview participants was done through email invitations and through professional networks. We aimed at a broad range of schools within the constraints of who agreed to be interviewed. The interviews were exploratory in nature, gaining details about the local educational context, the defined “need” on which the free school case was made, who was involved in the setup of the school, the distinctive features of the school in comparison to neighbouring schools (as perceived by the head teacher) and the pros and cons of the school’s greater autonomy and its effects. Innovation emerged as an important theme for the schools we interviewed, and the interview transcripts provided the material for an in-depth analysis of how head teachers perceive innovation.