

Diversity in education: Struggle for life

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1. The role of the State

Even if private schools have served to educate a great many children very well, it is traditional to think of it as supplementary to the educational responsibilities of government, seen as the best way to educate children. Education is increasingly seen as something the State owes to its citizens, and it is the State's responsibility to ensure it provides an equitable education for all. There are two main reasons why the state (instead then the private sector) has been given the task of educating youth citizens:

- public schools, with homogeneous programs, have a responsibility for producing at least minimally qualified individuals, trusting common values, to cooperate as adults.
- the state could help disadvantaged families, paying school costs with income taxes. The reason for that is not only equity, but also the negative consequences on national social capital, if too many would decide not to pay for their youth education.

Of course, there is also a number of limits to these reasons. For instance, in a democratic country, decisions about curriculum (contents, methods, timing, examinations...) would be influenced by the political majority. State, and consequently the school system, is not *super partes*, but is influenced, not to say conditioned, by the political power. In a state monopolistic school system, minorities have to accept an education at least partly different, or opposed, to their opinion and values. It should be obvious that minority choices cannot be fully determined by representatives of a local or national majority: there must be some governing principles beyond immediate self interest of the majority. If not, we could speak about an unfair treatment of minorities, even if actually educational institutions can't be neutral; better, neutrality itself is an ideology that can't be imposed to people willing a different kind of school, i.e. denominational. This is the limit of common school, mainly in a "plural" society, where a common culture (perhaps in itself a myth) no more exists.

The policy challenge is actually to devise ways of ensuring that every child receives an adequate education, while permitting the greatest degree of school autonomy and of diversity among schools, that is consistent with accountability. Is the best way to do so to multiply state schools, opposing private ones? I don't agree: in fact, the internal pluralism of public schools is not a model which guarantees the right to education, because it denies the possibility of adhering voluntarily to a specific education project. In my opinion, it is better to allow private schools to exist, monitoring their accountability, and balancing autonomy with accountability; at the same time, the Government must avoid a paralyzing regulation.

As for the balance between quality and equity, growth in standards may be temporarily related to some growth in inequality (Gewirtz et al., 1995)², because schools become more stratified in terms of attendance and achievement between different groups: but there is a lack of solid evidence for these claims. There is also little evidence that "the era of school choice" has allowed less successful school to slip into a "spiral of decline" (Gorard et al., 2002)³. In fact "no single instructional approach can meet the needs of every student... equity may necessitate very different experiences for different students"⁴: it

1 Expert at Gruppo CLAS (Italy)

2 GEWIRTZ S., BALL S., BOWE R., *Markets, Choice and equity in education*, Open University Press, Buckingham, 1995

3 GORARD S., FITZ J., TAYLOR C., *Does school choice lead to 'spirals of decline'?* in "Journal of Education Policy", vol. 17, n.3, 2002, pp.367-384

4 ROSSELL C.H., GLENN C.L., *The Cambridge controlled choice plan*, in "The Urban Review", vol.20, n. 2, 1988, pp.75- 93

is better to speak about “diversity of excellence”, than about “diversity of quality”. Struggle for existence in private schools, in fact, is not only struggle for legal right to exist, for funding, for hiring and firing teachers and principals, or for parental choice, but also, and perhaps mainly, for their identity. Is not only a question of money, it is a question of culture, of shaping the minds: as Lieberman writes⁵, “the struggle for choice is a struggle for American soul”.

2. Diversity as a risk versus diversity as an opportunity

Diversity in education is not always considered an assist or a value: it seems that often it is thought as a **risk**. The idea and the role of diversity in education depends on the value assigned to the concept itself, on the form of school system and on the characteristics of the social system.

Sociological literature says that an integrated system (i.e. composed by state and private schools) works to *improve the quality of the system as a whole*, breaking the state monopoly and introducing the idea of *competition*: as schools become more competitive it is possible that they will seek those aspects of each others’ programs which appear to be producing positive results in the form of recruitment of pupils. Private schools have a substantial autonomy, regarding the means they employ to attain their educational objectives, but at the same time they are *responsive to their clients, and to the authority that authorized them*. Private schools cannot take for granted their customers: their survival depends upon the degree they are responding (or the families believe they are, that is the same) to family preferences, providing the education they demand.

No student is compelled to attend a private school, and for this reason “schools of choice” can’t be permanent: private schools are not “domestic” but “wild” organisations, and to survive they have to be competitive, to become “laboratory for new educational ideas”, and so doing they “create dynamics that will cause the state schools to change, so as to improve education for all student”⁶. If private sector doesn’t exist, or is very feeble, state system could ignore demands for change or responsiveness, because this doesn’t have negative consequences. This is the main reason why public education, and perhaps teachers unions, are opposing not the existence itself, but at least the public funding of private sector.

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Not all private schools, of course, have transformative powers: some of them, perhaps the greatest part, are fully traditional (and parents like them for this reason). But public sector is afraid of the mere possibility, and it tries to avoid dissent about educational purposes, policies and practices, suppressing comparison. The concept of diversity in education is mainly connected to the public/private quality, but of course there are other forms of diversity (starting from internal pluralism), connected to the pedagogical program, as for instance in the charter schools, that are all similar in their nature (public, not state, schools, operating on a non bureaucratic basis) but really different as for their aims and forms. Even in the public school, the idea of “common” school is a fig leaf: actually, there are great difference within and among the schools. In the private sector too you have market schools, confessional schools, home schooling and so on, but there is no stress on “common” school.

To diversity is also connected the idea of parental choice: the family right to choose education for their children is indeed formal, if all the school have the same characteristics. Moreover, this right could be formal or real: it means, families can apply to the school they choose at the same conditions (i.e. free, or using vouchers...) or can apply freely, but have different costs, as in Italy. The parents *voice*, in Hirschmann⁷ terms, is not always strong, but at the same time *exit* has costs, and policy makers are not always sensitive to family needs. Holmes⁸ writes: “each generation of parents believes that change can be accomplished by efforts at their local school or school board, or by changes in provincial policy. The evidence is, however, that the deeply committed educational experts who dominate our faculties of education, provincial departments of education, and school district administration have learned well how to dig in and wait until the wave of protest stops, and then to carry on from where they left

5 LIEBERMAN M., *Public education: an autopsy*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Ma, 1993

6 HASSEL B.C., *The Charter School Challenge: avoiding the pitfalls, fulfilling the promise*, Brookings Institution, Washington D.C. 1999

7 HIRSCHMANN A.O., *Exit, voice and loyalty*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Ma, 1970

8 HOLMES M., *The reformation of Canada’s school: breaking the barriers to parental choice*, Mc Gills Queen University Press, Montreal 1998

off. Indeed, it is natural for large bureaucracies to move slowly, the more so when their own ideology is challenged”.

To assess the reasons why not everywhere the role of diversity is considered as positive, we can think about the *role of education*: if the idea is that education is aiming not to a person full development, but to acculturating people in a fixed culture (normally, the majority one), or if the main task of the school is to prepare for a job, of course it is better to have only one model of school, fostering the conformity. People worrying a sort of anarchy don't think that non-public schools are subject to regulation, quite apart from their source of funding (sometime, more than state schools); if they are private, but publicly funded, the risk is that regulatory scheme could be so detailed to become intrusive, and to force the private schools to offer a program of instruction that is indistinguishable in important respects from the public school program.

Charles Glenn calls that “the ambiguous embrace of government”⁹, wondering if public funding of private schools leads inevitably to their being (too) conformed to public schools: school autonomy is essential if the right of parents to make decisions about the schooling of their children is to have any meaning, but on the other hand society has a right to protect itself by ensuring that the education provided to all of its children is adequate to the demand that will be placed upon them as they become adults.

This model was perhaps possible in a society where the common school was the result of a really common value system (if any!), but in the contemporary societies, featured by an increasing diversity of race, religion, nationality, a standardized school system is not able to cope with the needs for education of the families, individuals or social groups. The common school cannot, with the best will in the world, represent the myriad diverse communities in their territory: but one of the strongest reason to contrast the public funding of private school is the idea that public schools will worse off. In the U.S. quite all the researches on voucher programs with which students could attend a private school (or a public school in another district) suggest that public schools are both able and willing to respond constructively to the prospect of losing their students to a choice program, by improving educational services¹⁰. Studies examining public school response to school choice in other countries have found more mixed results.

3. How to help private schooling to empower parental choice: the funding of education

Somewhere, school choice is exercised primarily by parents who can afford to choose where they will live, using desirable public schools, or who can pay for the private school. There are two possibilities to change this situation: funding *families*, that can choose every school they want, public or private, profit or non profit, but accredited, by means of vouchers (or another form of personal sustain, like income tax reduction, grants for students...), or funding *schools*, so families can send their children free or paying reduced tuition fees. In both ways, the idea is that “money follows the children” wherever he or she decides to move.

In Sweden¹¹, in 1992, a reform introduced a voucher programme: basically everybody has the right to start and run a school, and get funding corresponding the average cost per student from the municipality in which the school is located. Independent schools (profit or non-profit) have to be approved by the Swedish National Agency for Education (NAE), follow the national curriculum, are not allowed to select students and are not allowed to charge any top up fees. It is relatively easy to enter the education market: before the reform, fewer than 1% of students in compulsory education attended

9 GLENN C.L., *The ambiguous embrace: government and faith-based schools*, Princeton University Press, Princeton NJ, 2000

10 A complete bibliography is not possible there: we suggest to have a look to some of the web sites dedicated to this argument: www.ksg.harvard.edu/pepg; www.friedmanfoundation.org/schoolchoiceworks; www.borrrk.edu; www.thomasfordhamfoundation.org; www.educationnext.org; There are of course also different opinions: see BARROW L., ROUSE C.E., *School vouchers: recent findings and unanswered questions*, in “Economic Perspective”, vol. 32, n. 3, 2008.

11 SAHLGREN G.H., *Schooling for money. Swedish Education reform and the eole of the profit motive*, IEA Discussion Paper n.33, London 2010

independent schools: in 2010, they are about 10% in compulsory education, and over 20% for upper secondary schools.

Of course, this could be positive if, through competition, the voucher reform had a positive impact on educational achievement: the studies vary from enthusiastic to sober or sceptical, but in general researchers find a significant increase in the educational achievement, even in times of severe economical turbulence. In fact, Sweden incremented its voucher programme during the economic crisis, leading to cuts in school funding, unemployment and declining interest among students to become teachers. The effects of competition, suggest B lmark and Lindhal¹², could have been larger, if failing public schools had been closed.

The financial crisis forced affluent countries to make major cuts, proportionally greater for the private sector (if it was funded before). In 2009 and again in 2010, OECD carried on a study to see which have been main effects of the economic crisis on education¹³. In 2009, in seven countries, five point were fixed:

- a marked increase in demand for non-compulsory education in many countries as a result of rising unemployment;
- some budget cuts in education in some countries;
- attempts by governments in several countries to reduce the negative consequences on schools and universities by targeted explicit or implicit stimulus measures
- a rather severe impact on private investment.

The second OECD *educationtoday* Crisis Survey has been carried out over the summer of 2010 on twenty-five OECD member countries, at a time of starting economic recovery. The main outcomes of the 2010 survey are the following:

- The education system has not been dramatically affected by overall budget cuts. In countries where public investment in education has diminished, the effects are still very specific and concentrated, and vary across and within sectors of education.
- In general, governments seem to be rather successful in protecting education spending, although in some cases the impact on teachers and schools is significant
- The demand for non-compulsory education continues to augment, especially in vocational education and training, although the recession reduces the capacity of enterprises to uphold their training investments.
- The recession has not slowed down reforms in education; on the contrary, some countries have accelerated reforms.
- Some governments are also taking into consideration the difficult situation of private households by increasing social measures to contain education cost.

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The economic crisis actually appears to be influencing demand for education both in quantitative and qualitative terms in several OECD countries. Although private education was not specifically addressed in the survey, some OECD countries observe the negative impact of the crisis on participation in private education. Being often the common idea that private schools are not “free” but instead “rich” schools, normally the cuts affect more the private than the state sector

Regarding the supply side, the results of the survey suggest that the economic crisis and related stimulus measures have had some influence on education across the OECD area. Furthermore, it may be that the public investment in education is increasing in some countries to ensure educational participation in the event of decreasing possibilities for private educational investment. For example in Japan, where the private cost of education is above the OECD average, measures have been taken to ease the negative impact of the economic crisis on students and their families.

12 B LMARK A., LINDHAL M, *Does school privatization improve educational achievement? Evidence from Sweden's voucher reform*, IZA Discussion Paper n.36, Institute for the Study of Labor, Bonn, www.ftp.iza.org/dp3691.pdf

13 Damme, D. V. and K. Karkkainen (2011), “OECD Educationtoday Crisis Survey 2010: The Impact of the Economic Recession and Fiscal Crisis on Education in OECD Countries”, *OECD Education Working Papers*, No. 56, OECD Publishing. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/5kgj1r9zk09x-en>

4. Consequences of an integrated – public/private – system

As regards choice, proponents of marketisation think that parents from any ethnic or social background would have an equal opportunity to exercise choice; critics argue that those with more cultural and material capital would use their existing advantage by being given greater ability to exercise choice in education. Studies in Europe have found that *in general and at the very beginning*, some polarisation is exacerbated, and “weak” students are considered an “inconvenient” in competitive market (both from public and private schools). But some data have also shown that if choice is between different public schools, even working class parents become “alert” from “inert” and move to the best available public school. Opponents to the public funding of private schooling (educational bureaucracy, teachers’ unions, leftist academics) argue that allowing choice between public and private will neither improve the fit between educational goals and the families’ needs, nor provide an organizational climate encouraging innovation and accountability in every school, but instead they think that it will further inequality, because middle class parents will monopolize the schools perceived as better, and they will fly from the public schools to the private subsidized schools, creating or reinforcing elite schools. In a word, in their opinion, public school can’t cope with private, in a fair competition!

On the other hand, it is evident that, if all parents are allowed to choose the school which they think are suited to their children, likely education could be more effective, and parents would be more satisfied. So we can suggest that diversity is the only possibility to give an answer to the demand for an education inspired to the different values, giving to parents (individually or in groups) a greater authority in education. This could be both in private or public schools: if you have a private system, of course it has to be financed in (quite) the same way. A school that is forced to select its students by wealth is not a free school. If you have a public school system, where private schools are appointed to play a public role (as in the Netherlands) there is no problem. If the public system overlaps the state or district schools, it is likely that diversity is reduced.

Of course, every state has the right to ask the free schools to respect what we can call the “game rules”, it means some fundamental values connected to the citizenship: it could also ask for a minimum of competences that are requested to live as an adult in the society (the three “AR” for instance: reading, writing, arithmetic). My opinion is that the State has only this one fundamental duty, indicating the conditions for the autonomous schools to be accredited as public: common contents requested to full enjoy citizenship, basic learning, teachers’ qualifications, levels and streams of schools and higher education. The steering function of government will actually increase if it was no longer “preoccupied with rowing the boat. Governments may no longer produce services, but they are still responsible for making sure needs are met”¹⁴. It is really important to ensure the adequacy of education provided by the offered alternatives. Likely, autonomy will increase from primary to secondary education; schools will be assessed on their results basis. The State will have three fundamental tasks: planning, assessment and educational research; no organization, a heavy task that risks to overdrive every other possibility (in Italy, the state school is the biggest enterprise; likely the biggest in the world, after the collapse of the Red Army...).

On the equity side (every citizen, even if poor, has to attain fixed levels of education), in Italy we know that the state school has failed: we have a too high level of dropouts and withdrawal, and the researches say that the poorer the students, the earlier the dropout. Offering the same kind of education to everyone has a paradox effect, because it risks to exclude people that would profit better from vocational education, apprenticeship and so on. In the school, anyway, they should have personalized options; in a standardized state school, this is quite impossible.

Choice schools seem to be a possible answer to both aims (equity and common citizenship socialization), because families are allowed to send their children in a school where they can find commonalities with home values. If choice schools, anyway, are considered as “private” in the meaning that they are not producing a common good, and for this reason they are not, or not enough, funded, inequity increases: rich families could choose schools, poor families could not. Private schools being “affluent” schools is a *consequence* of the way education is funded.

14 OSBORNE D., GAEBLER T., *Reinventing Government*, Addison Wesley, Reading (MA), 1992

Apart from ideological conditioning, so strong in Italy, a change in funding of education (now standardized and based on the number of classes) could realize a better equity:

- using voucher to allow low class families to send their children in a choice school (both state or private)
- using capitation to fund both state and private schools, helping families to “vote with feet” sending students wherever they want, provided that schools are accredited
- giving schools greater autonomy, but starting a real system of assessment to i) identify the failing schools ii) help these schools to improve through programs of innovation iii) give families better information to choose iv) give more funds to best performing schools v) shifting control from input to output control.

We should reject the idea that the state must endow all children with significant educational choices in classroom: instead, parents should be encouraged and sustained to make decisions about their children’s education and to take responsibility for the consequences: parents have a legitimate interest in selecting the values and educational practices they prefer to grow their children.