

CEPaLS 13: Promises, Promises

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This text was original posted on my blog on Tumblr on 16th February 2017. The blog has been deleted and so I am presenting it here as a CEPaLS paper.

Promises, promises

Enclosures of the common land in the 18th Century led to a reported statement: “All I know is, I once had a cow and an Act of Parliament has taken it from me”. So traditional grazing rights were dispensed with as poor families were pushed off the common land. We might replace this with a modern day version: “All I know is, we once had a school and an Act of Parliament has taken it from us”. So local common schools with open access to the community are being replaced by experimental schools – my colleague [Dr Steven Courtney](#) has shown there are between 70 and 90 different types of schools across the former education ‘common land’. Schools have been ‘enclosed’ by new ‘owners’ and a curriculum targeted at particular students. The media are now regularly reporting on school closures. Children and families are increasingly rendered as failed consumers.

In blog posted on 15th January I noted the closure of Free Schools, and the questions this raises for children and families competing in a market. It seems that Free Schools are provided (sometimes in places where the numbers of children do not need more school places) and are un-provided through closure. It seems that the Greater Manchester University Technical College (GM UTC) in Oldham is now due to close, and it also seems that it is not the only UTC to close this year.

https://www.theguardian.com/education/2017/feb/07/greater-manchester-university-technical-college-closes-three-years?utm_source=esp&utm_medium=Email&utm_campaign=GU+Today+main+NEW+H+categories&utm_term=212235&subid=365947&CMP=EMCNEWEML6619I2

This article provides more challenging evidence about the impact of markets on children and parents. Those who have made the choice to attend this school are now faced with finding another school place, and to learn with those who did not make that choice in the first place. This also raises questions about how markets work: are there enough children? Are there enough children of the right type to produce the right outcomes for the school?

Thinking undertaken by Hannah Arendt is helpful here. She is very clear that children should not be used as pawns in adult experiments. So why are educational products and their providers being allowed to take risks with the provision of children’s education? Children and parents are being promised an education that is based on chance and competition, and yet education requires certainty and stability. Arendt argues that promise-making is central to providing this:

“Without being bound to the fulfilment of promises, we would never be able to keep our identities; we would be condemned to wander helplessly and without direction in the darkness of each man’s lonely heart, caught in its contradictions and equivocalities – a darkness which only the light shed over the public realm through the presence of others, who confirm the identity between the one who promises and the one who fulfils, can dispel” (Arendt 1958 [The Human Condition](#) p237).

It seems that the children at this UTC have been given a commercial promise – an education based on enough children making a choice, and enough of the right type of children making

that choice, that creates an identity that is now worthless. They must now wander in the market place, trying to find another identity. The promised identity has failed, and so they must now seek another one, in another school, and possibly another and another. Indeed, research shows that 'parental choice' is actually a fabrication because schools choose children and not the other way around.

This seems to be ridiculous way to treat children and to invest public resources. Why do we not turn a common town into a common school, where children (and adults) are given the public promise of an education? Where the needs of all children (and adults) are identified and provided for? I am using 'common' here in relation to shared access to a public asset – I do not mean ordinary. Research shows that common schools have done extraordinary work with and on behalf of children in England. Perhaps if we had a learning town that is inclusive of everyone, with specialization within the town rather than between competitive education products that may or may not fail, then not only will children be enabled to learn without the distress of having failed to make the right choice, but also we would be making a promise that we had a better chance of keeping. Perhaps the notion of the promises we give and the process of promise-making and promise-keeping need our urgent consideration. We need to keep our public promises to and for all children.

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