

Research Briefing Summary: The Social Composition of Free Schools after Three Years

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Introduction

Are English “free schools” socially selective, and if so in what way? This is one of the frontline issues that have arisen in the wake of the government’s flagship policy of encouraging new schools through civic initiatives.

While it is too early to evaluate free schools by their pupils’ performance in public examinations, if they are going to deliver the benefits that the government anticipates, then it is important to see where free schools are being established, and who is going to them. Is access to a free school being shared relatively equally across social groups? Have they emerged most strongly in areas of social disadvantage, responding to the needs identified by local groups or organisations, as anticipated by the government when it was formulating its policy in opposition (The Conservative Party, 2007)?

Unlike in Sweden, the UK policy has been controversial, with no consensus among politicians. Some critics have expressed concerns that free schools could become socially exclusive, favouring middle-class aspirations over those of working-class families with fewer resources. Early evidence on applicants did indeed suggest that some groups that might otherwise have set up schools in disadvantaged areas had found it difficult to navigate their way throughout a complex application process (Higham, 2014). Critics have feared that some free school proponents would use the flexibility in location, and in the selection rules, to find ways to favour children of higher ability, or from more socially-advantaged backgrounds.

Both sides of the argument have been able to point to cases from the early free schools that support their position. But there is much variety among free schools, so to generalise we need larger numbers. By cumulating three years’ worth of intakes, we are now in a position to obtain robust findings. Using the National Pupil Database we examine available data for 88 primary and 63 secondary free schools that had opened by September 2013.

2. Our Methods

We analyse both primary and secondary schools (though not special schools). We look at the new intakes to schools in the three most recent years for which data are currently available: 2011/12, 2012/13 and 2013/14. We consider reception year (Year R), the first year of primary school and Year 7 pupils, the first year at secondary school.¹

For each school type we examine three aspects of the social composition of the pupils: their degree of poverty, as indicated by the proportion of pupils eligible for free school meals (FSM); their prior achievement, as indicated in the case of secondary schools by the mean Key Stage 2 (KS2) scores of the Year 7 intake, and in the case of primary schools by the mean score on the Foundation Stage Profile (FSP) of the Year R intake; their ethnicity, as indicated simply by the proportion of pupils with white ethnicity.

3. Our Findings

Some key findings are shown in Table 1. We find that both the government and the critics can point to support for their views.

- i. First, the government’s anticipation that free schools would emerge in disadvantaged neighbourhoods is, on average, vindicated: looking at the *neighbourhoods* of free schools, one can see that there is a slightly higher proportion of children entitled to FSM when compared to the rest of England: 22% compared with 17% at secondary level, and 18% compared with 16% at primary level.

¹ In a small number of local authorities, year 7 is not the transfer year to secondary education; we ignore this for our analysis.

- ii. However, critics' concerns that the schools might become socially selective are also supported. *Within* the neighbourhood, fewer pupils actually attending the free schools were eligible for FSM – only 17.5% for secondary schools and 13.5% in primary schools. The net effect is that the free secondary school pupils themselves are close to average for all secondary schools, and the free primary school pupils very slightly better off.
- iii. In terms of prior achievement, there is a marked difference at primary level: the free schools children have a distinctly higher mean score (0.33) than elsewhere in the neighbourhood and the rest of England where it is close to zero. The difference is statistically significant at a high level.
- iv. The table also confirms that free schools have emerged most strongly in neighbourhoods with high proportions of non-white children, compared with the national average, and that within those neighbourhoods they have admitted even higher proportions of non-whites. Not shown in the table but probably linked to this ethnic composition, among the free “faith schools” (i.e. schools that have proclaimed a religious affiliation), the proportion that are non-Christian is 17% for secondary schools and 9% for primary schools. These compare with under 1% for other schools at either level.

In short, it seems that the social composition of free schools' pupils *is* turning out to be a bit special in certain ways. Notably, when it comes to evaluating the performance of primary free schools, it will be important to examine their value added, rather than their academic outcomes, which are likely to be better than average because of their intakes.

Table 1: Social Deprivation, Prior Achievement and Ethnicity: Free School Pupils Compared With Others

	Measure	Free Schools	Neighbourhood of Free Schools	Rest of England
Proportion eligible for free school meals				
Primary	% of pupil intakes	13.5	18.3	15.9
Secondary	% of pupil intakes	17.5	22.1	17.3
Prior achievement				
Primary	FSP mean score	0.33*	-0.05*	0.01
Secondary	Key Stage 2 mean score	28.1	28.1	28.5
Ethnicity				
Primary	% of white ethnicity	34.0*	50.9*	71.3
Secondary	% of white ethnicity	61.7	66.0	78.0

Note: Figures apply to all schools opened up till September 2013, for which there is information in the January 2014 census; *applies to only 43 schools, those opened up till the 2012/13 intake. FSP, the Foundation Stage Profile, is a standardised score from a teacher-assessed set of benchmarks recorded during the pupil's first year of primary school. Key Stage 2 is a nationally set and remotely marked test; it is a useful proxy for academic success at the point of entry to secondary school. “Neighbourhood” is defined by the Census as “lower super-output-area”.

References

Higham, R. (2014) ‘Free schools in the Big Society: the motivations, aims and demography of free school proposers’, *Journal of Education Policy*, 29 (1), 122-139
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