Finding a Balance: Local Autonomy and State Involvement in Alternative Provisions of Educational Choice

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Academy schools have become a prominent policy initiative in the UK. By creating self-governing bodies with increased freedom over the educational mandate and financial management of a particular school, the hope is that the increased autonomy will correlate to greater educational innovation and improved student outcomes, particularly for those who are most disadvantaged. Louise Bamfield correctly identifies an ambiguity in the use of the term "freedom" that is employed in the political rhetoric to promote the growth and opportunities that are espoused in these Academies. Specifically, Bamfield provides an interesting distinction between freedom as *non-interference* and *non-dependence* and argues that in order for Academy Schools to provide the level of autonomy that it is intended to provide, a more robust notion of non-dependence must be considered.

I wish to take the opportunity to push Bamfield's conclusions further and consider two points. First, I contend that the notion of non-dependence, although not explicitly articulated in policy documents, has not been a major consideration in the implementation of various provisions of alternative programs in American and Canadian charter schools, Swedish free schools, or the UK academy schools. Second, I wish to challenge Bamfield's more demanding notion of freedom as non-dependence and contend that this would be an undesirable stance to take if we wish to provide safeguards for the quality of provision that students receive in alternative school provisions.

Freedom as Non-dependence

Bamfield articulates a nice distinction between freedom as non-interference and non-dependence. Drawing upon Gerald MacCallum's notion of freedom as one's being free from constraints,[1] Isaiah Berlin's negative and positive freedoms,[2] and Quentin Skinner's notion of freedom as an individual's ability to be free from coercion to be able to develop a "realization of the self,"[3] it is the final point for which Bamfield wishes to advocate. Without this aspect of freedom, Bamfield is concerned about the coercive power that might undermine the very purpose that academies were intended to fulfill in creating more autonomous self-governing bodies that would be free from the inherent bureaucratic constraints of central and local education policy. More provocatively, she further suggests that it "would have a damaging effect on the psyche and morale of school staff and management."[4]

I wish to examine the distinction that Bamfield draws between non-interference and non-dependence, and suggest that the notion of non-dependence, albeit not explicitly articulated in policy frameworks, is not one that has been on the table from a policy perspective. For instance, Swedish free schools must follow the national curriculum,[5] charter schools in Alberta also follow the provincial program of

PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATION *2012* | Claudia W. Ruitenberg, editor

studies,[6] and the UK academies follow certain subjects set within the national curriculum (specifically, English, math, science and information and communications technology).[7] All have overlapping mandates in that there is some flexibility and autonomy in terms of self-governing. In allowing more localized control within their specialized educational mandate there is usually a clear and explicit accountability measure to demonstrate improved student achievement and fiscal responsibility.[8]

While the political rhetoric has indeed been ambiguous about the notion of freedom, the ways in which these educational policies have been conceived and implemented suggest that non-dependence was not a consideration in the conception and implementation of these education policy initiatives. For instance, academy schools paralleled much of the "Third Way" values that were developed by Anthony Giddens who helped to formulate British Prime Minister Tony Blair's rationale that forged a "new relationship between the individual and the community."[9] In this sense, Third Way values promoted public-private partnerships, and partnerships between national government and local and private agencies. The intent was to allow for bottom-up decision-making and local autonomy. Gidden writes, "This is obviously true of education, for example, where schools might be given a range of new powers, but the way these are used has to be regulated by the state."[10] The notion of extending local freedom through academy schools combined a clear mandate to allow for innovation with accountability by central government. This point does not necessarily conflict with Bamfield's analysis of freedom as non-interference and non-dependence, but it does suggest that the government initiatives from Sweden, Alberta, and the UK have sided with the notion of freedom as non-interference either wittingly or unwittingly.

Is Non-dependence Desirable?

While the first point that I have made contends that the intention of governments was not that of "non-dependence," the second point that I wish to address is Bamfield's normative recommendation to move toward a notion of freedom as non-dependence. She argues that such a move would create a genuine form of independent self-governance and move educators toward a "more democratic model of governance for the new schools." It is this second point that I think is worthy of debate regarding the desirability of taking up such a position.

Bamfield contends that the influence central government has on academy schools undermines an academy's ability to have a robust notion of freedom. Yet this debate rests on a larger political discussion regarding the parameters of educational choice and common schooling.[11] Embedded in this debate are the attempts to balance the interests of a diverse citizenry in a pluralist society with the need to foster students' shared commitments to justice and democracy. I do not share Bamfield's position that in order for these alternative choice initiatives to be effective and free from coercion, the central government must not intervene. Indeed, one might argue that some involvement of central government plays an essential function in providing certain monitoring and regulatory safeguards in public and private education systems. Consider, for example, the implications of not having any

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central government discretion to monitor and regulate the local educational mandate in an academy. Conceivably, an academy could foster a particular ethos that does not expose children to competing views of how they should lead their lives, nor develop an appreciation and respect for civic equality in a pluralist society. Not having any discretion by the central government to intervene in such an exceptional case seems to be inappropriate both in protecting individuals' well-being, in developing their critical capacities, and in protecting the broader democratic ideals necessary for a cohesive and stable society.

We need to be sure then that a balance occurs between local autonomy and central government. Within a pluralist society, alternative choice programs have the potential to provide some local autonomy and innovation that may foster a particular educational ethos, but this ought to be balanced by the central government's role in ensuring that all students receive an education that will allow them to flourish in making informed judgments about how to lead their lives, and also have an understanding about their concomitant responsibility as civic equals in a pluralist society. The broader democratic ideals and protections that are placed by central government ought to take priority over individual choice programs.

Conclusion

Changes put forth in the UK's Education Act 2011 suggest that further limitations will be placed on the ability of third-party organizations to be involved in academies, and only in exceptional circumstances would the central government intervene in academies. Bamfield contends that these legislative amendments mean greater controls and less freedom (particularly if freedom is conceptualized as non-dependence), and that they compromise and potentially undermine the very purpose of increased local freedom for which academies were established.

Academies[12] offer the potential to have lessened central bureaucratic constraints to carry out a particular educational mandate. Yet, the involvement of central government plays an essential role in protecting both individual and societal interests.

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1. Gerald MacCallum, "Negative and Positive Freedom," in *Philosophy, Politics and Society,* eds. Peter Laslett, W.G. Runciman, and Quentin Skinner (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), 174–193.

2. Isaiah Berlin, *Four Essays in Liberty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969).

3. Quentin Skinner, "A Third Concept of Liberty," *Proceedings of the British Academy* 117 (2002): 237–268.

4. The point that Bamfield wishes to make regarding the central government's role in how it might affect the "psyche and morale" of staff in academies is an empirical point that cannot be addressed here.

5. Helena Holmlund and Sandra McNally, "A Swedish Model for UK Schools?," *Centre Piece* (Winter 2009/2010): 20–21.

6. Alberta Learning, *Charter School Handbook* (Edmonton: Alberta Learning, 2002).

7. Department for Education, *About Academies* (London: Department for Education, 2012).

8. In some instances, free schools and academies can solicit private funds to augment their financial circumstances. Charter schools in Alberta are not allowed this option, and private funding is discrepant in various states of the United States.

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9. Anthony Giddens, *The Third Way: The Renewal of Social Democracy* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1998).

10. Ibid., 84.

11. Rob Reich, "Supporting Common Schooling and Educational Choice," in *The Common School and the Comprehensive Ideal: A Defence by Richard Pring with Complementary Essays,* eds. Mark Halstead, and Graham Haydon (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008).

12. This also applies to other choice initiatives such as charter schools and Swedish free schools.

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