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The Marketisation of Education: A Critical Review

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Introduction

Researches and discourses on the role of education have been present in academic papers and over political tables around the globe with the ultimate aim of

reaching a consensus that clearly outlines the expectations from educating and schooling children. What has been achieved throughout these intellectual discussions is voluminous but with concluding statement one can say that the fundamentals of education has been organically growing and changing.

Nowadays, specifically in the Middle East, regimes, societies and nations are struggling to induce new social and political order, either by embracing democracy and human rights or by keeping them outside their front door. Similarly, after Europe triumphed over its turbulent period in the 20th century, post-World War period induced a new political order that was based on social democracy as a compromise between liberal and Marxist ideologies. The distinctive character of social democracy rested on principals of justice and equality for the underrepresented and underprivileged classes of the society. Education that had always been perceived as a tool for social mobility and class equalizer was believed to be a capital for economical efficiency and thus equity for the underprivileged. The value of education as a capital started to shift from being merely a service provided by the state into a commodity that follows the rules of the market. The rationale behind throwing educational services into the market was the belief that economical operations and market forces will enhance the standards of education and the accompanied services through competition. On the other hand, the marketisation of one of the national services, education, was considered a threat to the service itself and a financial burden that could be added up to shoulders of the underprivileged class.

As a general outline, the following paper will attempt to review and critique the advantages and drawbacks of marketisation and commodification of education. The author will rely mostly on academic research articles, theoretical discourses and certain textbooks in order to support his arguments. The marketisation of educational services will be analyzed and criticized within a broader socio-political context rather than in mere numerical and empirical boundaries. First, the paper will start by discussing different rationales that stand behind commodification of educational provision, critically outline differing viewpoints between advocates and opponents of marketised education and conclude with a broader socio-political and economical analysis of the phenomenon under study.

Rationale of Marketisation of Education

Tracing back the turning point of the general global trend to marketise education seems easier than uncovering the rationale behind the trend itself. To name but some of the reasons of marketisation of education was general dissatisfaction with the performance of public schools, replicating the quality of educational services of private schools and institutions, budgetary and monetary restraints on the public funds, increasing the accountability of the schools and lessening the bureaucratic procedures of the state and the strong belief in economic rationalism. Except for the last rationale, economic rationalism, the other mentioned reasons for marketisation of education will be empirically discussed at a later stage in the paper by discoursing the evidence-based outcome or the educational result of the marketization process itself. On the other hand, as for economic rationalism, the term was first coined by Michael Pusey (1991) in his book "Economic Rationalism in Canberra: A Nation-Building State Changes its Mind" though it was better defined by Battin (1991). The latter argues that economic rationalism is "the belief that the market is the only legitimate allocator of goods and services in *society* at large [and] not just in the *economy*" (italics in the original work, p. 296). These theorists advocate the fact that market forces of supply and demand operate for the betterment of a product or service including the service of education. Irrespective of the quality of the product of market-based education, market forces are replacing the role and responsibility of the state in providing and governing educational services. And if the role of the state becomes limited to safeguarding the smooth operation of the market as the New-Right movement has favored (for a review see Pearce, 2004) then unforeseen consequences can rise and endanger the role of education in the society. First because the continuous growth of private sector involvement in education can also be associated with unexpected withdrawal of these "companies" and organizations from the market, which in turn can jeopardize the provided educational services and products. On the other hand, governments can hardly withdraw from provision of education since education, in essence, remains a public good and service. Second, the downside of a complete surrender of educational services to the market forces by rationalizing it with the philosophy of economic rationalism can simply imply a transfer from public monopoly to private monopoly.

Thirdly, private sector in turn is motivated with profitability, which is considered a move away from the consumer's expectations and the prevailing notion that governments are service-providing often free functional systems. Hence, economic rationalism derived by claims for educational reformation can result in unforeseen consequences.

Furthermore, state attempts to redirect the course of education from the market back to its provision, re-nationalization of education, can become a complicated task. In short, basing the success of marketisation of educational services on the notion of economic rationalism is least to say doubtful.

Before discussing the outcome of educational services provided by private sector, one should also question the fact that whether the marketisation and/or privatisation of education is an independent initiative by national governments or it's a part of wider economical attempt that has socio-political agenda? To the best of the author's knowledge, the literature does not include reviews that have attempted to answer the above-mentioned question. In fact, answering this question sounds difficult both theoretically and empirically due to the fact that governments can claim to marketise educational services to reform the sector, increase performativity and organizational effectiveness but in fact their very motivation can hide further socio-political ideologies and/or agendas. Hence, pinpointing the exact reason behind marketisation of education remains a difficult task to uncover. On the other hand, measuring the consequences of marketisation of education theoretically and empirically has been a topic of wider interest and well-established findings have been recorded in this direction which will be discussed shortly.

Marketisation of Education: Supporting and Opposing Discourse on Level of Attainment

The notion that the supply of educational services can be best achieved through private sector, or as Ball described "the export of statework to private providers and agencies" (2009, p. 93) has been challenged with counterarguments both theoretically and empirically. To start with, the advocates for a greater role of market forces or private sector see education as a commodity whose quality and outcome can be improved through competition. For example, in a cross sectional research study on the educational outcome of schools that were in a state of competition, Belfield and Levin (2002) found that a significant number of schools have benefited from market

competition. The study that was conducted in the United States defined educational outcomes as test scores, graduation of students, quality of teaching, ratio of expenditures and efficiency. The mentioned study measured the educational product of competitive or marketised educational system with comprehensive outcomes and did not rely solely on educational attainment level (league tables) or exam results (national tests). Moreover, the bright side of transferring education into the market economy has been seen in the rise of parental choice and driving up educational standards. Results of research studies show that students who are enrolled in schools of parental choice have higher achievement level including students who are enrolled in charter schools (Bohte, 2004), voucher program (Chakrabarti, 2008) and magnet schools (Lauen, 2007).

At the same time taking different educational policy initiatives on a national level and on long-run terms by relying only on these evidences should be treated with great cautiousness (Fisher, 2011). More specifically, first policy makers should consider opposing studies which have concluded that parental choice whether with charter and magnet schools or voucher programs have not shown any significant effect on student's academic achievement or educational outcome. For example, Zimmer and Buddin's (2009) empirical study on charter schools showed that the competition resulted from charter schools was not associated with students' performance or an increased in their attainment level. Second, a closer look has to be taken to investigate whether the relative outperformance of competitive schools, if any, compared to schools that are not found in competitive markets is constant, stable and durable which in turn might be influenced by factors irrelevant to the givens of the market. Third, methodologically speaking, one should also has to stay alert against the "marginality" of this outperformance and question whether the significance of the yielded difference necessitates and stipulates a rational change in policy by adopting new policy initiatives. Hence, any consideration to establish and implement new educational policies has to be accompanied by the comprehensiveness of the yielded results, the marginality of the competitive schools' outperformance and finally the durability and stability of the outperformance. Certainly, the conclusion that marketised education with parental choice is correlated with higher student's attainment requires further theoretical

discussion. In UK for example, advocates for parental choice programs were further motivated by the assumption that schools with “good reputation” will grow in size and those with “low standards” will vanish away. This cause-and-effect relation between parental choice and school competitiveness was explained by the fact that parents upon their best intellectual judgment will choose the school that best fits with the socio-economical and educational requirements of their children. Those privileged and educated parents were more advantaged at making the right choice and disadvantaged parents failed to benefit from the choice program (Bosetti, 2004). However, at the same time one also has to be aware of attributing causal explanation to the relation between reform policy (choice program) and educational outcome (attainment level). In other words, does student’s outperformance in “chosen” schools directly caused by the parent’s intellectual and selective decisions? I assume that any change in student’s performance is complicated process of intermingling factors. Some of the factors that contribute to students’ outperformance include parental involvement in children’s daily learning, students’ characteristics including cognitive and intellectual inclinations, motivation and study skills though further discussion of these influences is considered outside the scope of this paper.

On the other hand, if school choice is empirically associated with student’s attainment level, then one also has to argue whether this outperformance balances with the economical, moral, ideological and socio-cultural costs of privatisation or marketisation of education. For example, by introducing market rules into the provision of educational services, the core values of education, including the content of teaching in schools, cannot remain intact from the influences of private interest. In addition to pursuing pure economical and financial profits, privatized education can non-innocently infiltrate private agendas into the educational system of the nation. And since the state provision in commodified education is minimal, any intrusion by private interest groups, despite the fact whether its tangible or visible to citizens, can cause harm to the communal and national values of education as a public good and as Grace (1994) put establish the sovereignty of consumerism.

In summary, as a general conclusion to the effect of market forces on educational outcome, there is a general empirical consensus among researchers that

student's achievement and outperformance is marginal and modest. Ladd's (2002), study yielded and confirmed this conclusion when she conducted a comprehensive review on the educational gain of voucher system in the United States by stating that "contrary to the claims of many voucher advocates, widespread use of school vouchers is not likely to generate substantial gains in the productivity of the U.S. K-12 education system. Any gains in overall student achievement are likely to be small at best" (p. 21). Hence, no matter how small is the educational outcome resulted from marketised education or irrespective of the marginality of competitive and marketised education, student's attainment level has increased. This is a blow to the advocates of state-funded education that criticize market forces without "providing any evidence for the effectiveness of state-funded monopolies" (Gorard & Taylor, 2001, p. 6). In short, from an optimist's point of view, one can conclude that competitive educational services have been conceived as productive intervention and resulted in an increase in student's performativity though in small margin.

The major criticism for this relation between commodified education and attainment level remains a theoretical argument. The conclusion that privatized education succeeded to contribute positively to students' increased knowledge (performance) is based on the assumption that knowledge is numerically measurable. However, quantifying knowledge and attaching numerical value to its significance opposes the holistic meaning of education. By further questioning, one can argue that the amount of knowledge a student acquires is difficult to measure but at the same time knowledge has to be standardized for local and national purposes. Brancalone and O'Brien (2011) highlighted the quantitative significance of knowledge by assuming that "education is ever more treated as a commodity, its quantitative equivalence, how it is measured and exchanged, becomes its defining feature. This occurs at the expense of other qualitative considerations that become secondary or marginal, such as: learning methodology; teacher-student relations; inventive curricular and assessment arrangements" (p. 509). Hence, quantifiable and instrumented knowledge is exchanged with economical value and this exchange in turn leads to the commodification of education. Eventually knowledge transcends over its pedagogical meaning to envisage pure economic value and it is "in *exchange* where the purposeful, concrete, value of

education is realised. At this moment, added worth (or 'exchange value') is bestowed to education by means of the market process" (ibid p. 506). In conclusion, unlike the unstable and ambiguous association between parental choice and segregation that will be discussed shortly, the introduction of marketised education and giving parents more choices is associated with better student performance (quality) which in turn is considered short-term and temporary gain compared to the wider socioeconomic disparities of different societal groups that require broader and long-term interventions to bring equity.

School Choice and Segregation

In addition to aiming at a lift in quality of education, introducing market mechanism into educational services has also aimed at narrowing the ethnic and socioeconomic gaps or desegregating between different populations, schools and districts. Once again, differing results were yielded in studies that investigated the implications of choice regimes on the socioeconomic and ethnic backgrounds of students. For example, according to Gorard, Fitz and Taylor (2001), choice system has succeeded to create socially mixed schools especially when compared to 1988 with respect to the general representativeness of the wider society from which students are enrolled. The authors have explained the decrease in segregation in England and Wales by arguing that the "stratifying effect of market forces in schools depends on large extent, on the status ante. What we have shown is not that choice is SES-free, but that it is certainly no worse, and probably a great deal better, than simply assigning children to their nearest school to be educated with similar children" (Gorard et al, 2001, p. 22).

According to the findings of this study where the authors claim is the largest study on the consequences of school choice in publicly funded schools, the market operations and thus reform has allowed families from low SES backgrounds to enroll their children in catchment areas and market forces have encouraged schools to improve their national exam scores. Also, on the bright side of introducing choice regimes in school systems, results from Weiher's (2000) study indicated that with choice programs black students have improved their academic performance whenever they were placed in classrooms with higher proportion of black students. Similarly, the author

concludes that when students from Latin background are taught in classes with relatively higher number of Latinos students their academic achievement is significantly improved irrespective of their socioeconomic background. Presumably, those parents who choose school districts with similar social and racial background favor their children's academic performance and this relation applies to all minority and ethnic groups under study. On the other hand, arguably, one can also assume that "*racialization*" of choices results in negative consequences including the social islanding and disintegration of certain racial and ethnic groups and lack of intercultural communication and exchange between different communities. When parents start to exercise their right of school choice program based on racial consideration then the policies of school choice that initially aimed at equity and equality diverts from its purposes and causes other unseen problems, namely indirect segregation.

Finally, in addition to the mentioned contextual factors that influence parental exercise of school selection, peer influence and social preferences can also play a significant role in the choice process. Unlike the younger students, I assume that students in higher grades express certain opinions in their school choices and their voice often is well heard. To the best of the author's knowledge, this issue is an understudied phenomenon in the literature of policy studies except a review by Masnki (1993 as cited in Lauen, 2007) where he concludes that adolescents consider their predecessors' experience while making school choices.

Similar to findings on segregation from the United Kingdom, in United States the famous new Charlotte-Mecklenburg school choice regime in North Carolina increased school segregation on three different fronts including ethnic division, socioeconomic status and thirdly ability segregation (Godwin, Leland, Baxter & Southworth, 2006). The Charlotte program that encouraged families to enroll their children in schools outside their living area, provided free transportation and developed the school outreach programs not only failed to meet its goals against racial and socioeconomic segregation but in fact the program introduced resegregation (Godwin et al, p. 994). Hence, instead of reducing ethnic and socioeconomic differences, the program caused adverse effects. In short, the introduction of choice regime of schooling and open enrollment system further amplified the ethnic and socioeconomic disparities of students and schools.

Reay (2004) explains this phenomenon by assuming that contrary to underprivileged parents, “middle-class families were far more likely to be successful in their choice making. Possession of economic, cultural, and social capitals, and “a feel for the game” generated by middle-class habitus, meant their families were engaged in a range of exclusive and exclusionary practices that provided their offspring with real as opposed to illusory choices (Reay, 2004, p. 541). Finally, another sample of study that clearly opposes the equality purpose of choice program was found in West, Hind and Pennel’s work (2004). In their investigation, the authors found that 11.2% of foundation schools and 13% of the surveyed schools applied school admission criteria based on aptitude and religion respectively. The schools took advantage of choice programs to screen their admission based on ability and social characteristics of students. As result, those parents who were educationally privileged or belonged to higher social classes were able to develop more informed school choice strategies and meanwhile parents from the lower classes of socioeconomic ladder were disadvantaged with their choices of schooling (Waslander & Thrupp, 1995).

The studies that are included in this review usually come from two different countries, United Kingdom and United States, where both countries aimed at introducing the market economy policies and parental choice to promote equity among the social classes of the nation. Yet, regardless of the educational, societal and economical differences of the two states, the results of both initiatives to bring equity among the classes and ethnicities were not crystalized. Unlike to the relatively mild but significant association between privatized and marketised education and school attainment, the lack of relation between parental school choice and desegregation is clearer and more significant.

If the choice policies further disadvantaged the underprivileged classes, is this an indicator of the total failure of the choice system and thus the concept of marketised education, which was initially revised to increase desegregation? Moreover, can these policies be eradicated or changed in accordance with the reported results?

I think prior to judgment on the effectiveness of choice policy, one should attempt to analyze the reasons of the “failure”. According to the policy literature, one of the factors that mediates the “en route” relation between school competition and parental

choice is the contextual environment within which these policies are cultivated (Reay, 2006). Two of the mostly investigated variables include the dissemination of information by the schools to the parents and the parents' way of gathering information about schools (Ambler, 1994) and transportation or geographical proximity of schools (Levin & Driver, 1997). In addition, other contextual factors that might have considerable role include psychological, social, geographical and even infrastructural variables that most theorists and researchers underestimate their role in parental choice. Bowe and his colleagues (Bowe, Gewritz & Ball, 1994) explain this phenomenon by concluding that "[these] form of analyses wrenches people out of their context and loses the particularities of the way in which they construct the activity of choice-making within their own particular social milieu" (Bowe, et al, p. 72). The authors add "the outcome of the analysis is the loss of any picture of the relationship of individual parents to their varied criteria of choice and the relationship of both parents and criteria to wider social change" (ibid p. 72). Hence, the association between parental choice and school enrollment is often a complicated course that involves conscious decision-making by parents based on their social class, geographical location, parental information and related factors.

As parental choice has been implemented differently in different countries, like in USA it is voucher program and in UK it is the introduction of school league tables and open enrollment in local catchments, I think policies aimed at marketisation of education that fail to consider the contextual peculiarities of every district have high chances of generating unexpected results. Similar to the fact that voucher program might not be applicable in UK, or catchment system in US, similarly I don't think that grand national policies can help to induce equality and equity without considering the contextualization of the schools and factors affecting its operation. Certainly, as mentioned previously the environment within which these policies are implemented or the contextualization of educational policies can be considered as confounding variables that explain the ineffectiveness or counter-productivity of these policies.

Sociological Implications of Marketised Education

The majority of the conducted researches in the policy literature have studied the consequences of marketised education in countries (United States, United Kingdom and

Australia) that have ideologically believed and politically adopted market principles to improve the quality and equality of educational services. On the other hand, certain similar Western countries have yielded school control to parents but haven't noticed any significant difference in student's performance. For example, in Denmark where the voucher system has been in place for more than one-century, by the exclusion of selection effects, students from private and public schools have not displayed performance differences in their academic work (Anderson, 2008). However, without controlling selection of students, the same study showed that private schools with high socioeconomic status outperform public schools whereas private schools with low socioeconomic status underperform compared to public schools (ibid, p. 59). Presumably, selection of students' enrollment plays an influential role in a school's general performance and similarly the socioeconomic status of students irrespective of private-public duality. Hence, in essence socioeconomic status of students is a key factor in explaining the outperformance of certain social group of students and the introduction of choice regime is merely solidifying the influential power of economic capital of families and thus socio-economic inequalities. In other words, marketisation of education through choice programs can be considered as an attempt to regulate or fix a socio-economical problem that has been already present before the advent of the marketised educational policies, namely differences between classes and unequal distribution of wealth. Thus, one can conclude that the very economical structure of a country is the main reason of socioeconomic disparity and as a result a major contributing factor to the outperformance of certain social groups. Education in turn has become a tool that is perpetuating the socioeconomic unfairness between the classes and groups. Introducing marketised education through choice policies to promote equality has become analogous to "fighting the war for equality but in the wrong field" since the generator of inequality is the economical system and not the educational system.

Also, one has to be informed that although empirical studies have "verified" that market education can create competitive schooling systems for higher quality performance, at the same time perceiving educational policies as utopian panacea for the underperformance of minority groups is an exaggerated and unrealistic vision. For

one reason, even among schools that possess similar socioeconomic backgrounds (poverty schools in this sample) there are different contextual factors that influence the student's achievement including student characteristics and their educational needs, housing, admission policy and rural/urban location (Lupton, 2005; Thrupp, 2006). By introducing market forces into education provision with the assumption that marketised educational system with its effectiveness, accountability, organizational management and professionalism can improve student's grades is theoretically "naivistic" due to the fact that performance is often influenced by contextualization, social background, circumstances and school history. At the same time, the association of quality with marketised education seems more realistic compared to the claimed relation of equality and marketised education since the underpinning reasons of socio-economic equality is wider and bigger than education itself regardless whether it is state-funded education or privately provided competitive education. Moreover, though education has high exchange and economical value, yet this monetary or economical profit has not contributed to "significant" class mobility in the larger society even with the advent of different educational policies (Heath and Clifford, 1990). In their cross-national meta-analysis on the effect of educational qualifications upon class reproduction and mobility, Ishida, Muller and Ridge (1995) have found that among 10 nations under study, the strength and degree of the association between education (irrespective of state-funded or privately provided) and class mobility has been directly influenced by socioeconomic history, institutional arrangements of the state and the political regime of the country.

Meanwhile, the underlying reason for these policies regardless of their efficiency lies in general dissatisfaction with public school's status quo since they are "commonly perceived to be in such a bad state that people are looking to implement any program that might help to bring about improvement (Goldhaber, 1999, p. 23). The public's discontent with the public schools has encouraged politicians with different ideological orientations to adopt educational policies to "satisfy" the consumers' needs for educational reforms. However, politician's policy visions though motivated and marketed by principals of equity and quality might not always be based on clear empirical evidence. A major problem arises when "within a given ideology, the line over accepting and not accepting evidence is to be drawn. Choices are rarely implicit in evidence, and

evidence is itself not unproblematic. Politicians need ways to select what is useful to them, and to a large extent this is provided by a paradigm. As in many other decisions for policy makers, the choices are uncertain even if objectives are clearly defined; decisions are problematic and how to minimise risk a high priority. For most practitioners, in most fields, the easy option is to choose policies which accord with the prevailing paradigm or value system” (Fisher, 2011. p 6). On the other hand, full accord between educational policies that consider empirical evidences of previous studies and market policies that are mostly constructed and driven by social and political ideologies does not necessarily generate equal and quality education for all the classes of society. Ball (1993) with all the counterarguments that followed his and his colleagues’ study (Tooley, 1997) has concluded that these policies can legitimate differences and are considered as *“class strategy which has as one of its major effects the reproduction of relative social class (and ethnic) advantages and disadvantages”* (italics in original work, p. 4).

Finally, in the following paper, the author refrained from taking clear stance by neither advocating nor discouraging marketised and commodified education. Instead, further questions were raised relating to the motifs of commodified education and its effectiveness. Also, one has to admit the fact that the presented critiques on commodified education by different authors have not overstepped beyond academic papers. If evidenced disbelief in marketised education does not lead to changes and/or transformation of policies and legislations, this means that *either* the politicians are ignoring these factual information and thus they have to be held democratically accountable for their “inactions” by the educational consumerists *or* the academicians have not accumulated convincing evidence to pursue policy makers and thus educational consumerist to revise and change the educational policies that are in place. The answer for the mentioned dilemma requests further empirical investigations and theoretical discussions to find out the most efficient method or legislative policy that induces quality and equality in the field of education.

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