

We Wanna be

Free!

...or do we? As the first free schools start to confirm admissions for September 2011, parent and journalist Helen Mulley considers the implications...

We all want what's best for our children. Such a simple statement – and so obviously, unarguably true. Yet... what does it actually mean? Who are 'we all'? Do we have the same ideas about 'what's best'? And by 'our children', do we mean 'those for whom we are directly responsible', or are we talking more collectively?

When it comes to education, things get even more complex. There are so many valid voices: teachers, parents, politicians, academic theorists, and (often forgotten) the children themselves. Everyone seems to have a different view on what education is for, let alone how it should be delivered – with one of the few points of almost universal agreement being that a 'one size fits all' system is rarely 'best' for anyone.

In a sense, then, the coalition's emphasis on promoting its free schools policy can be seen as a logical response to such considered diversity. If there are multiple, equally valid approaches to education, then why not ensure that they are similarly supported within the state system, rather than forced into the private sector?

Moreover, if parents and teachers particularly (let's not get into the sticky area of charities, businesses and religious groups for now), are passionate about actually *providing* what their community needs, rather than just complaining about existing schools, then why shouldn't they

What's the word?

"If they falter, if things goes wrong, if there's any jiggery-pokery, schools will close."

Michael Gove, *the Guardian*, June, 2010

"I've been through the process... I know the anguish that parents go through when there just are not enough primary school places, so for us it's a wonderful way to meet a community need."

Penny Roberts, proposer, *St Luke's Primary School*, March, 2011

"Since the 80s, the tide of LA influence has been going out – the idea that by opting out, you are deserting a local authority, has gone away."

Mark Evans, director of school support, *Tribal*

"...what began as a project has become a crusade...I have become possessed by a Jesuitical fervour."

Toby Young, March 2011

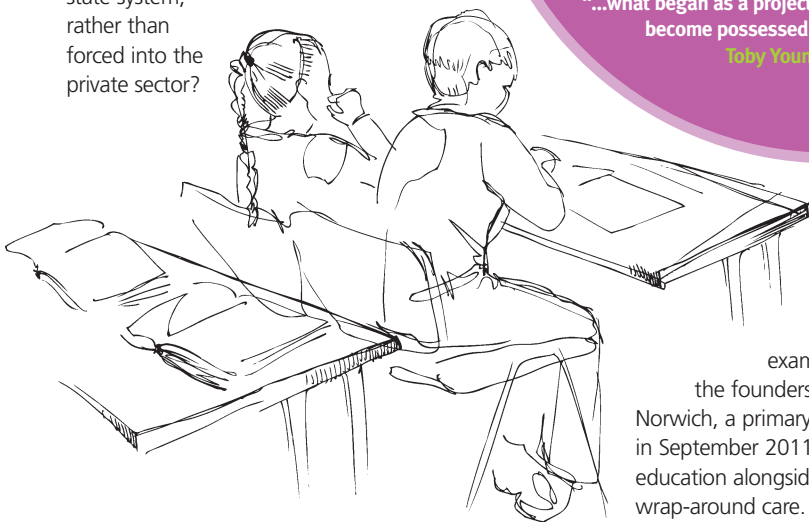
a lively interest in alternative pedagogical approaches, I have trouble disapproving of the small number of Steiner establishments that are considering applying for free school status, purely in order to drop parental fees.

Are free schools fair?

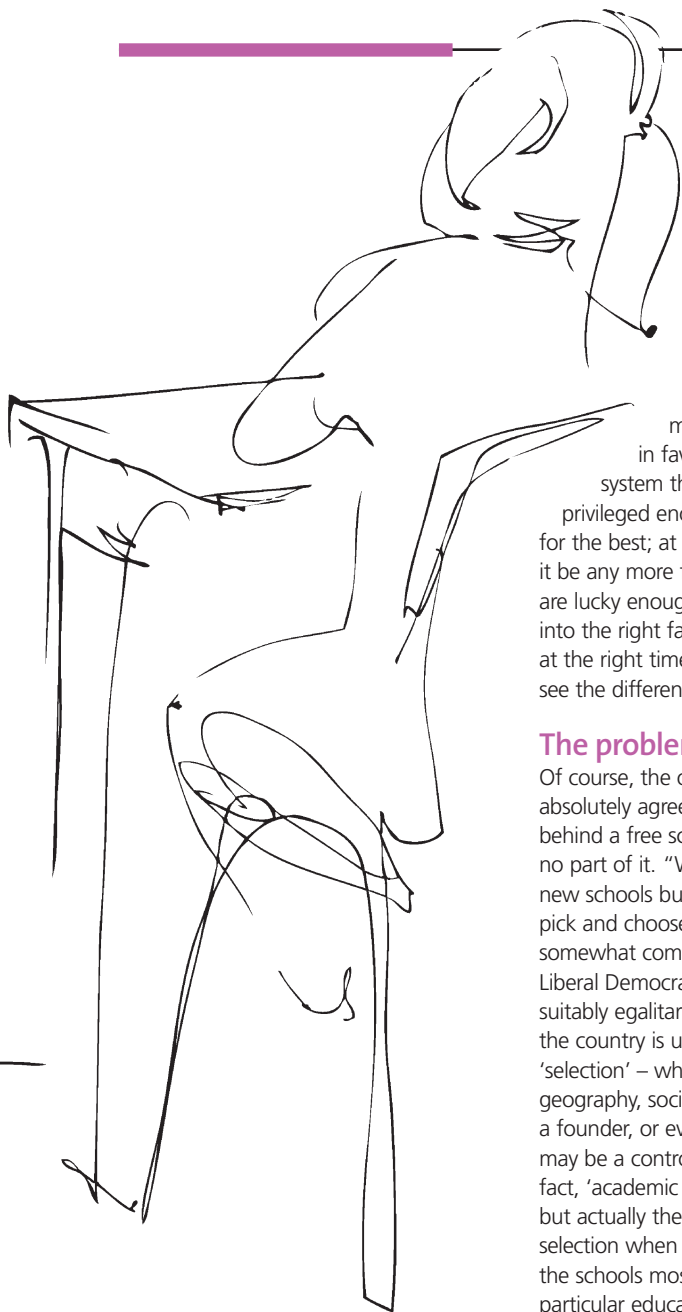
However, despite the convincing nature of many individual proposals, I'm concerned about the underlying argument that essentially, free schools are simply putting opportunities into the hands of those with the motivation and drive to deserve them, regardless of their financial situation. For a start, no matter how passionate one is about top quality education for all, setting up a school is a complex and long-term project. Toby Young claims to have "devoted between

be given the means to turn their enthusiasm into reality? As a working parent, for example, I'm impressed by

the founders of the Free School Norwich, a primary setting that will open in September 2011 offering quality education alongside low-cost, year-round wrap-around care. And as someone with



If there are multiple, equally valid approaches to education, then why not ensure that they are similarly supported within the state system, rather than forced into the private sector?



They are putting opportunities into the hands of those people's children, as well as other youngsters who happen to live in the same area, with similarly motivated parents. I'm not in favour of an educational system that favours those who are privileged enough to be able to pay for the best; at the same time, how can it be any more fair to favour those who are lucky enough to have been born into the right family, in the right area, at the right time? Frankly, it's hard to see the difference.

The problem of selection

Of course, the one thing on which everyone is absolutely agreed is that whatever the ethos behind a free school, 'selection' should form no part of it. "We will allow people to set up new schools but we will not allow them to pick and choose the brightest," confirmed a somewhat compromised Nick Clegg at the last Liberal Democrats conference. It sounds suitably egalitarian. But unless every school in the country is under-subscribed, surely 'selection' – whether on the basis of geography, social need, being the offspring of a founder, or even by lottery – is inevitable? It may be a controversial view, but I wonder if in fact, 'academic ability' is not only the fairest, but actually the only logical method of selection when it comes to placing children in the schools most suited to developing their particular educational potential – as long as it is acknowledged that 'academic excellence' is just one kind of success, and not superior to any other; that a multi-stranded approach to identifying ability is taken; and that, crucially, resources are allocated according to need, not results.

It's a debate with high feelings on all sides, as well as plenty of fence sitters. I know that what I want is to be able to send my children to the local primary and secondary, safe in the knowledge that they will be educated there by those for whom education is a vocation, in such a way that they are recognised and

40 and 60 hours a week" to the West London Free School from the start – and even if you rule out all the time spent on the not entirely essential task of thinking up increasingly elaborate ways insultingly to describe Fiona Millar, that's still a major commitment for any parent with a less flexible and media-focused career than that of the undeniably dedicated Mr Young. Secondly, and more worryingly – for me, at least – free schools set up by mums and dads *aren't* putting opportunities into the hands of people with motivation and drive.

Freedom in Action

THE FREE SCHOOL NORWICH WILL OPEN IN SEPTEMBER 2011. KEY PROPOSER TANIA SIDNEY-ROBERTS EXPLAINS HER EXPERIENCE OF THE PROCESS SO FAR...

"The original motivation for setting up the school was the difficulty many working (and particularly single) parents have in finding high-quality, low-cost childcare; we will provide a high standard of education with an extended school service, open 51 weeks of the year. We had a clear idea at the outset of what would be involved, and feel we have access to all the support we need; we are well organised, on schedule and progressing according to our plan. Our teachers will be paid according to the national TPS, but working in an environment free of what we consider to be unnecessary bureaucracy, so that they can really focus their energy on teaching to the highest standard.

"We are not permitted to select children for any reason and we would not wish to. However, we are offering a particular kind of education service tailored to the needs of modern day working families – so the majority of applications for places have reflected this. For some families, local authority schools are exactly what they are looking for; others may need a different kind of service. It is about high standards and parental choice being offered in all schools, whichever sector they are in. The Free School Norwich will certainly be aiming high for its children when it opens its doors!"

nurtured as individuals, and with access to all required resources – and I want that for every parent. But until I can put my hand on my heart and claim honestly that I don't want those things *in that order*, I'm really not sure that I'm the one who should be spending government money in pursuit of my ideals.

