Hidden markets: the new education privatization

Stephen J. Ball \( ^a \), Martin Thrupp \( ^b \) & Martin Forsey \( ^c \)

\( ^a \) Institute of Education, University of London, UK

\( ^b \) University of Waikato, New Zealand

\( ^c \) The University of Western Australia

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Reviewed by Stephen J. Ball, Martin Thrupp and Martin Forsey

Privatization is a key feature of global education policy in the twenty-first century. It is a growing policy trend, in one form or another, in countries with very diverse cultural and political histories and economic positions. Indeed the spread of privatization in education is isomorphic with the form of capital it represents – the transnational corporation. The fast and massive expansion of private-sector participation in public-sector education is driven of course from both sides of the exchange relation, supply and demand. Privatization is attractive to governments and to multi-lateral agencies as ‘solutions’ to the ‘problem’ of public-sector reform (with the promise of increasing productivity, introducing innovations and reducing costs) and is a new (and relatively safe) profit opportunity for capital (large and small) particularly at a time when other areas of business activity are in recession. Public services markets involve huge expenditures, and governments are usually reliable payers. In education, the incursion of private providers is evident now across sectors, and through all aspects of assessment, curriculum, pedagogy and organization. Given this the odd thing is that so little attention has been given to privatization within the sociology of education. With a very few exceptions and the occasional rhetorical aside, most research in the sociology of education continues with business as usual with the effect of rendering invisible the processes of privatization of state education and their effects on and in schools, colleges and universities. One of the reasons for this radical neglect is a narrowness of vision in a lot of sociological research; another is clearly that we lack both a language and methods for researching privatization. In both respects, Patricia Burch’s book is a major contribution. At the risk of cliché, it is an important book. And given its brevity and the clarity with which it is written there are no excuses for not reading it. Some might argue – ‘it’s about the United States’ – but that cannot be an objection here. The processes Burch analyses are already recognizable within a whole range of other diverse settings around the globe, and indeed some of the companies she refers to and examines are present in the United Kingdom, the Far East and Middle East, Latin-America and elsewhere. My own work on the United Kingdom identifies many parallels and commonalities (Ball 2007). Patricia Burch’s book focuses in particular on No Child Left Behind (NCLB), which rests on a complex ensemble of federal legislation aimed at raising pupil performance standards and holding schools and school districts accountable for these standards, but it touches on several other aspects of privatization. NCLB, Burch argues, brings into play a new policy logic and redefines the roles of all the key players in state education. It constitutes, as she calls it, ‘new privatization’.
school districts have always dealt with and contracted with private providers but the scale and scope of recent developments are unprecedented and their effects are beginning to bring about fundamental changes in the locus of control over educational decision-making.

The book deploys two sets of theoretical resources. One is the critical study of education markets, which draws on studies that ‘step outside of the immediacy of policy requirements and popular trends’ and have ‘their concern with the policies’ social justice implications’ (p. 10). The other is ‘new institutionalism’, which focuses on ‘the role of broader cultural norms in influencing organization and behaviour’ (p. 10), including issues of agency and conflict. This in particular leads Burch to explore the ‘field effects’ of privatization; that is, the way in which privatization is shifting the policy spaces of local educational governance. The changes and impacts that the book describes are not simply about the insinuations of profit or the neglect and exclusion of particular social groups but also shifts in the balance of influence in local decision-making (around instructional reform), on the one hand, and the emergence of new kinds of businesses and philanthropic engagements (venture philanthropy) with state educational services on the other. In other words, the effects of privatization can be traced in classroom processes and patterns of educational opportunity and changes in the nature of the local and federal state, and in the development of new areas of business and new relationships of business to policy, and policy to business. As Burch says, ‘the more I look, the more complexity I see’ (p. 19). But this complexity is clearly and elegantly laid out and explained for the reader.

So Burch develops a language for researching privatization. What is also very impressive is the range of methods and approaches she brings to bear within her study of the phenomenon. Her data and her analysis are multi-dimensional, and multi-level, and involve: interviews with key players in the educational services industry; examination of financial reports and company and Securities and Exchange Commission documents and company web sites (companies like Edison, K12, Educate Inc., Compass Learning, Powerschool, Elearn, Einstein Academy, Learning Point, etc.); venture philanthropies, like the New Schools Venture Fund, and the lobbying and promotion work of the Education Industry Association; alongside this are a series of school district case studies of privatizations of different kinds (like Supplementary Services and student testing) in school districts of differing sizes and compositions, which include interviews with teachers, school district and local company staff; and case studies of particular market interventions – like virtual high schools, which draw upon the whole range of other data. Thus, we are able to see the work of privatization from national to local level and into the day-to-day activities of schools and classrooms.

Chapter One of the book outlines the approach of the study as noted above and the issues to be addressed, as well as introducing ‘new privatization’ and its recent trends and developments. Chapter Two looks inside the education services market at the financial and operational activity of the largest of the firms now operating in this field. One of the points that emerges here and elsewhere in the book – and I found the same trend in my UK study – is a concerted process of consolidation and mergers. Small companies often find themselves at a market disadvantage over and against the major players and go out of business or are bought-up. As a result, school districts find their range of choice of contractors being reduced and the larger companies are becoming vertically integrated. The chapter also makes clear the enormous profits being made by some companies as well as the very large sums being spent by them on promotion.
and advertising. NCLB has brought about massive growth in the areas of test development and preparation, data analysis and management, remedial services, (Supplementary Educational Services) and content area-specific programming (i.e. curriculum development and material production). US school districts historically have contracted with outside vendors for services in each of these areas but NCLB has accelerated this trend considerably. As a result, Burch points out, ‘changes in the field of educational privatization have increased firms’ resource dependency on the Federal government’ (p. 38). According to one estimate (Jackson and Bassett 2005), the 45 million tests currently done each year in the United States as part of the NCLB programme are worth $517 million to the private sector.

Chapter Three considers the political activities of the ‘intermediaries’ of privatization, those individuals and organizations that straddle the worlds of policy and business and drive the changes being described. The US vendors of services and their lobby groups have sought to leverage NCLB mandates as part of their marketing strategies – fostering policy as a profit opportunity – and the executives or agents of US education management organizations (EMOs) have been heavily involved in the political dynamics of NCLB, and many of them are ex-school district employees (as is also the case in the United Kingdom). There is a symbiotic relationship between the federal state as market maker, and the private sector as advocates, lobbyists, and promoters of privatization.

Chapters Four, Five and Six each explore a different case or instance of new privatization grounding the more general analysis and tracing effects and consequences in schools districts and into schools. Chapter Four looks at supplemental programmes. The vouchers for after-school programmes that under-performing schools must offer are taken up by private tutoring companies; indeed, school districts that fail to achieve test targets for three years are prohibited from offering such services and they must be contracted out, and failing schools can be closed and re-opened as charter schools, in some instances run by EMO. These programmes are aimed at giving support to the most economically disadvantaged students but Burch concludes from her review that ‘SES [supplemental education service] has little promise for ensuring that after-school programming adds value for the students for whom it was intended’ (p. 75). Some students, like those with disabilities and those who are English Language Learners, are excluded or not well served, parents are offered very little feedback or guidance on the programmes, and innovations in teaching and learning are the exception rather than the rule – the problems of the school day curriculum are typically replicated by the tutoring companies – more of the same! Indeed, this is a recurring theme in the book, rather than bringing much heralded innovation and creativity into state schooling, the education services companies tend to accommodate to and reproduce what already exists in the institutional practices of schools. Despite their promotional claims to the contrary.

Chapter Five focuses on virtual charter schools, a small but fast growing sector of US schooling, and an attractive opportunity for school districts seeking to boost their budget. Virtual high schools (VHS) can recruit across school district boundaries, bringing in new income at no infrastructural cost; that is, no need for new buildings – ‘learning anytime, anywhere’! VHS also appeals to home-schoolers and Christian parents seeking to avoid the evils of state schooling. The running of the VHS is contracted out to EMOs – like K12 Inc., which was founded in 1999 and currently enrolls 27,000 students. Between 2004 and 2007 K12’s revenue doubled from $71.4 million to $140 million. Such companies seek not only to sell their...
technology and management skills to school districts, but also their curriculum software and test facilities – charging per student and per curriculum unit. These developments are driven both by the possibilities of new technology and federal policy support. As for the latter, VHS are touted as having the potential to offer high quality curricula to socially disadvantaged families. The idea being that students can move from under-performing schools at virtually ‘no cost’. But Burch’s examination here points out how people in the path of policy ‘resist, reinterpret, dissociate, or reassert non-market principles’ (p. 85). For example, as Burch puts it ‘some students need not apply’ (p. 88). In the case of study schools, in response to the pressures of testing, potential ‘drop-out’ students, those with mild learning difficulties and families who were judged not able to give proper support were counselled not to apply and the VHS were unrepresentative of their school districts in terms of class and colour and English Language Learner students. Furthermore, there were corporate pressures on teaching and learning in the schools, not only in terms of selling of additional services but also toward increasing the student load for ‘virtual tutors’. Interestingly, while some school districts insisted that the EMOs employed properly qualified and unionized teachers, others did not.

Chapter Six looks at the contracting out of benchmark assessment systems, and again general trends are traced through three school district case studies. Burch makes the important point that policy sanctions and mandates require more testing and businesses have responded with increasingly sophisticated software (which work more or less well, but at considerable expense) (one district developed their own software), but much less attention has been given to how districts should respond to the problems that data analysis identifies. Testing reforms that are being ‘pressed on schools, are being layered onto rather than replacing deeply institutionalized and broader structural inequalities’ (p. 118). Testing does not automatically change ingrained assumptions about student capabilities nor does it deliver the internal district capacity to respond to the equity issues revealed.

Patricia Burch’s book offers a broad body of evidence ‘of the paradigm shift occurring from public to private management in public education’ (p. 119). To a great extent this shift is opaque and inconsistent. Relationships and processes of privatization differ significantly between school districts, which are more or less competent, confident and assertive in their dealing with companies. But there is a move away from public to private control of key aspects of the processes of schooling. Neo-liberal logics are taking hold. New organizational fields and power blocs and professional categories are emerging. New inequalities are being institutionalized and older ones challenged and sometimes reinforced. There is a trend towards larger class sizes, one-fits-all curricula and niche marketing aimed at successful students by the private providers – the tensions between profit and equity are often very clear. But the book does identify some things that private companies do well and some things they have improved.

Burch’s book is stunningly wide-ranging and comprehensive, and, it needs to be said, careful and balanced. But she is clear about what she has not been able to do and what remains to be done. Much more ‘in-depth qualitative research is needed in order to examine the interplay between local practice, government policy and corporate activity’ (p. 128) and more national data on the for-profit firms themselves and on vendors’ practices, what school districts are buying and how much they are paying, is needed.

This book is a very sophisticated example of ‘policy sociology’ in practice. It is forensic, comprehensive, and deeply worrying. There is a set of research tools outlined
and demonstrated here. The findings and discussion have a far wider relevance than what is happening in the United States. The book also offers a series of ways forward for a great deal more research in the United States, but elsewhere also. The sociology of education needs to give much greater effort and attention to the changes in organizations fields, the neo-liberal logics, the market inequalities, and the democratic deficits that Patricia Burch identifies.

References

Stephen J. Ball
*Institute of Education, University of London, UK*
*Email: S.Ball@ioe.ac.uk*

*Hidden Markets* is about how private firms are increasingly taking advantage of education policy (and lobbying to make education policy advantageous) in order to profit from providing products and services to schools and school districts. It is also about how these privatized products and services often do not measure up to the claims made for them. While largely about the business opportunities made available by the *No Child Left Behind* legislation in the United States, this book also has considerable international relevance as the privatization of education is now well underway in the United Kingdom (Ball 2007) and to some extent in many other policy settings too. Although history and politics predispose some countries to privatization more than others, the global reach of neo-liberalism means that privatization is being considered an option in many places. As Burch (p. 83) points out, the ideology is that ‘markets can succeed where government has failed and the role of policy is to cheerlead and stimulate demand’. In this climate, proposals for privatization can be triggered by a budget deficit, concern about ‘standards’, or even just a change of government as in New Zealand recently.

An important feature of this book is its concern with social justice as it probes the extent to which the education industry is concerned with addressing social inequalities and the impact of its products and services on low socio-economic districts and students. *Hidden Markets* illustrates that there is often a belief amongst the advocates of privatization that it can improve outcomes for the poor and that the solutions being sold to districts often purport to address social inequalities. However, the book also presents much evidence against such claims. Burch raises concerns about large amounts of public money being spent on the advertising budgets of firms as they compete for market share and the shelving of social justice ideals by education officials as they take up posts in private firms. Case studies of local experiences with supplementary education services, virtual charter schools and benchmark assessments illustrate how they, variously, fail to connect with and inform parents, leave behind students with special needs and those for whom English is a second language, discourage admission of students of colour and from low-income families, and excuse teachers from looking critically at their own practice. In some of these
instances the private sector is replicating the problems of the public system, but in others it makes the situation worse. Policy can aid and abet inferior provision by private firms where ‘there appears to be a lack of parity between what is required of public educators and what is required of private educators working with the same population’ (p. 61).

*Hidden Markets* is also informative about the levels and kinds of privatization that are occurring. This is important because, as the title suggests, much of the privatization in the United States is going on in hidden ways: hidden because of the complex ideological and political diversity and hybrid forms appearing under its umbrella; hidden because privatization is often in relatively obscure areas of the school system; hidden because the firms are taking advantage of second layer policies, detailed rules and regulations under the *No Child Left Behind* legislation, which are not widely understood; and hidden because private firms are typically less transparent than the public sector, even when they are in receipt of public funds. Privatization is also complex because so much of it depends on the support of the state; it requires expertise developed in public education and the state ‘continues to have a significant interest on firms that design and deliver services, because of the very established nature of its policy and practices’ (p. 123).

The book starts slowly as Burch prepares the ground with historical background and a theoretical framework that draws on critical policy studies and the new institutionalism. She takes a determinedly measured approach to her topic, and indeed often understates her critique: ‘Perhaps one of the most consistent findings from [the research on the for-profit contracting model and its impact on student achievement] is that more research on effects is needed’ (p. 40). But it soon becomes clear that this book has a wonderfully broad reach in the way it looks at privatization. It is concerned with all of the ideological, legislative and regulatory environment that has allowed privatization, the growth of the for-profit firms, how they operate and build relationships with school districts and the impact of the supposed solutions they offer on those districts and the schools and students they serve. The scope of the book allows it to provide numerous kinds of insights into privatization. Most heartening, it highlights the possibility that concern about the privatization of education could eventually reach well beyond those who are currently concerned about it. There is potentially a wide group of teachers, researchers and policy-makers who could form a consensus around the view that the privatization of education is problematic.

First, there is much here that should concern the many teachers (and teacher educators, and researchers) who are not especially interested in political debate about schooling because they consider it more important to focus more directly on the learning of children. This is because one of the key messages of this book is that the educational programmes of ‘for-profit’ firms often do not measure up to their promises. For instance, the case studies of local experiences with supplementary education services illustrate inappropriate incentives for students, excessive use of ‘more of the same’ teaching approaches such as worksheets of multiple choice questions, large group sizes, little communication between teachers, and poor feedback to parents. Similarly, *Hidden Markets* makes it much harder to take up the functionalist position that the education system is benign and ‘everyone is in it for the kids’. There is much about privatization that makes a mockery of this assumption. The education industry is fundamentally in it for profit, and the indifference of its growth strategies to the genuine well-being of children is well illustrated by this book. It is directly illustrated
by some rather cynical quotes from industry representatives and is apparent in the way private firms interfere with local politics and in the general difference between the rhetoric that surrounds the solutions peddled by the industry and the reality of what is actually being offered ‘on the ground’ in both educational and social justice terms.

A further contribution of *Hidden Markets* is to signal a privatization research agenda that invites wide interest from educational researchers. Research on privatization sometimes involves activities that the majority of educational researchers will not feel competent to undertake (e.g. investigative financial accounting) or would not find very interesting (e.g. trawling the web sites of for-profit firms). But the kinds of case studies of the impact of privatization on districts and schools in this book are much closer to the traditional classroom and school-based concerns of most educational researchers. Although Burch (p. 147) notes an absence of classroom based data in her study, she says this book is intended to trigger classroom studies and is a first step in this direction – and indeed it is. It opens up many questions for empirical research in schools around the actual approach taken by private firms, the calibre of their offerings and the way they interact with schools and classrooms more generally. These are concerns that specialists in areas such as curriculum, pedagogy, assessment and educational leadership could explore and in doing so they would be helping to get under the rhetoric of privatization’s advocates and the sale pitch of firms selling private solutions.

While it therefore seems quite feasible to muster strong evidence against privatization, it may still be ideology that wins the day with policy-makers. A parallel can be drawn to the area of school choice where Lubienski (2008) points out that although the body of academic research evidence does not support the growth of US choice programmes, these continue to grow because choice has increasingly become an ideology supported by advocacy groups despite whatever the research ‘says’. Nevertheless this book should begin to furrow the brows of policy-makers where they have any genuine concern with evidence-informed policy. Similarly there should be food for thought here as to the ethics of the public policy-making role. As already indicated, there is a section called ‘officials turned contractors’ that names a number of high-ranking education officials who have taken their knowledge of education policy into lucrative private posts. This notes that ‘concepts that [such officials] have made much of while working for government, such as equity, access and opportunity, for the time being, are shelved’ (p. 45). It is hard to know what effect the Obama Administration will have on these kinds of behaviours in the United States, but there and elsewhere this book invites discussion of the shift in moral purpose required by policy-makers moving to the private sector.

Overall *Hidden Markets* is a very impressive book, and one I will be recommending widely. It provides a model of good scholarship, is tenacious in pursuit of its subject and is hugely useful. Privatization is growing rapidly, and if it is not recognized, understood and debated, for-profit firms will colonize public education before educators and the general public really realize what is happening. It seemed apt that I read much of this book while taking one of Japan’s beautifully engineered high-speed ‘bullet trains’ or *shinkansen*. The shinkansen network was developed by the Japanese Government but later privatized. For-profit firms in education are also being allowed to exploit public funding and expertise. The further risk emphasized by *Hidden Markets* is that, in education, the for-profit firms might offer the educational equivalent of a ‘shinkansen’ but deliver at best a slow commuter train – and that even then there are many stations it will not stop at.
The new education privatization to which Patricia Burch refers happened in the 1990s when education policy and ‘the market’ were linked more intimately than they had ever been before. In *Hidden Markets*, Burch – who currently teaches in Educational Policy Studies at the University of Wisconsin–Madison – focuses squarely on the USA. The book taps a rich vein of knowledge and experience of supplemental education services, virtual charter schools and district school reform, all of which offer useful, important information about the ‘school improvement industry’ in the nation that has pushed the privatization of education further than most.

Burch describes her research as a phenomenological study of school improvement triggered by the *No Child Left Behind* policy regime introduced by the recently departed Bush administration. But it was the emergence of education management organizations (EMOs) in the 1990s with which Burch associates ‘the new education privatization’. EMOs are commercial enterprises that have taken over the many aspects of the management of public schools, mainly charter schools, in the USA. They developed from the crisis in confidence in public education that is associated with the *Nation at Risk* era, for which the critical stream of sociological studies flowing out of the 1970s must take at least some of the credit, a point often missing from current critiques by critical analysts of neoliberalist reform in education.

Burch aligns her project with this critical studies tradition, marrying it to concerns with ‘the new institutionalism’ that have recently arisen in organizational studies. She describes three main concerns of institutional theorists: firstly, the adoption of similar policies and practices in a diverse range of organizations, some of which have little, if any, interaction; secondly, the disconnection between design and practice in organizational policy formulation; thirdly, the wider societal/cultural forces influencing and producing seemingly stable structures and practices across the range of organizations (p.15). Issues arising out of these ideas and the research conducted by Burch include the absence of empirical support for current forms of educational privatization and the failure of for-profit firms to challenge established practices and ideas, which is ironic given that promotion of diversity is a key justification for the privatization of educational services in the first place. Burch also expresses interest in the idea of the field and ‘field effects’ as a means of ‘how the forces of policy and markets are converging and in the process creating a new organizational arena’ (p. 17). Her use has a Bourdieuan ring to it, but this is not acknowledged by Burch, which is noteworthy because the various references to ‘field’ in the text seem rather underdeveloped. A stronger commitment to showing how the different organizations under consideration were arenas of horizontal and vertical struggle over various forms of capital, as Bourdieu

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**References**


Martin Thrupp  
*University of Waikato, New Zealand*  
*Email: thrupp@waikato.ac.nz*
describes social fields, may well have been useful to the analysis of the new privatization uncovered by Burch.

*Hidden Markets* introduces the reader to a range of ways in which public education is being increasingly privatized. Michael Apple notes in his foreword to the book that the marketization in and of education is ‘world wide’ (p. x), and Burch makes it abundantly clear that privatization is not a new phenomenon; but, in the USA at least, it has intensified in recent times. Privatization has moved from the periphery of ‘noninstructional services’ – catering, transportation and custodial services – to the centre of the educational enterprise, with EMOs assuming responsibility for administration of schools, teacher training, building maintenance, food service and clerical support (p. 4). Even more recently, with the guidance of various policy directives, the America Schools Act of 1994, Goals 2000 and the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001 have progressively mandated ‘standards based reforms’ (p. 5), culminating in annual testing of students in Grades Three to Eight. According to Burch, NCLB is not simply a national version of standards-based reform, it is also ‘a free market’ (p. 6).

Under the NCLB regime, schools are required to reach target test scores in a strictly stipulated period of time. Those that fail to do so are obliged to offer parents and students the option of a school transfer to a non-failing school. Chronically ‘failing’ schools carry the threat of imminent closure with the option of reopening as a charter school under the management of a for-profit firm. And this is the visible end of the market. Burch documents the more invisible market-inducing aspects of NCLB, using examples such as the disallowing of school districts in which the students do not make the required test scores for three years or more from providing the after-school programs they are required to offer. The districts must pay for these services, but cannot run them. What is more, they are required to alert potential vendors to the rules of NCLB and the possible demand for their services; they are not allowed to set up rigid price structures for these services and private education providers are exempt from the civil rights responsibilities imposed upon public institutions (pp. 8–9).

These introductory comments and examples expand out into an interesting discussion of the ways in which education has become a trillion dollar industry in the USA, and some of the implications of this for providers and recipients of educational services. Four functions are identified as central to the new privatization: test development and preparation, data analysis and management, remedial services and online curricula (p. 24). For the companies providing the school tutoring, tests, data management and online education content, Burch documents a near doubling of profits for the combined income of the 18 companies she evaluated. As is to be expected, the various businesses jockey hard for market position in this now lucrative field. But it is not just companies seeking a share of the action. In moves paralleling the defence industries, former leading education bureaucrats are sourcing rich pickings as employees of private companies as they leave public office. As Burch puts it, ‘the outsourcing incentives embedded in NCLB have given former education officials much better options for profiting financially from their government experience’ (p. 41).

There are a number of aspects of the *Hidden Markets* that may surprise and alarm many, especially those of us located in nation-states where public education is still largely in the hands of public servants. These include the ways in which multinational corporations are tapping into the billions of dollars available through NCLB tutoring programmes, the emergence of virtual charter schools, and the ways in which NCLB has paved the way for the mass production of standardized tests of academic performance (benchmark assessment systems). The latter means that well-known publishing
companies are positioning themselves to not only produce benchmark assessment tools but also the curriculum and teacher training surrounding state testing materials.

The emergence of virtual charter schools is arguably the most fascinating dimension of the recent privatization of public education exposed in *Hidden Markets*. As their name suggests, virtual charter schools present their curriculum online, they do not require students to sit in classrooms and can offer learning anytime, anywhere. Many are publicly funded and indeed school districts are using them as a means of attracting students from outside their boundaries, drawing extra government revenue for doing so. The first virtual K–12 school in the USA opened in the mid-1990s, and they are growing at a rate of 30% per year (p. 77). Burch offers two case studies of virtual schools (pp. 85–95). Both schools attract inordinate numbers of white students from high-income families, which rather makes a mockery of claims to these open access schools offering more equitable treatment of students and greater responsiveness to diverse learning needs. Like so many public schools that have been freed up to compete in the so-called open market, they reproduce forms of schooling tailored to meeting the needs of the middle classes (Blackmore 1999; Bratlinger 2003; Forsey 2007a; Lauder et al. 1995; Whitty 1997).

Opacity is a major problem in this new education industry. Burch presents a very concrete, almost comical example of the sorts of obscure language and principles governing the market when quoting the web site of a company that provides strategic services to the education industry:

> [We are] an educational information broker, empowering transactions between multiple government and business entities while retaining complete privacy, security and authentication as information is shared or as transactions are shared. (p. 42)

As Burch points out, the private companies, unlike public schools, are not required by law to disclose their operations for public scrutiny, very few parents and teachers are aware of how companies are inserted into school and the systems supporting them, and their effects are barely recognized or acknowledged. One of the reasons why the influence of the companies is relatively invisible lies in the fact that things have not necessarily changed very much, if at all. Blackmore (1999) has already alerted us to the normalizing, homogenizing effects of the market in education; Burch helps confirm this insight. Structural isomorphism is the term she borrows to describe this phenomenon and, in addition to the homogenizing effects of privatization on the student body just discussed, she shows how the ‘supplementary education services’ offered by various companies tends to reproduce not only the curriculum but also the pedagogical practices for which public education is so often criticized (pp. 68–70). Big companies also tend to produce their own bureaucratized response to the needs of their clients. They often want to fit the client to the product and not the other way round, which Burch exemplifies through a very interesting discussion of a school district that used one of its own programmers to develop an assessment system that suited local needs better than the off-the-shelf solutions being offered by the big companies. As the case helps show, the private does not necessarily trump the public in efficiency and adaptability. Not only did the programmer develop a system that was much more effective than anything available through the market, but he did so at a considerably lesser cost (p. 116).

The spectre of neo-liberalism hovers over and around *Hidden Markets*. I say it hovers because whilst Burch makes the obvious link between the privatization of
public education and the neoliberal impulses that have dominated much of the political debate and action in many a nation-state over the past three decades or so, the links are taken for granted more than they are shown. All too often the complexities and contradictions of neo-liberalism are ignored by academic commentators (Larner 2005), which is where Olssen’s (1996) elegy praising the seemingly dying public education system is helpful. Rather than positioning neo-liberalism as something new, Olssen sees it as more of an extension of classical liberalism, with the positive conception of the role played by the state in creating ‘appropriate markets’ and competitive, entrepreneurial individuals marking the major difference between classical and neo-liberalism (p. 340). In asking the interesting, and oft ignored question why people become neoliberal subjects, Larner (2005, 2) argues that it is rarely taken up by social researchers because they are primarily focused on neo-liberalism as a ‘top-down impositional discourse’, a charge that can be levelled at *Hidden Markets*. Neo-liberalism is not a monolithic, ‘top-down ideological project’; rather, it is a complex, multi-layered, multi-vocal, deeply social phenomenon (Larner 2005, 10–12).

Burch seems committed to showing the deeply social face of the new privatization. As Apple says in his foreword, her task is not to condemn and her account is well balanced (p. xi), but somehow she does not quite reach the rich depths promised by her data. To emphasize this point, in her research design and methodology appendix (pp. 137–147) Burch reports researching the project from December 2006 to June 2008 (which she claims as being a two and a half year process but the figures do not add up). In this period she interviewed 30 senior executives from 20 different private companies, read through the financial and operational reports of 18 educational vendors, scanned the web sites of numerous companies, analysed the end-of-year reports of various supplemental education service (SES) companies, attended trade conferences engaging with sales staff and witnessing many a demonstration of their products and services. In addition, six school systems were located as research sites, all of which had contracted with at least one of the companies Burch had investigated in the earlier stages of the project. A research team spent time observing the tutoring provided by four SES companies. They conducted focus group interviews with groups of SES vendors, principals of schools in need of improvement, school personnel employed as SES coordinators and district officials, and also interviewed nine of the parents whose child was eligible for tutoring. Two virtual schools were included in the research programme, data were collected from a wide variety of policy and marketing documents at both district and school level, as well as extended interviews with 13 teachers. In order to study Benchmark assessment practices, the team began with a survey of selected school districts, followed by case studies of three districts based on in-depth interviews with district employees.

Returning to an earlier used metaphor, Burch did indeed tap into a rich vein of experience and knowledge of educational practices in the USA and this offers a useful way of recognizing and imagining the authority of her work. But it disappointed me not to actually meet any of the research subjects she met and came to know. We get occasional glimpses of these people through snippets of conversation, but rarely do we get a sense of how people make policies and the ways that markets are oh-so human in their construction. Qualitative research of policy should allow us to recognize the complex social practice that policies represent as they are ‘negotiated and reorganized in the ongoing flow of institutional life’ (Levinson and Sutton 2001, 1–2). Burch goes some way to showing policy as a social phenomenon that occurs within cultural and
structural frameworks that determine its general direction, if not its specific trajectory. However, with a greater commitment to writing the people into the text, allowing the rich narratives of the new privatization to do more of the illustrative and conceptual work of the social analyst, we would have a much more nuanced understanding of the not-so hidden markets Burch has researched so deeply.

Closing on a speculative note, I wonder how much of the explanation of why we do not meet more of the people Burch and her team encountered through the long period of their research project lies more in her commitment to critical research than to the complexities of such a task. Critical researchers involved in researching the rich and powerful often maintain an ideological distance from their research subjects lest they be accused of being too empathetic with them (Marcus 1983; Priyadharshini 2003). Social research training encourages those of us entering the world of the powerbrokers, the rich and powerful, and even the middle classes to find and emphasize the negative or the absurd (Marcus and Fischer 1986; Goodman 1998). Yet surely understanding and comprehending how people come to grips with their particular social location and realities, no matter where they are positioned in social hierarchies, is a key component of our jobs as social researchers (Forsey 2007b). Hidden Markets is not as strongly ideologically driven as some or many written in the criticalist tradition. Burch does indeed seek balance in her analysis and she does present a wide-ranging, interesting analysis of the promotion of the private over the public in American education. I just think there is more to learn about how this happens via deeper, richer, thicker portraits of those involved in creating and enacting the policies that we sometime rush to critique before we understand how they got there in the first place (Christian 1987; Goodman 1998).

References


Martin Forsey

*The University of Western Australia*

*Email: mforsey@cyllene.uwa.edu.au*