Chapter 6

The Privatization of Education

Introduction: Different Types of Privatization

One of the dominant themes of at least the past 30 years has been the increasing privatization of significant areas of public provision, including education, and, in this respect, Britain has been pursuing a trend that has a direct parallel in other parts of the world (to be discussed more fully in chapter 8).

According to Professor Stephen Ball, who has made a detailed study of the meaning of privatization where education is concerned, it is important to realize that we are not talking here about a straightforward, one-dimensional phenomenon. The privatization of education is part of a fundamental redesign of the public sector, involving a variety of separate processes; for this reason, it is probably more appropriate to think in terms of “privatizations.” In Ball’s view, “there is a wide variety of types and forms of privatization, involving different financial arrangements, and different relationships between funders, service providers, and clients” (Ball, 2007, p. 13). What has been described as “a relentless rolling process” (Whitfield, 2001, p. 75) has involved private and “not-for-profit” companies, voluntary and community organizations, and NGOs (nongovernmental organizations) in all manner of income-generating activities within the public sector, especially within health and education.

Professor Richard Pring argued, in a number of academic papers and newspaper articles published in the 1980s (see, for example, Pring,
1983; 1986; 1987a: 1987b), that, in its initial stages, the privatization of education assumed at least two major forms: the purchasing at private expense of educational services which ought to have been free within the public system; and the purchasing, at public expense, of educational services provided by private, and often very expensive, institutions. There was possibly a third category, which was privatization in the sense of impoverishing the maintained sector to such an extent that anxious middle-class parents with the necessary means felt more or less obliged to select some form of private schooling for their children. Whatever form it took in the 1980s, the privatization of education could be usefully defined as the systematic erosion, and possibly even abandonment, of the commitment to a common educational service, based on pupil needs rather than upon private means, and accessible to all young people on the basis of equal opportunity. And, as Pring and others have argued, all this was taking place in England against a background of sustained ministerial and media criticism of the performance of the state education system, and as part of the process of subjecting the education service to the same kind of market pressures to which any commercial enterprise would be subjected. Thatcherism clearly involved providing strong ideological and financial support for private education, and also encouraging middle-class “exit” from state institutions.

Pring’s first category included the various ways in which parents and community organizations were being asked to pay for both essential and nonessential services within the school at all levels: special lessons or additions to the basic curriculum, resources and books, repairs and maintenance, modifications to the buildings, even teaching posts. It could be argued that there would always be a variety of extracurricular activities—for example, visits to the theatre or school trips, both in this country and abroad—for which parents might well be asked to make an appropriate contribution. But what was happening in the 1980s was that many parents were being expected, not simply to enrich the curriculum for a few, but to also facilitate basic curriculum provision for all. The National Confederation of Parent Teacher Associations (NCPTA) estimated that, by the middle of the 1980s, £40m a year was being required of parents for what could be regarded as “essentials”: books and equipment and lessons (Mountfield, 1991, p. 45). And successive HMI reports pointed to the need for parents to contribute large sums of money, as a means