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*Quasi-markets, accountability,  
and innovation: analyzing the  
case of Free Schools in England  
through teachers' perspectives*

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*Cuasimercados, rendición de cuentas e  
innovación: analizando el caso de las escuelas libres  
en Inglaterra desde la perspectiva de los docentes*

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### Abstract

Since 2010, England has undergone a new education reform under quasi-market principles combined with high school autonomy and accountability. Through the Academies and Free Schools policy, almost half of English schools have been transferred to private hands (GOV.UK 2022), fostering school competition with the expectation that private providers would yield innovation (Greany & Higham, 2018). In this exploratory research, I study three Free Schools, a new school type from which innovations are expected (DfE, 2010), looking at what innovations were developed and how teachers make sense of and enacted the competing demands of innovation and accountability. I analyze school innovations using the OECD (2014) framework while I draw on policy enactment literature (Ball et al., 2012) to understand teachers' views and responses on innovation and accountability. Primary data includes school documents and websites, inspection reports, and interviews with twelve teachers. Findings show wide use of innovative marketing strategies to appeal to parents, but more limited curriculum and pedagogical innovations. Furthermore, teachers' autonomy and innovative practices are largely mediated by the school culture and leadership views on accountability demands. In line with prior research on quasi-market reforms, high-stakes accountability acts as a main constraint to school autonomy and innovation (Lubienski, 2009b).

*Keywords:* Accountability; Free Schools; Innovation; School Autonomy; Quasi-market

### Resumen

Desde 2010, Inglaterra implementa una nueva reforma educativa bajo los principios del cuasi-mercado combinados con políticas de autonomía escolar y la rendición de cuentas. La reforma de las 'Academies' y 'Free Schools' produjo la transferencia a manos privadas de casi la mitad de las escuelas de Inglaterra (GOV.UK 2022), fomentando la competencia entre escuelas con la expectativa de que los proveedores privados generen innovación (Greany & Higham, 2018). Esta investigación de tipo exploratoria estudia tres 'Free Schools', un nuevo tipo de escuela del que se esperan innovaciones (DfE, 2010), analizando qué innovaciones se desarrollaron y cómo los docentes dan sentido y lidian con las demandas competencia, innovación y rendición de cuentas. Las innovaciones escolares son analizadas utilizando las categorías definidas por la OCDE (2014), mientras me apoyo en la literatura sobre implementación de políticas (Ball et al., 2012) para interpretar de las respuestas de los docentes sobre la innovación y la rendición de cuentas. Los datos incluyen documentos y sitios web de cada escuela, informes de inspección y entrevistas con doce docentes. Los resultados muestran la preponderancia de la innovación en las estrategias de marketing para atraer a los padres, pero son más limitaciones en cuanto al currículum o las prácticas pedagógicas. Además, la autonomía de los docentes y las prácticas innovadoras están mediadas tanto por la cultura escolar como la posición de los directivos sobre las demandas de rendición de cuentas. De acuerdo con investigaciones previas sobre reformas cuasi-mercado, la rendición de cuentas con altas consecuencias actúa como una limitación central para la autonomía escolar y la innovación (Lubienski, 2009).

*Palabras clave:* Autonomía escolar; rendición de cuentas; innovación; Free Schools; Cuasi-mercado.

## 1. Introduction

Over the last decades, a wave of market-based reforms with further elements of school autonomy and accountability has spread globally, promising not only educational improvements but also system-wide innovations. In education, the first wave of neo-liberal pro-market reforms began in the late 1980s, with England and the United States as epicenters and diffusing into different countries like Chile, Australia or Sweden (Lubienski, 2009b). This second wave adds to the classic market-based recipe of school competition, parent choice, and private provision of schooling the tenets of New Public Management, namely a devolution of decision-making power to the school level and new accountability instruments to produce performance-related information (Verger, Fontdevila, Parcerisa, *et al.*, 2019). England has become a paradigmatic case of the revamped pro-market agenda through the Academies and Free Schools policy (A&FS), under which state-funded schools are operated by a private sponsor registered as not-for-profit (Ball, 2017). Since the introduction of the *Academies Act 2010*, more than 40% of all English schools are operated by a private sponsor and 682 Free Schools have opened, encompassing rampant privatization of the school system. In line with pro-market tenets, the A&FS reform expects that the private sector involvement combined with the autonomy conceded to sponsors would yield innovation within the system (Greany & Higham, 2018; DfE, 2010). However, the idea that market-based reforms would spark innovation in education is not new, yet neither has proven to generate the expected results (Lubienski, 2009a).

The A&FS policy aimed to create a 'self-improving school-led system' (DfE, 2010) that merges the managerial outcomes-based logic of school autonomy with accountability (SAWA) reforms (Verger, Fontdevila, & Parcerisa, 2019) in the context of an education quasi-market. A&FS are granted large degrees of decision-making power compared to traditionally maintained schools regarding curriculum design, teaching practices, staffing contracting, or school calendar and day length (Higham, 2014; West & Wolfe, 2019). In particular, Free Schools are newly created schools operated by a sponsor with the capacity to propose a radically new approach. In comparison, Academies were state-controlled schools that had a change of sponsorship from a Local Authority to an academy trust, either through a voluntary change or as a consequence of their low performance. However, quasi-market reforms with high levels of autonomy also involve strengthening accountability over schools as a way to monitor educational quality and the promises of improvement (Falabella, 2014; Looney, 2009). Thus, accountability can operate as a big constraint to innovations, particularly at the classroom level, as principals and teachers are under high pressure to obtain good results in standardized exams and school inspections (Greany, 2022).

Hence, this study looks at Free Schools in England as a case of quasi-market reforms to explore the extent to which school innovation can occur within a high-stakes accountability system. As teachers are key actors in the process, this study focuses on Free Schools teachers' perspectives on school innovations. Thus, three research questions are examined: (i) How have Free Schools responded to the policy goal of developing innovations? (ii) How do Free Schools' teachers perceive their autonomy to develop innovative practices? (iii) How do Free Schools teachers manage the tension between the goal of innovation and the demands of performance? To answer these questions, I have examined three Free Schools in London and interviewed twelve teachers. Following Wiborg *et al.* (2018)

study on Free Schools, I use the OECD (2014) framework for analyzing innovations, yet with two main differences. First, this research studies how teachers interpret and enact policy-driven goals of innovation. This is important as prior studies have looked at the school's management level, namely those who made decisions about the school ethos and general approaches to teaching and learning (Brundrett & Duncan, 2014; Wiborg *et al.*, 2018). Second, by focusing on teachers, it aims to go beyond organization-level views and to discuss what happens at the classroom level by understanding how teachers respond to the competing incentives of innovation and accountability within quasi-market environments. In this sense, while education policy research has largely studied the process of reform adoption (Steiner-Khamsi, 2014), this project contributes to the literature on the enactment of governance reform (Ball *et al.*, 2012; Braun & Maguire, 2020; Coburn, 2004; Falabella, 2014). The rest of the paper is organized as follows. In the next section, I present a brief overview of English history regarding market-education reforms and the emergence of the A&FS policy. Then, I review the literature on quasi-market reforms as drivers for innovation, studies focusing on England, and the conceptual framework to analyze innovations in this study. In addition, I discuss the idea of policy enactment, looking at how SAWA reforms in different contexts have been interpreted by school-level agents. In the final section, I present the results around school innovations, teachers' autonomy to innovate, and the constraints generated by the accountability system, followed by a discussion of these results in light of the quasi-market goals to produce innovation and the existing literature on the topic.

## 2. England: a long road towards a market-based education

Since the late 1970s, England has undertaken market-based reforms in education which slowly but thoroughly transformed the system and its actors (Ball, 2017). Under Thatcherism, the 1988 Education Reform Act advanced school autonomy and parental choice, by devolving budget control to schools, creating City Technology Colleges and Grant-Maintained schools which were outside of Local Authority's oversight, and allowing parents to express preferences among state schools (Ball, 2017). Concomitantly, the 1988 reform fostered school competition and accountability, by establishing per-capita funding, creating a National Curriculum, an assessment system, and publicizing school results in league tables (Ball, 2017)<sup>1</sup>. In 2010, the Conservative-led Coalition government introduced the A&FS reform by radically expanding the London-based City Academies program from 2000 (Eyles & Machin, 2015). In the White Paper "The Importance of Teaching" (DfE, 2010), the government blamed the system's bureaucracy as the main constraint for improving results (Bailey & Ball, 2016), while arguing the need for substantial change based on England's low performance in international assessments in the context of a globalized knowledge economy (Ball, 2017). The reforms depart from the premises of school competition for students who represent funding as an incentive to improve outcomes, the expansion of parental choice by enlarging available information on school performance via league tables and inspection grades, and the emergence of innovative approaches thanks to private sector management of state-funded schools

<sup>1</sup> For a comprehensive account of England's education history and its layering neoliberal reforms in education, see Ball (2017).

(Robertson & Verger, 2012). Figure 1 shows how England's 'self-improving school-led system' intends to combine quasi-market and SAWA tenets. Therefore, the A&FS policy goals can be summarized in three large groups: (i) to give schools more autonomy by releasing them from Local Authority oversight and fostering school competition for parents' choice as engines for improvement; (ii) to involve private actors into school management to trigger innovation within the system through the private sector's entrepreneurial spirit, and; (iii) to hold state and privately managed schools accountable to parents through the information created by the accountability system, rewarding and punishing school performance.

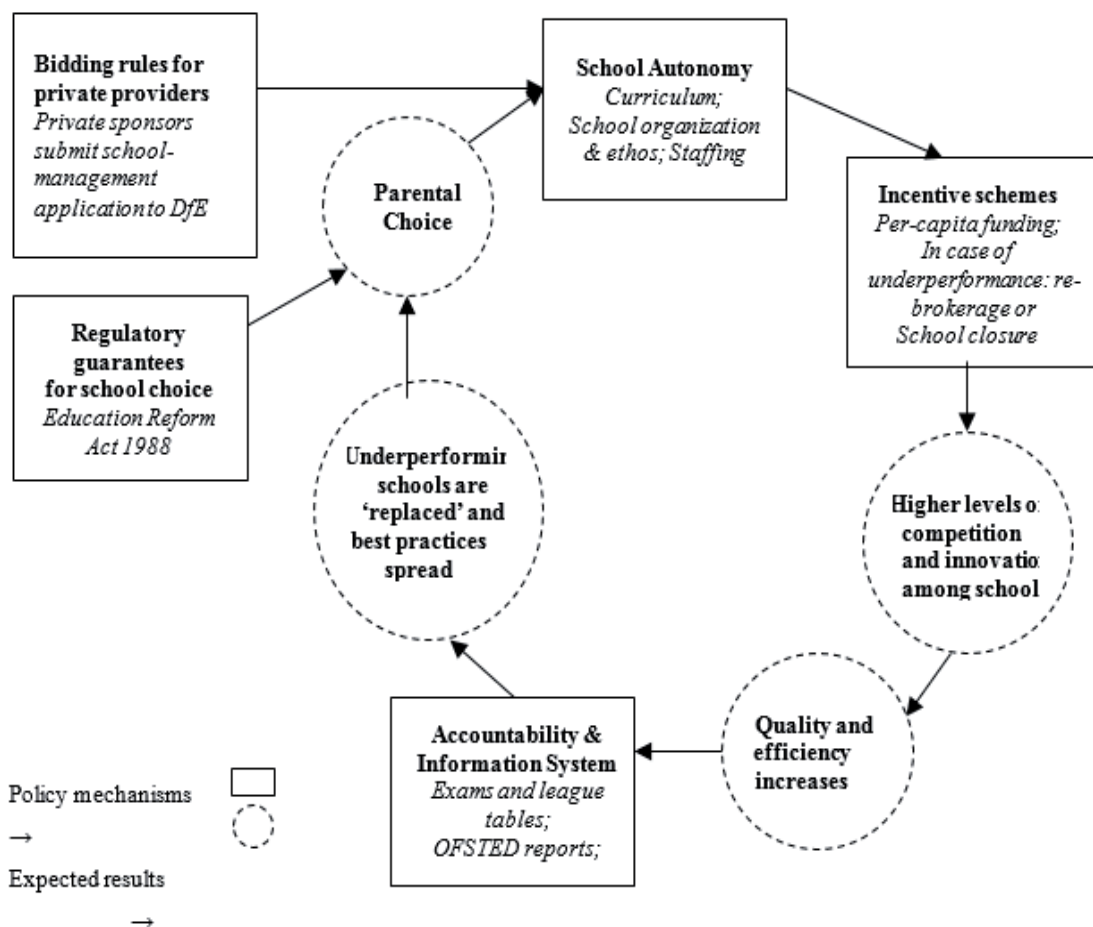


Figure 1. Quasi-market reform logic as England's 'Self-Improving School System'. Source: Elaborated based on Verger & Robertson (2012).

At the heart of the 2010 reform lies the goal that of innovation would emerge among Free Schools, as a result of private sponsors' freedom to decide on the schools' ethos. Michael Gove, former Secretary of State for Education, put it clearly "innovation, diversity, and flexibility are at the heart of the Free School's policy. We want the dynamism that characterizes the best independent [private] schools to help drive up standards in the state sector" (Gove, 2010). Deeming state bureaucracy as the cause of underperformance and constraints to new approaches, the reform envisions community members

–universities, businesses, groups of parents, former teachers or principals, etc– to set up their schools while bringing innovative approaches that would also improve schools (DfE, 2010). This purview is at the cornerstone of quasi-market advocates, which argue that consumer choice and competition among autonomous providers leads to innovative approaches, and therefore improving schools (Lubienski, 2003). To further this idea, the A&FS reform established that every new school in England has to be a Free School (DfE, 2010). Therefore, since 2011 a total of 682 Free Schools have been established, depicted in figure 2 (GOV.UK, 2022). However, the tendency shows that Free Schools have increasingly been opened by chains called Multi-Academy Trusts (MAT) instead of single-sponsored groups. As shown in Table 1, this is also true for Academies, demonstrating a school governance shift from Local Authorities to private school chains. This phenomenon encapsulates the first paradox of quasi-market reforms, the replacement of a state bureaucracy by a private bureaucracy. In England, the growing number and size of private chains has required new middle-tier governing bodies (Greany & Higham, 2018) and other financial oversight mechanisms (West & Wolfe, 2019). The consequences are not just a privately-run system but also the fact that schools in chains have less freedom to be innovative compared to stand-alone schools (Wiborg et al., 2018).

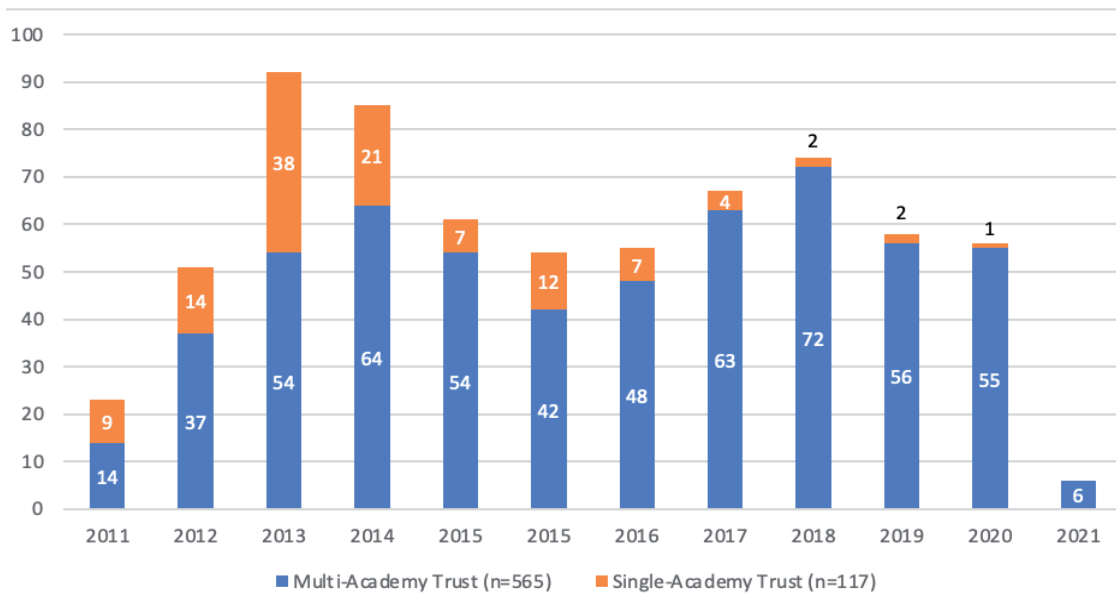


Figure 2. Evolution of Free Schools opened by sponsor-type (2011-2021). Source: Self elaboration based on GOV.UK (2022).



Table 1.  
*Distribution of open schools in England by different types of operator*

Types of schools	Total	
	n	%
Academies	9,269	37.7
Supported by a multi-academy trust	8,240	88.9
Supported by a single-academy trust	1,029	11.1
Free Schools	682	2.78
Supported by a Multi-academy trust	565	82.84*
Supported by a single-academy trust	117	17.16
Independent Schools	1,788	7.29
LA maintained	10,744	43.78
Colleges (years 14-16)	250	1.02
Other types	548	2.23
Special Schools	1,259	5.13
Aggregated	24,540	100.00

\* Share of Academies supported by a SAT or MAT. \*\* Share of Free Schools supported by a SAT or MAT. Source: Self elaboration based on GOV.UK (2022)

A second paradox induced in quasi-market reforms is the constraints that high-stakes accountability systems pose to innovation (Looney, 2009). The devolution of authority to schools and liberalization of management by private operators involved a re-centralization of power through different mechanisms, where the Department for Education and the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) became the main controllers. To put it clearly, while Academies and Free Schools are independent of Local Authorities, these are under DfE and Ofsted oversight. The reform strengthened the existing Performance-Based Accountability (PBA) system by expanding the number and the stakes of national assessments, reinforcing school inspections, enlarging the available information in league tables, and renewing the new National Curriculum (Ball, 2017). Hence, the different instruments enable the central government to monitor schools and actors at distance (Ozga, 2009), while at the same time raising the pressure on performance hinders schools' incentives to develop innovative approaches.

### **3. Innovation in education: a brief framework**

In the context of quasi-market reforms, innovation as the desired goal can act as an empty vessel over which varying local meanings are filled depending on the circumstances (Steiner-Khamsi, 2014). In education, innovation tends to be defined as a change (OECD, 2014), novelty or improvement (Lubienski, 2009) in the school organization

(Wiborg et al., 2018), school leadership (Greany & Waterhouse, 2016), the instructional methods or pedagogy, the school curriculum (Brundrett & Duncan, 2014), among others. Furthermore, some authors consider that innovation entails simply something new from what has been done before in a certain context (Christensen et al., 2008), while others expect disruptive changes from outside the system (Leadbeater & Wong, 2010). Yet, any innovation needs to be assessed against a certain 'baseline' practice, the reason why it is important to establish which categories are used to analyze innovations in Free School and against what baseline these are compared.

Delving into prior research on school innovation in England, I use the OECD (2005, 2014) innovation framework as adopted by Wiborg et al. (2018) when studying Free Schools. Originally built for the business sector in 2005, the OECD (2014) framework proposes four categories to analyze innovation in education, summarized in Table 2. The first relates to product innovations, such as the curriculum, textbooks, or other resources, which entail a "substantially different service offered to students" (Wiborg et al., 2018, p. 5). Second, process innovation, which consists of a new or improved delivery method, such as changes in instructional or pedagogical practices, or the use of technology in the classroom (OECD, 2014). The third, marketing strategies, is particularly relevant for quasi-market contexts, as it captures schools' attempts at better-addressing customer needs, like school advertising of their ethos to attract parents' choice. Lastly, organizational innovations include new practices for improving learning or new ways of organizing activities (OECD, 2014). This framework, which defines innovation in broad terms (Wiborg et al., 2018), does not provide a benchmark against which to compare school practices. Therefore, as Free Schools were expected to innovate compared to state-controlled schools, I use an 'ideal type' of school, in a Weberian sense, as the baseline model. I derive the ideal type from what Tyack and Cuban (1995) defined as the grammar of schooling, having knowledge divided into specialized subjects, students organized by age and grades, instruction happening in a top-down fashion with a single teacher per classroom and divided by time-units. To illustrate this, a deviation from England's National Curriculum would be considered a product innovation, or adopting project-based teaching methods would be a process innovation. Although this simplification does not fully capture the practices in England's state-controlled schools, it does show the endurance of the historical organization of education and acts as a suitable model to compare against Free Schools.



Table 2.  
Innovation Framework

Type of innovation	Examples in education
<p>Product</p> <p>Introduction of a good or service that is new or significantly improved with respect to its characteristics or intended uses</p>	<p>Curriculum, textbook, or educational other resources</p>
<p>Process</p> <p>Consists of a new or improved delivery method, such as changes in instructional or pedagogical practices, or the use of technology in the classroom</p>	<p>Pedagogy (project-based learning), Integrated Co-Teaching distance learning, blended-learning, etc</p>
<p>Marketing</p> <p>The implementation of a new marketing method involving significant changes in product design or packaging, product placement, product promotion or pricing.</p>	<p>School choice strategies, advertising, and pricing</p>
<p>Organizational</p> <p>Involve the implementation of new methods for organizing routines and procedures for the conduct of work.</p>	<p>Institutional structure change, remote learning, changing supportive environment, or new professional practices such as teacher evaluation or peer support.</p>

Source: Elaborated based on OCDE (2005, 2014).

## 4. Quasi-market reforms and innovation in England

Educational innovation as a result of high autonomy, competition, parents' choice, and private management of schools remains an unfulfilled promise. Champions of market approaches to education like Milton Fridman or Julien Le Grand envisioned that a business-like mentality from private managers would give rise to educational innovations that would also improve the system as a whole (Greany, 2022). However, the evidence for this idea is weak (Lubienski, 2009b; Waslander *et al.*, 2010). After reviewing the effects of quasi-market reforms in 20 countries to generate innovation, Lubienski (2009b) raised serious doubts about its appropriateness to effectively generate systemic changes. Rather than classroom-level innovations, schools in quasi-market contexts are more successful in developing new marketing or organizational practices to attract parental choice (Lubienski, 2009b). Most likely, competition results in the development of a school hierarchy based on school performance, where schools aim to control their student intake in order to maintain their status (Glatter *et al.*, 1997; Waslander *et al.*, 2010). At the same time, high-stakes PBA is often the main constraint for systemic innovation in quasi-market contexts ( Greany & Higham, 2018; Looney, 2009).

In the case of England, different studies have pointed to small-scale innovations at schools as a result of market incentives. For instance, Brundrett & Duncan (2014) found curriculum innovations in primary schools, including some Free Schools. However, evidence on curriculum innovation continues to be thin. While surveying 478 Academies, Bassett *et al.* (2012) found that only a small group was keen on making curriculum changes in spite of their autonomy, concluding that “simply giving schools more autonomy does not ensure that they will innovate and improve” (p. 7). Similarly, Greany and Waterhouse (2016) found some pedagogical innovations as project-based learning, but scarce innovations at the curriculum level in Academies and Free Schools. It is important to stress that quasi-market reforms do not advance teachers’ autonomy to make decisions about their professional boundaries and frames, considered professional autonomy, nor for them to make decisions that influence school-level practices on teaching and learning, defined as collegial autonomy (Parcerisa *et al.*, 2022). Rather, teachers derive individual autonomy from these reforms, as the school management may have limited capacity to influence their practices (Parcerisa *et al.*, 2022), yet school instructional approach or curriculum decisions occur at the leadership level. To illustrate this, in one of the few studies about innovations in Free Schools, Wiborg *et al.* (2018) concluded that innovative teaching and curriculum practices were relatively small due to PBA constraints on teachers’ autonomy, while at the school management level a wide variety of innovations did seem to exist. Similar trends were found by Greany (2022), who stresses that teachers are not involved in school-level decisions about classroom practices or curriculum content. In sum, most authors signal the high-stakes PBA system as the biggest challenge for innovation to flourish system-wide or for innovative practices at the classroom level to be diffused (Brundrett & Duncan, 2014; Greany, 2022; Wiborg *et al.*, 2018).

A small group of studies has looked at the economies of scale around Free School sponsors, to understand who and with which purposes new schools are opened. Garry *et al.* (2018) studied Free Schools originating purpose, categorizing them into five types: innovator, parent-led, MAT-led, faith, and former independent school.<sup>2</sup> To establish the typology, they explored schools’ websites, prospectus, and media outlets, and concluded that in secondary education only 1 out of 3 schools could be classified as innovative, “demonstrating a genuinely novel approach to the curriculum or to their ethos” (Garry *et al.*, 2018, p. 10). Furthermore, only 18% of cases when a MATs opened a Free School were seen as innovative, as opposed to 46% of schools that were opened by SATs (Garry *et al.*, 2018). As shown in Figure 2, there is a growing tendency of MATs as the main opener of Free Schools, a growing phenomenon also among Academies (Andrews & Johnes, 2017; Higham, 2014; Ladd & Fiske, 2016). A similar pattern was found by Wiborg *et al.*, (2018), who observe a significant difference when it comes to the innovative capacity in school management and governance of single-sponsored cases compared to schools in MATs operate in a larger and more standardized structure in terms of school practices (Wiborg *et al.*, 2018). Hence, as school chains that result from quasi-markets might lead to standardization and homogeneity across schools rather than diversity and innovation, as expected.

<sup>2</sup> Typologies were not exclusive, as the authors argued that ‘many schools fitted into more than one category (Garry *et al.*, 2018, p. 9).

## 5. Education reforms and policy enactment in schools

How and to what extent policy reforms make schools respond to their expectations, and how much schools actually reform policies is a debate that has puzzled scholars and policymakers for decades (Hallett, 2010; Meyer & Rowan, 2006; Tyack & Cuban, 1995). Quasi-market reforms that combine high-stakes accountability create a highly competitive environment for schools with multiple and conflicting demands (Falabella, 2014). A linear trajectory between a policy text and its implementation has been largely rejected, as schools respond to policy or environmental pressures in varying ways (Ball *et al.*, 2012). In a performance-driven environment, schools pretend to do so as conforming to these norms and values to gain legitimacy among their surrounding actors (Keddie, 2013). In this line, neo-institutionalism argues that schools tend to deflect environmental pressure to change their practices by adopting 'ceremonial' changes while maintaining their core functioning and institutional traditions mostly untouched (Hallett, 2010). The de-coupling between environmental demands and schools' core functioning has been widely explored to explain policy misalignment, discourse, or symbolic adoption, or why policy fails to change organizations' behavior (Coburn, 2004; Diamond, 2012). More recent studies, however, have shown that high-stakes PBA environments can produce more tight coupling between policy goals in implementation (Diamond, 2012; Meyer & Rowan, 2006), clearly constraining teachers' autonomy and agency (Hallett, 2010). In spite of that, neo-institutionalist decoupling argument falls short of understanding how policies are interpreted and recontextualized within the school core as it fails to account for the mediating role of teachers' belief systems, norms, and collective practices (Coburn, 2001; Tyack and Cuban, 1995).

Literature on policy enactment has focused on actors' meaning-making of education policies based on both collective and situated practices to address the shortcomings of institutional theory, providing a nuanced and detailed account of actors' responses to their environments (Ball *et al.*, 2012; Coburn, 2004; Spillane *et al.*, 2002). Sense-making theorists suggest that the school culture and organization are the results of how school leaders and teachers interact and select information from their environment, and how they interpret and make meaning of it (Coburn, 2004; Gawlik, 2015). Thus, the school culture or ethos, understood as a set of norms, values, attitudes, and behaviors that prevail within the organization acts as one of the mediating factors on teachers' interpretations and responses to environmental demands (Coburn, 2001; Spillane *et al.*, 2002). Making sense of policies is both a collective process resulting from teachers' interactions with their peers, leaders and other stakeholders and deeply embedded in their own micro-school culture (Corun, 2005; Ball *et al.*, 2012). Within this body of literature, a growing number of scholars have studied school-level responses to the growing phenomenon of quasi-market and PBA (Ball *et al.*, 2012; Falabella, 2014; Keddie, 2013). The machinery of targets, metrics, and accountability creates an environment of performativity orchestrated by both an obsession and fear for results, which can lead teachers to "set aside personal beliefs and commitments" and enact in accordance with the expectations of performance (Ball, 2003, p. 215). Yet imagining a linear response from teachers or principal responses to this logic would neglect both actors' agency and the negotiated, collective, and situated nature of the varying enactment of policy (Ball *et al.*, 2012).

The school culture, values, and organizational practices are fundamental to understanding teachers' sense-making and responses to the competing and conflicting environmental demands for performance and innovation. In the context of the Chilean quasi-market system, Verger *et al.*, (2020) looked at how the school management of PBA pressure and its view of high-stakes exams shaped teachers' perceptions and responses to accountability. Depending on how the PBA was perceived –as highly coercive or less constraining– and how the school positioned vis-a-vis high-stakes exams –either in favor or against–, the authors found five types of school responses to PBA: accommodation, induced alignment, dilution, fabrication, and de facto opting out (Verger *et al.*, 2020). For instance, schools with innovative pedagogy and centered on students' overall development tended to 'dilute' PBA pressure, whereas those with a school culture around discipline, performance, and high expectations for students did not feel constrained by PBA demands as it largely accommodates the school's values. In a study in England, Braun and Maguire (2020) explored how primary teachers' dealt with PBA demands, showing that teachers responded to the accountability requirements against their own beliefs of what would be best for students, focusing on teaching towards the exams. Similarly, teachers were urged to make school performance appear in line with Ofsted expectations, to avoid being graded 'Inadequate' (Braun & Maguire, 2020), enacting a 'performing school' (Falabella, 2014). Beyond the school environment, namely the norms, expectations, and involved stakeholders, the school culture and teachers' experiences, views, and values about the policy are fundamental to understanding teachers' responses (Keddie, 2013). The consequence of high-stakes PBA and the culture of performativity are many, from seriously and negatively impacting teachers' well-being and self-esteem (Moore, 2018), to transforming schools into exam factories (Hutchings, 2015) that primarily focus on teaching to the test (Au, 2007; Falabella, 2014). The implications of PBA obsession on exams not only narrow schools' curriculums to exam subjects (Vasquez Heilig & Darling-Hammond, 2008) but also make schools incur in practices of test-cheating to improve their situation in light of accountability metrics. Therefore, the same resorts and tools of accountability become the blades that harm its effectiveness and go against its own intentions.

## 6. Methodology

In this study, the main purpose is to understand what types of innovations are being developed by Free Schools and how teachers interpret and respond to the market-based aims of developing innovations in the context of high-stakes PBA. To do so, the study adopts a qualitative exploratory design and looks in depth at a small sample of three Free Schools in London. Qualitative exploratory studies are best suited to advance the understanding of an understudied phenomenon and to derive insights or hypotheses about them to be tested later in larger studies (Cohen *et al.*, 2018). Furthermore, exploratory studies are adequate for cases where there isn't a predetermined outcome (Yin, 2014), as it comes when exploring what innovations, if any, were developed by Free Schools. To answer the research questions, the main data comes from 12 semi-structured interviews with teachers from three different schools in London. In-depth interviews can help the researcher discern "the lived experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience" (Seidman, 2013, p. 9). Hence, the interview's main goal was to understand teachers' perspectives, ideas, and ways of navigating the complex and sometimes contradictory incentives posed by quasi-market reforms. In this sense, two considerations need to be made about Free Schools. First, unlike Academies which were priorly

state-controlled schools, Free Schools are newly created organizations and do not have a tradition on how to operate that needs to be changed. This relates to the first assumption of this study: Free Schools should be 'freer' to innovate compared to Academies. Secondly, autonomy in quasi-market reforms generally refers to the school-management level and not to teachers individual autonomy, which is mainly derived from the first one (Greany, 2016; Parcerisa *et al.*, 2022). Therefore, teachers' experiences and enactment of school approaches or even their degree of decision-making power within the classroom are determined by school-level decisions about innovation and accountability.

Regarding the sampling of schools and teachers, two main factors were taken into account: the type of Free School, and school subjects and grades of teachers. There are different types of Free Schools. One type are mainstream schools, which could be primary schools (year 1 to 6), secondary schools (year 7 to 11), colleges (year 11 to 13), or all-through (year 1 to 13).<sup>3</sup> The second type is University Technical Colleges (UTCs), a subtype that has a focus on Science, Technology, Engineer and Mathematics (STEM), which are sponsored simultaneously by a university and a company -or many-, and that cover years 10 to year 13 of schooling (University Technical Colleges, 2022; DfE, 2010). What also makes UTCs a special type of Free School is the combination of STEM-oriented curricula and a dual partnership with a university and a business, showing a clear orientation towards the labor market, making them the flagship innovation of Michael Gove (2010). Hence, for this study, I selected two mainstream Free Schools, one secondary and one all-through school, and a UTC, for a number of reasons. First, the sample exemplifies the variety of approaches that Free Schools can take as a result of the autonomy conceded to their sponsors. For instance, School B had an explicit school ethos towards innovation, while School A contrasted because of its focus on 'no-excuses' education. 'No excuses' was coined by Samuel Casey Carter in 2000 to describe high-achieving schools serving largely disadvantaged students in the United States, a model that has spread largely among American Charter Schools (Cheng *et al.*, 2017). The 'no-excuses' model is driven by a strict behavioral policy that considers success dependant on student's attitudes, a highly scripted organization in terms of classroom management, curriculum, and pedagogy, and has proliferated as a 'success model' for low-income students (Golann, 2021). Third, School C was chosen because of the interesting particularities of the UTCs model. The second reason relates to the rationale for creating Free Schools, argued on the basis of enabling community-led initiatives responsive to their needs and to better serve disadvantaged students (DfE, 2010). In this case, although all three schools were in London, Table 4 shows they all have a relatively large intake of disadvantaged students, evidenced by the high percentage of schools under the Free School Meals program used as a proxy for socio-economic deprivation (Andrews & Johnes, 2017). In sum, the three selected schools depict the array of different options that the new Free Schools policy gave birth to.

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<sup>3</sup> See Table 5 in the annex for a detailed account of schools' organizations and exam years in England.



Table 3.  
*Schools characteristics*

	<b>School A</b>	<b>School B</b>	<b>School C</b>
Type of school	Mainstream Free School	Mainstream Free School	University Technical College
Type of Academy Trust	Stand-alone	Multi Academy Trust	Multi Academy Trust
Area	Urban	Urban	Urban
School Years	7 to 13	1 to 13	10 to 13
Number of students / Full capacity	709 / 840	1186 / 1200	154 / 550
% FSM	21.1%	28.6%	40%
Ofsted Report	Outstanding	Outstanding	Not reported
Admissions	Non-selective	Non-selective	Non-selective

Source: Self elaboration based on GOV.UK (2022)

Regarding the teachers' sample, I intended to have a mixture of teachers with different years of experience in subjects with and without high-stake exams. As a result, a total of twelve teachers (n=12) were recruited, four per school, teaching different subjects such as English, Science, Mathematics, and Biology. Teachers' names and any other information about the school is treated anonymously due to the ethical protocol of this project. In this sense, findings are grouped by themes rather than per school as the best way to answer the research questions, although when relevant, specific features of each school are highlighted. To complement interview data, I conducted a content analysis of different schools and sponsors' related documents, their websites, DfE and Ofsted reports, and media outlets such as newspaper stories on each of the three cases. Categories were pre-defined by the innovation framework, which guided the content analysis in documents, media, and websites that aligned with it (Cohen *et al.*, 2018). his small-scale study has limitations. As explained, I used purposive sampling while also having a small number of teachers per school, to avoid making generalizations by use of the obtained results (Cohen *et al.*, 2018). In addition, a direct comparison between teachers working in different types of schools would have strengthened the results and could have shed light on the effects of the different types of school operators on teachers' subjectivities, their autonomy, and their capacity to innovate. However, in spite of these limitations, the study provides insightful contributions to the understanding of quasi-market reforms goals of innovations in the context of high-stakes PBA accountability as in the case of England.

## 6. Findings: What innovations do Free Schools enact?

In this first section, I present what innovations Free Schools developed across the four analytical categories from the OECD (2014) framework, comparing them to what was conceptualized as an ideal type of traditional education (Tyack & Cuban, 1995). Findings point to how school actors have interpreted and enacted the decision-making authority



conceded to them while navigating the competition and accountability incentives built within the system. Remarkably, the three schools have adopted and embodied completely different ethos for their organization and purpose, which largely define not only the school approach to the policy but also play a key mediating role over teachers' views and responses.

### **6.1. Organizational innovations**

A common theme among schools and innovation categories is that the three schools have taken different and even opposing directions in each dimension. Looking at organizational innovations, School B presents as the most innovative of all three. On its website, School B emphasizes that its founders aimed to merge three elements in their school ethos, academic success, character, and problem-solving, all encapsulated in their mantra "head, heart, and hands". In their 'Approach' section, School B highlights the importance of school assemblies and students' exhibitions as a way to engage and learn, while also stressing their partnerships with universities, businesses, and local organizations to provide students with real-world experiences. Compared to traditional schooling, it departs from a disciplinary-based organization of learning and aims to integrate real-world conditions into students' experiences. Consequently, the school organizational approach spillover the curriculum, which stresses students' oracy and communication skills rather than wrote memorization, and pedagogies, fostering the implementation of joint projects across disciplines, as will be discussed later.

On the other end of the spectrum, School A has adopted a totally different organizational ethos under a 'no-excuses' mantra. The school revindicates 'tradition' and has a neo-conservative approach to teaching and learning, emphasizing the importance of discipline, order, and hard work. School A follows a traditional organization of the curriculum into academic disciplines and largely focuses on students' behavior as key drivers for their learning. However, teachers emphasized a strong culture around peer feedback, a practice widely embedded in the school. Peer observations and feedback were essential to teachers' work in School A. This practice differs from a traditional standpoint to teachers' working style, signaling the nuances of the 'no-excuses' approach when looking at different layers of the school organization. An important aspect to consider is that, in contrast to School B or C, this school is run by a single academy trust, enabling the sponsor to imprint its own philosophy.

Last, School C has an innovative organizational approach defined by design. I consider this organizational model by design because School C is under the umbrella of the UTC model, which involves a STEM-oriented curriculum, a threefold partnership between the sponsor, a university, and an employer, and covers only students in year 10 to year 13 (University Technical Colleges, 2022). Therefore, the school's organizational design spins around giving students a real-work experience, and a curriculum focused on Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) could be considered as innovative in itself. Furthermore, as it only covers the last two years of compulsory schooling (10 and 11) and two last year of upper-secondary (12 and 13), it also differs from traditional secondary school organization.

### **6.2. Marketing innovations**

In the context of a competitive environment, Free Schools give a central role to their websites to promote their school approach and results to appeal to families. On top

of their school ethos, performance on exams and Ofsted inspections are central to the marketing strategy (OECD, 2005). Undoubtedly, online marketing was unnecessary for schools prior to the reform, nor a traditional practice by state-controlled schools. Yet, the fierce competition among schools under the new governing paradigm has pushed both Academies and Free Schools in this direction. In the case of School B, its website stresses the school's 'Outstanding' grade in all categories in its first inspection, including "(i) achievement of pupils; (ii) teaching and learning; (iii) behavior and safety; (iv) leadership and management". Ofsted's report highlights "A well-researched, innovative and creative way of organizing subjects promotes outstanding learning"<sup>4</sup>. Similarly, the school shows its good performance in high-stakes exams, including Reception year, Key- Stages 1 to 5, and the Sixth Form. The school, located in an underserved area of London, uses its website to promote its high-performing standards thanks to its innovative educational approach as a case of success. Similarly, School A also highlights its high performance on standardized exams and in all areas inspected by Ofsted. For instance, Ofsted's 2017 report states, "The school's leaders and governors are successful in their aim to encourage pupils' strong personal, social and emotional development. Pupils have very positive attitudes to learning and show powerful determination to achieve as well as they can". Arguably one of the peculiarities of this school is its repeated appearance in the media. As part of a larger phenomenon of 'no-excuses' schools being picked up by different outlets, such as TV shows, newspapers, etc, School A neo-conservative approach has been praised thanks to its high performance while serving disadvantaged pupils. Clearly, this self-advocating strategy is a direct response to the market incentives and appears as an innovative marketing strategy from schools to attract parents. To conclude, School C also highlights its students' exam results on its website, its curriculum approach to STEM, and the overall strength of the UTC model for giving students better opportunities in their future. Nonetheless, School C is under the larger umbrella of the UTC model, which has its own website where the strengths and specificity of the approach are advertised (University Technical Colleges, 2022). In sum, marketing innovations are widely adopted in Free Schools as a strategy to differentiate themselves from their competitors: Academies and state schools.

### 6.3. Curriculum and pedagogy innovations

The school curriculum and teaching methods are two areas over which Free Schools have autonomy to make decisions, making room for potential innovations. Not surprisingly, the school ethos operates as the driving factor behind curriculum decisions at each school. In the case of School A, teachers state that the school designed its own curricula, although following the guidelines of the national curriculum. The curriculum praises the importance of classic knowledge on core subjects, stating, for instance, that "classic Greek myths, Homer's *The Odyssey* and Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*" are read by all Year 7 pupils (School A Website). Yet, discipline and order are central aspects of the school culture, where running in the corridors is forbidden or any misconduct is severely penalized. These aspects are shown on the school website, where the curriculum is defined as "broadly traditional and academically rigorous", expecting students to be "polite and obedient" while it encourages "competition and allows our pupils to win and lose" (School A website). Thus, although not taking an innovative stance, the school used its autonomy to design its curriculum and incorporated in its culture the system's logic of competition.

<sup>4</sup> School websites and Ofsted reports although publicly available are not cited to maintain the school's anonymity in compliant with the ethical protocol of the study.

In the other two cases, both schools used their autonomy to develop an innovative curriculum in comparison to England's national curriculum. The UCT model argues a skills gap between traditional education and the demands of the labor market that they aim to bridge by partnering with a university and a business for creating their curricula which is not only focused on STEM but also that offer students the possibility of doing internships with their business partners (University Technical Colleges, 2022). This is reflected in the School C curriculum approach, as it focuses "on applied and contextualized learning and provides an alternative to the approaches offered by traditional schools", which is integrated into "employer-led business projects that are at the center of student learning" (School C website). Lastly, School B curriculum also departs from England's National Curriculum, adopting a holistic view based on the "head, heart, and hands". This approach spins around a student-centered learning organization, students' socio-emotional well-being, and a hands-on way of knowing, incorporating project-based learning as a pedagogical stance. The school offers a variety of subjects beyond core ones, such as Drama, Arts & Design, Spanish, and a large list of electives. However, in order to play by the rules of the system and give parents certainty over pupils' future, the school also stresses that from year 10 "all students start the GCSE program to ensure they leave with the grades they need to take them to the next level of study" (School B website).

Pedagogical or instructional methods are key areas for innovating in education, as different approaches aim to capture the variety of learning styles and content that can be taught. However, these are not mentioned in the 2010 White Papers and have not stood out among Free Schools. As could be expected, School A prioritized traditional methods, focused on teachers imparting knowledge, limiting group-work, and stressing discipline as the key component. School C, in spite of its STEM-oriented curriculum and apprenticeship in business partners for students, it did not adopt an innovative stance. Lastly, School B embraced project-based learning as a way for students to approach learning, fostered a learner-centered pedagogy, and encouraged teachers to undertake cross-disciplinary projects. The schools are represented in figure 3 across the different dimensions of innovation. In the next section, I complement this description with teachers' views of their autonomy to develop innovative teaching approaches.

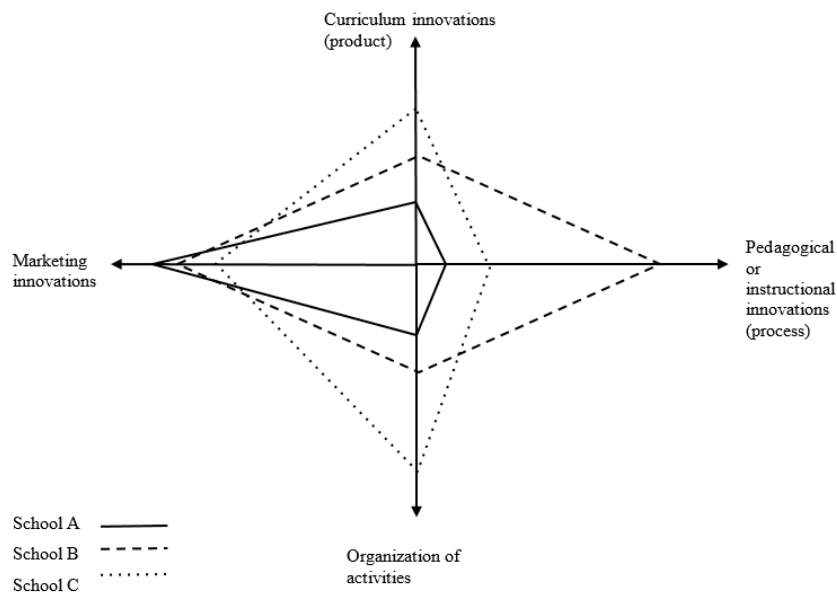


Figure 3. School innovation matrix. Source: self elaborated.

#### 6.4. Teachers' autonomy and innovations in Free Schools

The second group of findings relates to teachers' autonomy and the extent to which they see themselves developing innovation. As discussed, school autonomy conferred in reforms as the A&FS policy is different from teachers' professional or collegial autonomy, yet it does not limit teachers' individual autonomy within the classroom (Parcerisa *et al.*, 2022). Teachers agreed that they felt more freedom and autonomy in their current Free Schools, particularly when compared to Academies run by a chain. Many interviewed teachers have worked previously in Academies, which were seen as 'exam factories' (Hutchings, 2015), where their teaching practices were mostly prescribed "You were observed, probably at least once or twice a day. And that was like, you know, to check up on your teaching to make sure that you're delivering the schools' way of doing things" (Teacher 3, School B). Arguably, teachers seemed to perceive Free Schools not as results-driven as Academies, thus having more autonomy to decide their teaching content.

The school ethos and approach to PBA operated as the key mediating factor on how teachers perceive their autonomy or their practices. In schools B and C, where innovation was at the core, teachers felt enabled to make curriculum decisions, yet in the context of the school's approach to teaching and learning. To illustrate this, School B stands out by having a strong emphasis on project-based learning as a pedagogical strategy, and for its focus on students' soft skills within their curricula. This view was reflected by teachers, who considered that School B largely stressed oracy in its curriculum "oracy is huge, and if you're not used to teaching in that way, you know... oracy underpins the way that we teach. And with PBL as well!" (Teacher 4, School B). Also, teachers have the autonomy to make joint projects between different subjects "if I want to design a project which is kind of a combination of art English and drama I can go and speak to the drama specialist" (Teacher 1, School B). On the other end, School A with its 'no excuses' culture, decided to follow the National Curriculum at large, while emphasizing certain content in different subjects. For instance, the school headteacher revindicated the content of English GCSE, stating that studying classics like Shakespeare was a central part of English culture and traditions. However, when I asked if their practices were innovative, one of them answered "well, I suppose it's two ways to look at that. You can look up taking stuff that we know works, but it's fallen out of favor and then trying new innovations" (Teacher 3, School A). In this case, the teacher was referring to a traditional teacher-centered pedagogy and a strict behavior policy, as illustrated by another interviewee: "silence in the corridors. No calling out. Nor group work" because "their peers aren't experts in the subject, their teacher is" (Teacher 4, A School).

In a similar line, the UTC model also mediated on teachers' views and enactment of innovation. The UTC model not only focuses on STEM subjects, but it also aims to link work-related experience to students' learning. For an English teacher at School C, having an innovative take on her teaching was an organizational desire, but hard to implement due to lack of time and the focus on exams "the idea is meant to be, we are supposed to incorporate some of this kind of 'work-place' ideas within the English curriculum, but is hard for us to design that in so little time" (Teacher 10, School C). In this sense, none of the teachers felt the school's full potential was being achieved. One of the teachers said, "I've not yet heard of anyone doing something novel with that opportunity of teaching and learning at a UTC" (Teacher 11, School C).

## 7. Teachers confront the limits of accountability

The third group of findings points to teachers' views of PBA demands in relation to the goals of innovation among Free Schools. Teachers considered that Free Schools are an opportunity to create new approaches to education, although they all agreed that these attempts should be held accountable. For instance, one of the interviewees compared Free Schools with the U.S. political system in which each state had the freedom to try different policies "We are little laboratories, little experiments in education, trying different stuff. And you know what? maybe it will be a total disaster and nobody will ever try it to do it again" (Teacher 2, School A). However, differences and critiques were placed over the current PBA system. In the context of an education quasi-market, the need for an accountability system was deemed inevitable:

"Let's say you've got a business in another industry, perhaps you are selling a product, yeah? You know, you can have all the wonderful lovely innovations in the world, but ultimately it has to be an output, that's be something where its value is measured and they will sell products. And they will base their success on sales. So, you can have all the innovations and crazy ideas with you're not making sales at the end of the day, it's not it's neither here nor there" (Teacher 2, School A).

As occurred with innovations, the school ethos was a key mediating factor on how teachers perceived PBA demands and how it affected their practices. Building on the different types of school responses to PBA by Verger *et al.* (2020), Free Schools in this study fall under two of their four categories: easily accommodating and dilution. For instance, School A's take on PBA could be considered as 'easy accommodating', as teachers didn't feel much pressure on results and the school is in favor of PBA. On the other end, School B and C views on PBA can be considered as dilution, as exams were a big constraint to their learning approach, yet school leaders did not press teachers. This points to the school leadership's role in regulating the accountability demands. For teachers, school leaders could 'deflect' pressures from the outside world, such as Ofsted inspections or even the weight of exams on the day-to-day school life, or, on the contrary, it could intensify it.

The varying school responses to PBA also mediate teachers' perceptions when teaching school grades assessed by high-stakes exams. Not surprisingly, teachers in grades under national examinations felt a higher than when students don't face examinations, limiting the room for innovation. This was particularly a matter of concern in School B, "there is quite a lot of pressure because the children have not really done Maths and English in a normal way, in an exam way, until this year" (Teacher 1, School B). What's more, a teacher mentioned that the pressure wasn't coming from the school, but from herself: "that has come mostly from me! Because I'm very aware that the school only is free to do what it does because it did well in GCSE last year" (Teacher 4, School B). What this shows is that the pressure of accountability, or what Ball (2003) defined as the 'terror of performativity', is embedded in teachers' views.

In cases where the school culture and view on PBA were aligned, teachers felt less constrained. This happened in School A, where the curriculum followed the exam's content and where the headteacher had a strong grip on the school 'no-excuses' ethos, teachers were less worried about PBA, "the school needs to get a good set of GCSE results after five years to prove it's doing well, it's stressful, that's part of the job" (Teacher 1, School



A). On the contrary, the pressure increased when the school's future was more dependent on exams or inspection results. Teachers from School C, a newer school and not so well-established yet, saw exams as a threat:

“The pressure of getting those exam results reduces innovation... because you know that that's that those exam results will most determine whether the UTC survives, whether it will have to again join multi-academy trust or whatever the future will be of it” (Teacher 4, School C).

Something similar happened to teachers in School B, as they felt the school's autonomy to develop their innovative approach was highly dependent on keeping good grades in national exams. Ofsted inspections were also a matter of concern in Schools B and C, those with the most 'innovative' stance on teaching and learning. For School B teachers, as it has opened new grades and introduced several organizational changes since the last school inspection in 2014, they were concerned that a future one might yield negative results forcing them to change their practices. On the contrary, having a good Ofsted grade would mean having the inspectorate 'off your back' for some years (Hutchinson, 2016).

A recurring issue with high-stakes PBA systems are their unintended effects on school practices, namely teaching to the test, narrowing of the curriculum, or school cheating (Au, 2007; Hamilton et al., 2007; Looney, 2009). All three of them were pointed out by the interviewee teachers. The first one, teaching to the test, makes teachers focus primarily on the exam contents and methods instead of the broader curriculum. This was particularly disrupting for teachers in School B, whose pedagogical stance did not match teaching towards standardized exams nudging them to modify their teaching practices towards the requirements of the tests “we need to focus, especially when it comes to reading papers, you know, we need to give them test technique and stamina practice and speed and the time limit” (Teacher 1, School B). However, the consequences were not only for her, but also for the children “they were eager to do well, they wanted to do well, but they did not enjoy the process of practice papers...” (Teacher 1, School B). Narrowing the curriculum means focusing on the topics and how they are assessed in high-stakes exams. This is what happened for teachers with students in GCSE years and their broader curriculum “if we are doing GCSE exams, we have very few choices on what we can or can't do” (Teacher 2, School B). Lastly, teachers also reported practices of school cheating and consequently, distrusting exam results. In England like in the U.S., schools are assessed on the basis of students' progress. As a consequence, the higher the baseline the harder it is to show improvement. This creates an incentive for schools to lower baseline, even to cheat “Why do the schools cheat? Because teachers and schools are feeling so much pressure to get these results. Then it becomes not about the child. I just think there's kind of a contradiction. Why are we doing it for?” (Teacher 2, School B).

As evidenced in this section, both autonomy and innovation over curriculum and pedagogical practices are highly constrained due to PBA across schools. Table 4 summarizes the extent to which each of the four dimensions of innovation occurred in each of the schools, balancing discursive intentions with teachers' experiences. The results have shown that beyond the goals of being innovative in some areas, such as fostering real-life practices in students learning experiences, or teaching students what they thought was most important for them, the stakes of exams and inspections made teachers focus on exam results, even against their own beliefs.



Table 4.  
Type of innovations and responses to PBA in Free Schools

	School A	School B	School C
Type of school	Mainstream Free School	Mainstream Free School	University Technical College
Type of academy trust	Stand-alone	Multi Academy Trust	Multi Academy Trust
Process (pedagogy) innovations	Not recorded	Medium	Limited
Product (curriculum) innovations	None	Wide	Wide
Organization innovations	Limited	Medium	Wide
Marketing innovations	Wide	Wide	Wide
Views on PBA	Low pressure and pro-PBA	Low pressure and con-PBA	Low pressure and con-PBA
Responses to PBA	Induced alignment	Dilution	Dilution

Source: Self-elaborated based on Verger et al. (2020) & OECD (2014)

## 8. Discussion

England's Free Schools epitomize the complex logic behind quasi-market reforms, where the goals of innovations fall short in contrast to the incentives for competition and the stakes of accountability. In the three cases, school sponsors use their autonomy to decide on the ethos while strategically leveraging their websites to promote what makes their school unique and valuable for students and families: their curriculum, their teaching staff, the real-world learning experiences, their strict discipline, etc. This demonstrates clearly that schools prioritize marketing strategies to obtain what's most important for them: parents' choice (Waslander *et al.*, 2010; Falabella, 2014). Therefore, educational innovation becomes instrumental for sponsors, just as another layer of the school that can be appealing to parents rather than drive new approaches to transform the system (Lubienski, 2009b). Similarly, innovations in school organization were also expected from Free Schools (DfE, 2010), an area where sponsors portrayed different interpretations linked to their ethos. The only case that has clearly a different school organization compared to what was defined as a traditional view of schooling (Tyack & Cuban, 1995) are UTCs. However, the school's innovative design focused on STEM but limited to the last four years of schooling has been the main problem behind student intake, making several UTCs close in just a few years (NAO, 2019).

As reflected in the literature, innovations in pedagogical methods or school curricula are limited (Lubienski, 2009; Greany & Waterhouse, 2016; Wiborg *et al.*, 2018). Although two of the three schools propose a different curriculum approach compared

to England's National Curriculum, this difference seems to be offset during exam years. This was also true about teaching practices, where teachers in Schools B and C were keen to teach according to exam requirements and methodologies, even if they were not in line with their values (Braun & Maguire, 2020). What this shows is that the high-stake PBA has a limiting effect on curriculum or pedagogical innovations, as the stakes of under-performance are too high for both schools and students (Falabella, 2014; Wiborg *et al.*, 2018). At the same time, School A took advantage of the autonomy conceded embracing a 'no-excuses' culture (Golann, 2021) which yield great success for the school both in terms of PBA performance and parents, with much larger demands for seats than available spots. What these cases show is that Free Schools, rather than being disruptively innovative, respond to their environmental incentives, norms, and expectations by becoming a 'performing school' that "constantly act and perform for others in order to compete, remain attractive, and position itself advantageously in the marketplace" (Falabella, 2014, p. 5).

Beyond their surrounding environment, the school culture operates as a key mediating factor to understand the practices and responses to market and PBA incentives inside the school walls. Teachers' autonomy is bounded by the school ethos, which includes its view on teaching and learning, curriculum design, and organizational norms, but also the leadership stance about PBA (Coburn, 2001; Gawlik, 2015). Similar to what happens in Chile, schools whose culture clashes with PBA demands tend to dilute the pressure on exams (Verger *et al.*, 2020), making teachers feel less concerned about results (Pagès, 2021). On the other hand, teachers in School A and the no-excuses approach were aligned with England's 'self-improving' logic, seeing exams as integral to both their professional activity but also students' learning. However, in all cases, teachers found in the school leadership an important 'umbrella' against PBA demands, having the capacity to absorb the external pressure, releasing them to develop their work in a less stressful environment (Coburn, 2004; Keddie, 2013). However, the pressure is not only externally driven, as the reigning performativity culture in England became closely attached to teachers' identities (Ball, 2003), for whom results not only affected them or their schools but also students and their futures. This was evident in teachers from all schools agreeing on having strong accountability in England's fragmented system, in spite of critiques of it.

As an integral paradox to quasi-market reforms with high-stakes PBA, innovations are not diffused system-wide as much as the several unintended effects of teaching to the test, cheating, and narrowing the curriculum (Au, 2007; Hamilton *et al.*, 2007; Looney, 2009). Regardless of the school and its culture, all teachers were interested in teaching in a relevant way toward high-stakes exams. This was more evident and even more constraining for those teachers in charge of grades that face exams. The pressure for performance derives from the strong consequences schools and students face, from being re-brokered, closed, or not obtaining their high-school degree (Andrews & Johnes, 2017; West & Wolfe, 2019). More remarkably, schools not only often limited their curriculum but mainly mistrusted exam results from their own schools due to school-wide cheating. Undoubtedly, PBA pressures not only constrained teachers' autonomy but also creates a self-harming paradox of fostering school practices that hinder the system's improvement goals.

## 9. Concluding remarks

In this small study, we have explored the extent to which pro-market reforms combined with high-stakes PBA can yield the expected innovations within schools. Taking the case of England's Free Schools, a new type of institution governed by a private sponsor, I studied three cases to assess what innovations were taking place and how teachers perceived and dealt with the competing demands of innovation and accountability. Following Wiborg *et al.*, (2018), I used the OECD (2014) innovation framework to analyze the practices at each school, comparing them with an ideal type of traditional schooling as a baseline. In the first place, this piece demonstrates that private sponsors take advantage of the autonomy granted within the reform to develop the school ethos at their will, leading to widely contrasting school cultures. As a result, and given the competitive incentives in England's education quasi-market, schools are prone to develop marketing innovations to advertise their approach, making use of PBA measures to appeal to parents. Second, as in previous studies in England, innovations in school curricula but particularly pedagogical practices were more limited, mainly due to the prescriptive nature of the test-based accountability.

The study has also attempted to bridge the effects of the environment on schools and its effects within the classrooms. I have shown how Free Schools' ethos is a central mediating factor between external demands and school practices, as well as teachers' enactment of these goals. In this sense, school leadership can enable or constrain teachers' autonomy and regulate positively or negatively the pressure on results (Keddie, 2013; Verger *et al.*, 2020). However, in line with prior studies, the high stakes for schools and students associated with exams and inspections not only limited teachers' autonomy and reduced innovation (Greany, 2022; Looney, 2009; Lubienski, 2009b), but also trigger the full set of undesirable practices such as teaching to the test, cheating, and narrowing the curriculum (Au, 2007; Falabella, 2014). In sum, this small-scale study contributes in showing the several challenges for quasi-market reforms to trigger innovation, while fostering practices of competition among schools. Due to the exploratory characteristics of this research, further studies are needed to assess at a wide scale the development of innovations at different scales as well as the consequences of high-stakes accountability on teachers and students.

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## Annex

Table 5.  
*Organization of England’s state-funded schools.*

State funded schools		Key stage	Year	Final exam	Age	
Primary School	Lower School	Early Years	Nursery (or Pre-School)		3 to 4	
			Reception (or Foundation)		4 to 5	
Secondary School	Middle School	Key Stage 1	Year 1		5 to 6	
			Year 2		6 to 7	
		Key Stage 2	Year 3		7 to 8	
			Year 4		8 to 9	
		Key Stage 3	Year 5		9 to 10	
			Year 6	SATs	10 to 11	
		Key Stage 4	Year 7		11 to 12	
			Year 8		12 to 13	
		Upper School	Key Stage 4	Year 9		13 to 14
				Year 10		14 to 15
College	Sixth form	Key Stage 5	Year 11	GCSEs	15 to 16	
			Year 12		16 to 17	
		Year 13	A-levels	17 to 18		

Source: Self elaborated base on <https://www.gov.uk/national-curriculum>