

The Quality of Education in Britain: More Choice for Citizens?

The Quality of Welfare Services in Europe: The impact of policy change on citizens and providers, Social Science Research Center, Berlin October 2001.

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Background

There has always been some form of choice in the UK education system. The presence of the fee-paying sector is an obvious example. But, similarly, parents have always been able to express a preference for an alternative school within the state system since the 1944 Education Act. This form of choice between 1944 and the 1980s took place in an increasingly regulated education system where school places were allocated to children, typically by local government institutions (Local Education Authorities), on the basis of where they lived (sometimes referred to as 'catchment' areas). What we have seen recently is a shift in the balance of power between school choice and school allocation. This process was started by the Conservative Government with the 1980 Education Act but was significantly enhanced by the 1988 Education Reform Act. Not only did this extend the importance of choice but also introduced other features that have helped to create elements of a quasi-market based around three guiding principles: choice, competition and diversity. The most important features have been changes to funding mechanisms (resources increasingly allocated by pupil numbers), greater autonomy of schools from the state, known as Local Management of Schools (setting and controlling their own financial budgets), and performance league tables.

[Why reforms introduced?]

There have also been two court rulings that have further enhanced the importance of choice: The Greenwich Judgement, which has meant that priority in allocating places to children cannot be given to those living in the same local government district; and the Rotherham Judgement which finally gave complete priority to parents who choose a school (whether it be their local school or not) over those who are allocated a school place by default.

The more recent 1998 School Standards and Framework Act established a Code of Practice for school admissions in an attempt to make the allocation of school places in this new era of 'school choice' as "fair" and "transparent" to

parents as possible. Greater information relating to the schools admissions process is now published, competing schools now have to discuss their admission arrangements with each other, and guidance is given regarding “sensible” and “just” ways of allocating places where schools are oversubscribed.

As a consequence of these reforms and legal rulings England and Wales now have a situation where nearly all parents have to apply for a school place, whether this is their local, or ‘traditional’, school or an alternative school. Where possible these preferences have to be met, but where there are more applications than places the admission authority (the school or the LEA) has to follow published oversubscription criteria in the final allocation of places. Parents are then able to appeal over the final school allocation, giving them a final opportunity to get the school of their choice.

A parallel development to this programme of choice for parents in the education system has been the attempt to increase school diversity. Policy-makers have seen this as a shift away from having ‘bog-standard’ comprehensive schools towards encouraging schools to develop their own distinct ethos and reputation. To market advocates this is seen as an essential ingredient to satisfy parental choice. But such diversity has been artificially created and not as a direct result of schools being placed into a competitive arena. The most significant attempts to create horizontal diversity have been in the form of grant maintained schools (now Foundation schools), church schools and specialist schools and colleges.

It is often assumed that these reforms have led to a declining role of the state. However, it must be noted that education in the UK is a ‘boom’ area – public expenditure has increased in all sectors and there has been expansion in two directions: the widening of participation in post-compulsory education and the expansion of pre-school education. I believe it is necessary, therefore, to play down this assumption and keep the increased marketisation of compulsory education in some perspective.

Given this point the UK provides the largest experiment of market reforms to state education in the World. It is perhaps surprising, then, that research in this area is still relatively limited. However, there have now been a number of key studies that, together, enable a greater understanding of the implementation of such policies and their impacts.

(I would like to argue that the impacts of these reforms, on balance, have been minimal. Both in terms of raising standards and being socially divisive.)

One of the most significant findings has been the differential implementation and impact of reforms across England and Wales (Taylor 2002). The emergence of ‘local markets’ has meant that any assessment of this choice programme is embedded in the local geography, the local organisation of schooling, the historical development of schools in each area, the admission arrangements or the particular LEA and each school within, the way schools have responded to the potentially competitive arena, and the way parents

themselves have engaged with the education market place and the subsequent choice of schools.

Because of this the impact of the choice reforms have not been uniform across England and Wales. Therefore it is necessary to consider these impacts from a national perspective *and* at the local level. The implications for citizens and providers of these reforms have to be seen from an overall 'balanced' perspective, while also allowing the particular social and geographic contexts of the reforms to inform us about how these mechanisms lead to different outcomes.

Expectations of citizens

Evidence in England and Wales from LEAs and from a recent nationally representative sample (Flatley et al. 2001) suggests that approximately 9 in every 10 parents are offered a place in their preferred school (85% of parents offered a place in their *favourite* school, 92% in their *first preference* school). Similar findings have also been reported in Scotland. This would suggest that the programme of choice appears to work for the vast majority of parents. However, the one in ten parents who are not getting their child into their preferred school are of a significant number (in absolute terms). And the figures do not begin to illustrate the often reported levels of anguish that they endure. Indeed it is perhaps no coincidence that there around one appeal lodged for every ten parents in the admission process. Many of these parents, dissatisfied with their choice, attempt to get the decision reversed.

Given that the education quasi-market is spatially marked it is perhaps not surprising that these dissatisfied parents are not evenly distributed across the UK either. The nationally representative survey, reported above, has shown that parents living in London were three times as likely *not* to be offered a place in their favourite school as those parents living in the more rural shire counties. It should be noted that this is not just an urban phenomenon as parents living in other metropolitan areas are nearly as likely to be offered a favoured school place as those in rural areas.

One of the most likely reasons for this 'London' phenomenon is the significantly greater likelihood that parents will not apply for a place in their nearest state school (40% in London authorities; 31% metropolitan authorities, 29% unitary authorities; and 21% in shire authorities). Clearly the distribution of schools and the greater transport facilities in London ensure that parents living in this area have a greater choice of schools open to them. Consequently many more parents attempt to obtain a place in an alternative school to what would have been their traditional 'catchment' school.

However, nearly three-quarters of all parents in England and Wales *do* apply to their nearest, traditional, community school. The majority of parents would appear, therefore, to be rejecting the school choice programme. Of course these parents may not, in reality, be rejecting the school choice programme. It may not be that surprising that so many parents choose their local school

given that there is often little choice of schools open to parents within a reasonable distance of their homes. Perhaps more importantly the two court judgements and the recent School Standards and Framework Act have meant that parents are now *having* to choose their local school in order to secure a place in any school. It is the case that where schools are oversubscribed the two most used criteria in allocating places are distance from the schools and 'designated' priority areas (i.e. the traditional catchment areas). There are now many examples of schools that have had to take an increasingly more 'local' intake as they have become more popular. Rather than being able to extend the opportunity for parents from a wide area to get a place in such popular schools the choice reforms have, in places, made the importance of residence even more significant in determining who goes to which schools.

Impacts of choice

One of the larger studies investigating the choice of schools has shown that it is often the case that when parents do make use of the choice reforms it is because they wish to *reject* their local school in favour of an alternative (Bagley et al. 2001). The rejection, or unpopularity, of a school is often associated to the combined effects of their relative examination league performance and the social class composition of the schools. Indeed, detailed examination of competition between schools has revealed that schools often compete in local hierarchical market places (Taylor 2001).

This would suggest that parents who engage with the education quasi-market do so to avoid particularly poor performing schools with the 'wrong' kind of pupils. Market advocates would herald this as a success as it should make poor performing schools improve at a faster rate, or, with the political will, be removed from the education landscape. Either way educational standards would be raised as a result of the choice reforms. Opponents to the market, on the other hand, would argue that such schools will become unjustly under-resourced (since funds follow pupils). They would also point out that such schools are only performing poorly because of the nature of their intakes (since examination leagues tables do not show the value-added a school can offer a child), and that the process of choice will lead to increasing socio-economic segregation between schools.

The question is, then, which of these two scenarios has occurred? I would argue that the constraints of the school choice programme have, themselves, limited the impacts.

There is little evidence to suggest that the introduction of 'choice' has led to a rise in educational standards (Gorard and Taylor 2001; Walford 2001). Although there has been a raw-score improvement in standards since the 1988 Education Reform Act there is little discernible link to market forces. The move to criterion referencing, the introduction of coursework and the relationship between school outcomes and the background characteristics of their pupils appear to have had a far greater impact. There has been extensive rationalisation of school places, but this occurred during the early

1990s, too early for the choice programme to really make an impact, and really as a response by local governments to reduce the number of surplus places because of economic rather than educational pressures (Taylor et al. 2000).

So have opponents to increased school choice been proved right? Well, perhaps not either. Using data from every secondary school in England and Wales, we have shown that children living in poverty are actually more evenly distributed between schools today than they were in 1988, the year before the main reforms were implemented. It is only in the last five years that the national level of segregation between schools in England has risen. In Wales there has been a continued decline in the overall levels of segregation between schools. The apparent absence of increased socio-economic segregation between schools can be explained by the similar likelihood of parents from different socio-economic backgrounds being offered a place in their favoured school. The large proportion of parents not choosing an alternative school to what they would have previously been allocated probably compounds this.

This is not to say that levels of segregation between schools have fallen in all regions of England and Wales (Gorard and Fitz 2000). However, changes in the local levels of segregation appear to be related to other factors, such as residential segregation and the presence of selective schools, rather than the direct impact of the choice reforms. The evidence would suggest that in areas, such as those in London, where parents are more likely to reject their local school there is a greater likelihood that the local levels of segregation between schools will change, but in both directions. For example, London contains some of the LEAs that have seen the sharpest decline in segregation and those that have had the greatest increase in segregation. Our research would suggest that it is the constraints within the new education market that determine whether schools become more (or less) segregated. These include, the geography of the area (schools and residence), changes in the number of school places available, and the number of schools that are allowed to determine their own admission procedures and oversubscription criteria.

Conclusions

Based on this evidence, therefore, how do we evaluate the overall impact of the school choice programme on parents?

Given that the majority of parents continue to choose their local school it is still difficult to foresee 'choice' being removed from the UK education system. Although this assumption could be made problematic it is likely that any further changes to the organisational structure of schooling will take place within this 'choice' agenda.

Even so, the question should not be whether school choice is a good or bad policy, but whether it is better or worse than something else. For example, schools in many areas of England and Wales are heavily segregated because

of the high levels of residential segregation in those areas (Taylor and Gorard 2002). Returning to allocation by residence or the increased use of proximity in allocating places in oversubscribed schools may only exacerbate this.

However, the fact that school segregation has risen in a number of areas of England, and the fact that an increasing proportion of parents appeal over their allocated school place, would suggest that policy-makers need to find ways of making 'choice' work. In other words, creating a system where parents are given *greater, genuine*, choice without leading to *increased* social inequality and injustice.

(Of course evidence suggests that a child will perform equally well in any school)

Based in our research I wish, very briefly, to propose three possible courses that the programme of school choice could take. As usual, each has their own merits and weaknesses.

Local schools for local children

Return to a system that advocates the importance of schooling within the local community. However, this would need to be set alongside mechanisms to avoid 'selection by mortgage' – whereby parents with relatively high levels of income 'buy' into a catchment or local area.

Incentives in the education market

Introduce incentives, such as rebates on local government taxes, to encourage parents from all socio-economic backgrounds to attend schools deemed unpopular.

A planned market

Allow market mechanisms, such as school choice, to operate but forced to work for the benefit of society rather than the individual. This could require means-tested free transport to be made available to all parents to attend any school they choose. Another strategy would be to introduce genuine academic banding in to all schools alongside school choice. A third strategy would be to implement something similar to the Popular Schools Initiative, utilised in Wales during the 1990s. This allows schools to apply for extra capital funding so that more pupils are given places there. There are now many examples, in England and Wales where school intakes are becoming more socially mixed because the school offers places to all the parents that have applied.

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