



# **Parents and the diversity of secondary education: a discussion paper**

*Prepared for RISE*

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## **Introduction**

Choice and diversity are at the heart of current education policy in England. They serve the overarching aim of customising the education system the central characteristic of which will be:

*...personalisation – so that the system fits to the individual rather than the individual having to fit to the system...And the corollary of this is that the system must be both freer and more diverse...so that there really are different and personalised opportunities available (DfES, 2004 p.10)*

The concept of personalisation is subject to conflicting interpretations but Harris and Ranson (2005) helpfully identify two dimensions. The first is focused on the experience of the pupil to give them more choice and greater differentiation of educational provision within schools to meet their individual needs. The second is to customise provision for parents by extending choice between schools.

Underlying the legitimacy claimed for policies to increase choice and diversity between schools is that parents want more choice and it is in their best interests. But relatively little study has been done on the way in which parents perceive choice and diversity (as opposed to the way they make choices) and there are many questions to which we do not know the answer. We do not know whether parents want more choice. Greater choice does not necessarily lead to greater satisfaction and may well result in disappointment, anxiety and anguish. The often deep anxiety surrounding school choice is a consistent finding of the parental choice literature. We do not know what choice means to parents. Studies report, puzzlingly, that parents want choice but also wish that all schools were equally good so that choosing did not matter. Do they want choice in order to avoid a 'bad' school or to maximise preferences?

In relation to diversity there are equally challenging questions. For example there is the problem of logistics. How much diversity would there need to be to maximise parental preferences? Will it ever be possible to provide that level of diversity? How aware are parents of diversity? The existence of diversity or the theoretical right to choose do not necessarily mean increased perception of choice or increased actual availability. What matters to parents is not what national statistics say but what choice and diversity they find in their actual field of choice. Then there is the question of fair

admissions. Do/will all parents have equal access to the increased diversity of schools? Is diversity associated with more or less segregation on the basis of social background?

The current government is introducing a number of policies to increase diversity. The 14 to 19 White Paper (DfES 2005) aims to differentiate both structure and curriculum with sixth form colleges leading on general/academic provision and Further Education Colleges leading on vocational and skills provision. The commitment to choice and diversity is clear in the Further Education and Training Bill (DfES 2006):

*The Bill will **secure choice and diversity**. The LSC will be placed under a duty to create greater opportunities for learners and employers to exercise choice in type, place and form of learning.*

*The Bill will **secure new further education delivery models**. The existing powers of the LSC and FE colleges will be extended, enabling them to establish companies and charitable incorporated organisations for educational purposes.*

The introduction of Trust schools and Academies to the Foundation, Voluntary Aided and Community schools encourages a greater range of providers and increases diversity of types of school. The very great increase in the number of specialist schools is intended to offer diversity of curriculum emphasis to meet the needs of children with particular aptitudes. The endorsement of faith schools is a means of offering differing moral and religious contexts for education. The questions posed above are directly relevant to these significant initiatives and to the current thrust of policies.

The Research and Information on State Education (RISE) Trust provided funding to facilitate informed discussion of the policy of diversity and choice in relation to this range of questions. This paper does not present solutions but gathers together current evidence and tries to make what I hope are some useful distinctions relevant to the debate.

I look first at how we might distinguish different kinds of diversity. Then, using these distinctions, gather evidence as to how much of these kinds of diversity parents are likely to experience currently. The paper then raises some questions as to the logistics

of choice and diversity before turning to consider the experience of school choice. Finally a significant methodological issue is raised and a suggestion made for overcoming it. The paper concludes with questions for future research.

### ***What is the nature of the diversity facing parents?***

#### **Choice of different sectors of schooling**

Broadly there are two separate sectors of education in England: the independent sector (dependent on parental fees) and the state maintained sector (including academies and Technology Colleges). These two are what the great majority of parents of compulsory school age choose. The fee paying independent sector comprises the large, long established 'public' boarding schools as well as numerous smaller day establishments. Only seven percent of children attend these independent schools across England and the percentages in Scotland and Wales are smaller<sup>1</sup>. However, in London the figure is nearer 13%. So, a small but significant minority of parents take this option with a greater proportion presumably having considered it. It is of course only a realistic option for parents with enough disposable income.

Home schooling is a radically different kind of provision and one that appears financially more accessible for a greater number of parents than the fee paying schools. Currently only about 1% of parents choose to educate their children at home<sup>2</sup>. Systematic constraints operate here too such as the educational confidence of parents, the time parents can devote to their children's education and the loss of potential earnings. This is not currently a significant sector in relation to policy.

There is also a burgeoning voluntary school movement outside of compulsory schooling organised by religious or ethnic communities to supplement their children's compulsory school experience. This is not a prime focus of this paper because it is not offered as, nor does it have the status of, a legal alternative to compulsory schooling. But, it is an important part of the educational practice of parents where state schools are seen as either an inadequate, or partial, or inappropriate schooling for their children.

Relatively insulated as they are from the homogenising pressures on state maintained schools the commercial, home schooling and voluntary sectors offer the potential of radically different kinds of provision, and therefore real diversity, to flourish albeit in a way that is not equally available to all. The government's diversity strategy is to make it easier for parents and other groups to become mainstream providers of schooling in the future (DfES 2005). Currently, the great majority of parents (nationally about 92%) choose within the state maintained sector, and these schools are the subject of local and central government policy and therefore the focus of the present paper is the level of diversity and choice to be found there.

### **What should we mean by diversity?**

It is necessary to be clear about what we mean by diversity (Glatter et al 1997). The characterisation of diversity varies depending on the focus, or the often polemical role the concept of diversity is playing, in popular, political or academic debates.

Structural diversity is emphasised in relation to the introduction of a greater variety of providers of schools which is, in turn, justified by reference to the market concepts of provider capture and competition, the empirical claim that parents want more choice and to the liberal concept of free choice to protect the autonomy of the individual.

Educational diversity is emphasised where the focus is on school performance or the right of parents to choose a religious education or the individual needs of the pupil.

Diversity of intake is emphasised in discussions of educational equality or the fairness of the admissions system. Each of these is, potentially, of considerable significance to parents and any study of parental responses or attitudes to diversity needs to take account of all of these kinds. The interests of parents are often invoked but we do not know enough about how parents perceive each kind of diversity nor how they affect the way they relate to choice of school.

I suggest that the following kinds of diversity can be usefully distinguished.

#### *Structural Diversity*

- how the school is governed (i.e. constitutional arrangements)
- how the school is financed
- who is held accountable and how
- who has control over staff employment and the material assets of the school.

#### *Educational diversity*

- what the school teaches
- how the teachers teach/the educational experience of the children

- exam performance
- ethos
- educational principles
- organisation for learning (e.g. mixed ability or setting)

*Compositional diversity (diversity of intake)*

- sex
- ability/attainment on entry
- religion
- socio-economic group
- ethnicity

These capture actual differences between schools, by which I mean differences that are either part of the formal constitution of a school, or are (at least in theory) capable of being objectively evidenced. They are attributes of the school. But the reputation of a school is an extremely significant contribution to a parent's decision. When parents are asked what it is about schools that most informs their choices the different reputations of schools are highly significant (Gewirtz et al 1995; Which 2005). It differs from the other three categories of diversity in that reputation in some (we have to admit, still mysterious) way is conferred by groups of parents, or communities, or the grapevine (Ball and Vincent 1998). We do not know what parents mean by it. For each parent it is likely to be an amalgam of many things – for example, prejudice, informed judgement, strategic deferral to group opinion, class habitus, instinct, or blind panic in the face of acknowledged ignorance. It is clearly affected by the other kinds of diversity while being different from them. *Reputational diversity* is therefore proposed as a fourth and important kind of diversity.

Each school will present a different mix of structural, educational, compositional and reputational diversity. Some kinds of diversity may more easily be discerned by parents than other kinds. The varieties of structural diversity are evident, if parents are interested in looking for them. For example, exam performance from the league tables and aspects of compositional diversity such as single sex or religious affiliation from school admission criteria. However, it is not so easy accurately to know the social status of the intake of a school although judgements can be (and are) made on the basis of characteristics such as area of residence. Nor is it straightforward to judge the quality of teaching and management and their effect on the educational attainment of the children even with OFSTED reports and the measures of value added. It is next to impossible, even with intimate experience over a period of time, to know how all the

teachers teach, or what the day to day experience of the children is likely to be. Even the most informed observer could not predict, even broadly, what an individual child's experience is going to be in a particular school. There are simply too many variables at play including people's idiosyncratic responses and the myriad of personal/professional relationships. Paradoxically, reputation for all its mystery may well be the aspect that is most reliably known by parents because it arises in and is constructed by and through their immediate social interaction with other parents.

These four kinds of diversity will differentially impinge on parents depending how far parents are aware of them or how far they exist in the parents' actual field of choice. In the next sections I look at what we know of the prevalence of these kinds of diversity and the implications of each for the experience of parents in the process of choosing a school.

### **Structural diversity**

Since 1988 there has been an increase in the variety of forms of governance and types of school. Prior to the reforms of the Conservative governments from 1988 to 1997 local government was the sole provider and financier of state schools. In order to introduce a quasi-market some schools opted to be independent of the local authority while still being fully financed from public funds. The subsequent Labour governments from 1997 have continued that policy. There are now five types of school in the sector and a sixth, Trust schools, is proposed in the new legislation<sup>3</sup>.

Community and Voluntary Controlled schools are those provided by and run by the local authority and they make up two thirds of the schools on offer to parents nationally. The next most common are Voluntary Aided and Foundation schools each making a sixth of the total. Voluntary Aided schools are predominantly religious schools (a more detailed breakdown by religion is given in the next section) and they are run by the governors of the school under the guidance of the Diocese. Foundation schools are also governed by their governors. Two other kinds of school are Technology Colleges (formerly City Technology Colleges) and Academies. Academies are distinctive in having a strong relationship with trusts set by sponsors but their funding agreements require them to engage in consultation with other admission authorities in the area on admissions and to comply with the code on

admissions. City Technology Colleges are independent schools funded by the state. They are not subject to local statutory proposals. Both are funded by the state but are legally independent schools and any compliance with local arrangements is either voluntary or is required as part of their contract with the Department for Education and Skills. The number of both is negligible nationally but is likely to be significant locally. The number of Academies is set to increase considerably and the government's strategy is drastically to increase the number of schools that have Foundation status (DfES 2005).

### **Types of schools in September 2006**

|                                    | Number      | %          |
|------------------------------------|-------------|------------|
| Community and Voluntary Controlled | 2037        | 65         |
| Foundation                         | 530         | 17         |
| Voluntary Aided                    | 523         | 17         |
| Academy                            | 46          | 1.5        |
| City Technology College            | 10          | 0.3        |
|                                    | <b>3146</b> | <b>100</b> |

While there has been this increase in structural diversity it is unclear either, how far it has effectively provided more real choice, or how far parents know about or understand these structural differences between the schools. It is also the case that we do not know how far parents consider this kind of diversity as significant when choosing a school.

The context of choice is important here also. There are some authorities where all schools are Community (e.g. Cornwall) and some where they are all either Voluntary Aided or Foundation or Academies (e.g. Brent). Academies, while only a small proportion of all schools, are targeted at particular areas where parental choice is likely to be more polarised. These new types of school are likely therefore to have a considerable impact within those areas.

### **Educational diversity**

As structural diversity has been enhanced there has been a concerted attempt to decrease the educational differences between schools. Successive governments have sought to make all schools high performing as measured by examination results. They have also prescribed more closely what goes on in secondary schools through the



National Curriculum, the Literacy and Numeracy strategies, high stakes inspections (including the new 'light touch') that judge schools according to a strict framework laying down the criteria for success, the personalisation agenda and encouragement to set according to ability.

A further pressure making schools more educationally similar is the introduction of market relations between schools and parents. There is evidence that greater competition between schools leads to greater homogenisation. The PASCI study (Woods et al 1998) found that schools tend to 'privilege' the academic aspects of their provision over other parts of the educational mission. They also try to appeal to a broad group of parents rather than focusing on a niche i.e. they do not try to be sharply distinct from other schools. There seemed to be little incentive to innovation. Schools therefore tended to converge rather than offer something different.

More recently the work of Fielding et al on the transfer of good practice supported this earlier finding of Woods et al (1998). They found that competition between schools tended to inhibit innovation and risk taking. Stakes were high because of the prevalent 'badging' of institutions where explicit comparison of schools was encouraged using a small number of linear dimensions such as exam performance. This led to schools being categorised for policy purposes (as Beacon schools for example), and therefore labelled or 'badged' publicly, as superior or inferior. They concluded that:

*'staff and schools will not take risks if the consequences of doing so are likely to adversely affect their identity, their jobs, the continued well-being of the schools in which they teach and the young people whom they serve'. (p73)*

While these government actions and their effects have worked to reduce educational diversity one major initiative has been trumpeted as the means to enhance it – the push for specialist schools. Specialist schools offer educational diversity in so far as they offer relatively high standards of teaching and of exam performance in the area of specialism (Castle and Evans 2006). However, there is no way that parents would be able to identify what form that excellent teaching took apart from the assumed connection with results. Being a specialist school provides no information about educational organisation, teaching methods, ethos, or educational principles and, because all specialist schools are required to teach the full curriculum, there is no

difference in what the school teaches. However, where the school is over-subscribed and selects 10% by aptitude in the specialist subjects, parents can assume that specialist schools will have a marginally more advantaged intake than neighbouring schools (West and Hind 2003).

One of the most important considerations for parents is the educational experience of their children in the school of their choice, but parents do not make sharp distinctions between the educational experience and the emotional and social experience (Coldron and Boulton 1991; Coldron and Boulton 1996). For example, happiness, good discipline, strong anti-bullying policy and good relations with their teachers are cited as often as academic results. The school improvement movement has demonstrated over the years that schools in similar circumstances can differ very markedly in all of these respects and in the ethos that they create. This should not be surprising. What happens in schools is a team effort and it is a commonplace that sometimes the ‘chemistry’ works between people and sometimes it does not; leadership too is important and people do this differently and vary in their success; the culture of a school has a history and moulds the people who work there. Parents know these things and are sensitive to the ‘feel’ of a school. It is a kind of diversity that is likely to matter but we have little understanding about what parents think about these characteristics.

An important way in which schools can differ is in how they organise children for learning and specifically how far they adopt setting. The Labour government since 1997 has promoted setting in both primary and secondary schools. This has a very direct effect on children’s experience of school (Ireson and Hallam 2001; Ireson, Hallam and Plewis 2001) and is therefore likely to be an issue of importance for parents, but little is known about what parents think about it or how far it enters into their choice of school. How far do parents agree with setting and what reasons do they offer for agreeing or disagreeing?

While there have been studies that ask parents about their criteria of choice there has been less work that explores in a deeper way what parents think about these kinds of educational diversity and how their thinking affects their choices. This points to an important aspect of public educational debate in England. I have conducted many

interviews over the years with parents about the education of their children and their choice of school and I have become increasingly aware of the inadequacy of any shared public language to talk about and identify significant aspects of school and the educational experience of children. Similarly, the quality of public debate seems conceptually and pedagogically impoverished. Whilst there is a great deal of debate initiated by government around the issue of standards, selection, structures and testing there is very little about the educational experience of children, or the different aspects of learning, or the variety of ways of organising for learning or the variety of purposes of education. This takes place when teachers talk together but is not part of a public consciousness. If it is the case that we lack a publicly shared language with which to identify and debate these important aspects with any precision perhaps it is a priority to help raise the level of discussion between all stakeholders and particularly parents. This would be a first step in parents being able to take full advantage of the existence of educational diversity.

### **Compositional diversity**

Differences in the intake of schools have been the focus of criticism about the fairness of educational provision and the admissions processes (West and Hind 2003; Lupton 2004). It is arguably one of the most important criteria parents have for their choice of school (Ball 2003; Coldron 2005). It matters a great deal to them who their children's peers will be. Understanding the extent of compositional diversity and of parental response to it is important in understanding parental choice.

The following sections look at the evidence of compositional diversity in English secondary schools.

#### *Single sex and co-education*

A minority (13%) of all secondary schools have a single sex intake with slightly more schools for girls than for boys. A significantly larger proportion of Voluntary Aided and Foundation schools (23% and 20% respectively) are single sex compared to Community and Voluntary Controlled schools where the proportion is only 8%<sup>4</sup>.

|                         | <b>Comm*</b> | <b>%</b> | <b>VA</b> | <b>%</b> | <b>Found</b> | <b>%</b> | <b>All</b> | <b>% of All</b> |
|-------------------------|--------------|----------|-----------|----------|--------------|----------|------------|-----------------|
| <b>Girls</b>            | 106          | 5        | 63        | 12       | 54           | 10       | 223        | 7               |
| <b>Boys</b>             | 65           | 3        | 59        | 11       | 53           | 10       | 177        | 6               |
| <b>Total single sex</b> | 171          | 8        | 122       | 23       | 107          | 20       | 400        | 13              |

\*Includes Voluntary Controlled schools

### *Ability/attainment on entry*

There are 15 Local Authorities deemed to be wholly selective where the 25% highest attaining children attend grammar schools and the remaining 75% attend what are in effect secondary modern schools although a number of different names are now used<sup>5</sup>. All children are expected to take an 11+ test as part of the admissions process. In these authorities intakes to all schools are effectively selected on the basis of attainment/ability.

These 15 authorities account for 108 of the 164 grammar schools in England. The remaining 56 are in a further 21 authorities<sup>6</sup>. Here, all other schools are comprehensive, there is no authority wide 11+ exam and the comprehensive schools aspire to an all ability intake. The existence of the grammar schools in these areas sometimes means that sub-areas, for example Colchester in Essex and Salisbury in Wiltshire, are effectively wholly selective because parents have little practical choice but to choose within that area. In other areas, such as Calderdale, the intake of the comprehensives is significantly affected because the majority of the highest attaining pupils are taken by the grammars thus skewing the ability range of the remainder. In addition to the grammar schools there are 28 schools that select a proportion of their intake by general ability<sup>7</sup>.

### *Religious affiliation*

Approximately 16% of schools offer an explicitly religious ethos. In 2006 two thirds of these were Roman Catholic and about one third Church of England with a very small proportion of other religions.

**Maintained secondary schools designated as religious  
(excluding academies)<sup>8</sup>**

| <b>Religion</b>       | <b>n</b>   | <b>% of all religious schools</b> | <b>% of all secondary schools</b> |
|-----------------------|------------|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Roman Catholic        | 334        | 62.9                              | 9.9                               |
| Church of England     | 163        | 30.7                              | 4.8                               |
| Other Christian       | 20         | 3.8                               | 0.6                               |
| Jewish                | 9          | 1.7                               | 0.3                               |
| Muslim                | 3          | 0.6                               | 0.1                               |
| Sikh                  | 1          | 0.2                               | 0.0                               |
| Seventh Day Adventist | 1          | 0.2                               | 0.0                               |
| <b>Total</b>          | <b>531</b> | <b>100.0</b>                      | <b>15.7</b>                       |

All but six local authorities have religious schools. The six that do not are predominantly rural<sup>9</sup>.

*Socio-economic grouping*

There has been a great deal of debate about the level of social segregation between schools (Gibson and Asthana 2002; Goldstein and Noden 2003; Gorard 2002; Gorard 2003). Much of the debate has focused on the increase or decrease of such segregation and the causes. For example, whether or not this was as a result of the marketisation of education, and what role is played by residential segregation and interaction with admission policies. There has also been a great deal of discussion about the most appropriate means of measuring segregation. This has focused on technical differences in the mathematical modelling of segregation.

Despite the heated debate there are key points of agreement on the facts although not necessarily on the interpretation of those facts. Firstly, social segregation nationally has not significantly increased since 1988. Secondly; social segregation is higher in areas where:

- the population is more dense
- there is a greater number of schools nearby
- there is structural and religious diversity between schools
- there are more schools that are their own admissions authority
- the area is wholly selective.

Recent work by Allen and Vignoles (2006) provides evidence that, despite there being no *overall* increase, segregation is increasing in specific *localities* particularly in London and other densely populated areas.

Their segregation curve approach to measuring segregation also helpfully highlights the different patterns of separation that occur in different LAs. For example, for three LAs with the same Dissimilarity index (a measure of overall segregation) one may have a small proportion of schools with a predominantly high socio-economic intake with all of the others equally sharing the remaining students (Advantage segregation), while another LA might have a small number with a predominance of low socio-economic students (Disadvantage segregation) while a third has a smooth continuum of segregation from most to least segregated. These different patterns would pose significantly different contexts of choice for parents.

### *Ethnicity*

Schools differ in terms of their ethnic composition and this is strongly connected to the level of residential segregation. Johnston et al (2006a) found that for most people, the norm is that they live in White-majority areas and attend schools where there is a White-majority of students. However, approximately one-tenth of students attend schools with a non-White majority but with a significant White minority. They also found that only a small proportion of students attend schools where one minority group predominates. They conclude that across England as a whole,

*...(1) both Blacks and South Asians are substantially more segregated in schools than they are in neighbourhoods; and (2) South Asians are more segregated than Blacks. p8*

Nationally, there has been no increase in ethnic segregation between schools other than that explained by the increase in the BME school population (Johnston et al 2006b). It is the case however that the minority population is not evenly spread across all LAs, but is concentrated in a few areas:

*..the presence of ethnic enclaves is a feature not only of London and other large cities (especially Birmingham) but also a number of other urban centres which have attracted substantial numbers of migrants in recent decades. p15*

In these enclaves there are schools where the students are almost exclusively White and others where they are almost exclusively from minority communities. This, together with the finding that segregation of school populations is greater than the

residential segregation in the area, suggests that post-residential processes such as admissions procedures and parental choice may be part of the explanation. In terms of the ethnic composition of schools, significant diversity is evident only in this minority of areas.

There is a need to explore what parents from different ethnic backgrounds feel about the ethnic composition of schools and how it impacts on their choices. Do parents from minority ethnic communities positively seek schools where their children's peers are from the same community or do they seek places at schools with a majority white intake? If White parents opt away from schools with majority BME intakes, why do they do so?

### **The inter-connection of dimensions of diversity**

While it is important to identify the extent of diversity on each separate dimension, there are important inter-connections between them. For example structural diversity (e.g. Voluntary Aided schools) is associated with compositional diversity by religion but also by social-composition with voluntary aided schools having fewer children on free school meals than other schools in the area. Research conducted for the Sutton Trust (Sutton Trust 2006), found that in voluntary aided (faith) schools, the average proportion of pupils on free school meals was 5.6% compared with 14.6% for the surrounding areas. Pakistani and Bangladeshi families are over-represented in the lower socio-economic groups; and, schools with intakes largely drawn from the lower socio-economic groups are more likely to have a relatively poor exam performance.

How these inter-relations play out in parents' experience of choice and what mechanisms may be at work to determine the different kinds of intakes actually found in secondary schools has been a focus of much academic work on parental choice. There is a need explicitly to explore the inter-relations of these characteristics in parents' thinking and in particular to consider how they contribute to reputational diversity.

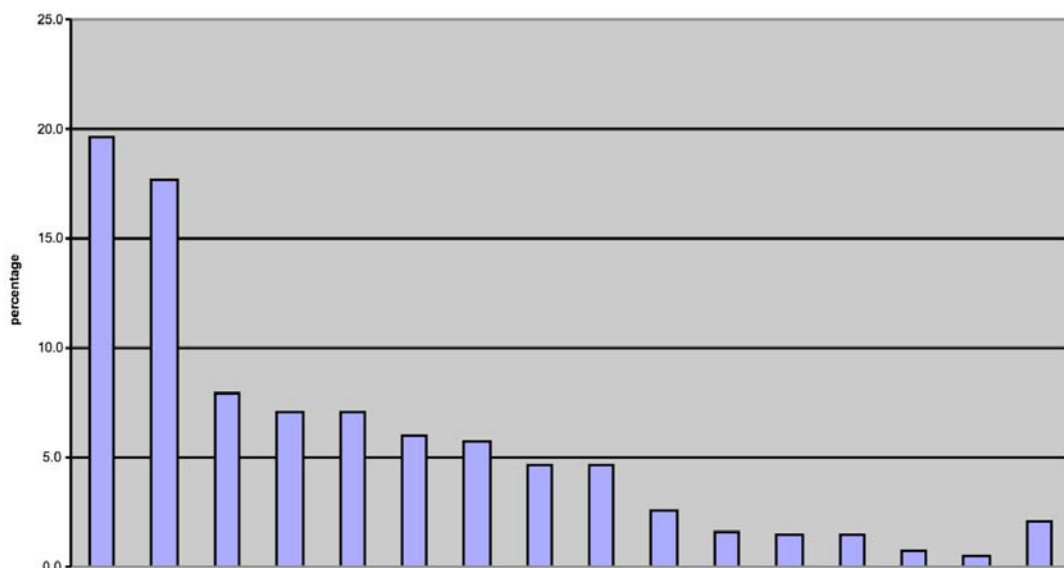
### **Reputational Diversity**

With each of the other kinds of diversity we asked the question "How much of this diversity exists?" and the way to answer seemed more or less straightforward. With

this fourth category it is not so obvious. I propose that one way to operationalise the concept is whether or not a school is over or under-subscribed. If we take it that a school with an excellent reputation is equated with it being highly desired by parents *relative* to other schools in the area then, where a school is over-subscribed this would indicate a relatively high reputation and vice versa for those under-subscribed. Since we are concerned to measure diversity within parents' actual field of choice this would be a good measure. This information is not currently available across the country<sup>10</sup>.

However there is strong evidence that this kind of diversity exists in many areas, is accessible to parents in their field of choice (Ball and Vincent 1998; Which 2005), that it is extremely salient to parents' expression of preferences (Flatley and Williams 2001) and that in many (especially densely populated areas) there is a remarkable consensus on a hierarchy of desirability on the basis of reputation. For example, in Calderdale all parents of years 3, 4 or 5 in primary schools in Calderdale (n = 7717) were asked to state which secondary schools they most preferred (Coldron 2005) and the results showed a clear diversity of desirability (see chart below). Admissions officers often report that this is the case in their areas (Williams and Coldron 2001) and they manage it on a daily basis.

**Which secondary school would you most like your son or daughter to attend? (n = 1422)**



As noted above, a school's reputation will be affected by what parents know and how



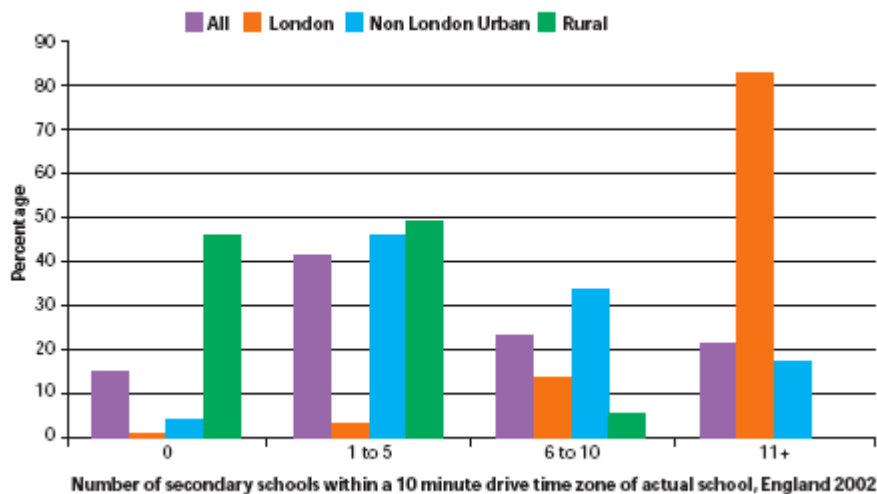
parents view the other kinds of diversity. It will also be affected by the way in which parents define a good or a bad school. The educational debate over the last decade at least has been in terms of simplistic and arguably flawed definitions of a good or a bad school. In so far as this has contributed to the impoverishment of the language and ideas we use to think about education it also leads to less well informed preferences on the part of parents.

### ***How much choice do parents have?***

#### **From what number of schools can parents choose?**

While parents can legally choose any school, in reality the practicalities of travel, the admissions criteria of schools and parents' own preferences, radically restrict the range from which they feel they can effectively choose. All other things being equal, parents are likely to opt for nearby schools rather than incur the costs of further travel. Defining nearby schools as those within a 10 minute drive of the place of residence, Burgess et al (2004) found that Londoners had around 17 schools nearby, parents in other urban areas about 7 and those in rural areas 1.

#### **Feasibility of choice of secondary school**



**Source: Burgess et al (2004)**

On this definition of nearby school Burgess et al conclude that 45% of children do not attend their nearest school. This is likely to be too high an estimate because it does not screen pupils attending their nearest grammar schools, or nearest church school. The nationally representative survey for the *Parents' Experience of Choosing a Secondary*

*School* project (Flatley, Williams and Coldron 2001) found that just 28% of the respondents said their child did not attend their nearest school.

Parents are encouraged to act as good consumers of education and, using information such as the comparative performance tables and OFSTED reports, to see schools as superior or inferior. In some densely populated areas where there is a high level of social or ethnic segregation this leads to some parents ruling certain schools out of consideration from the start. As two London parents put it:

*“I don’t want my daughter going to a school where there’s a huge element ...of pupils that are disruptive, whose parents don’t care about their behaviour and the schools are out there to monitor their behaviour instead of teaching them.”*

*“My child’s not going there because most of the kids go straight from that school into borstal.”*

The admission arrangements can also restrict parents’ choice. There has been considerable work done on the criteria set by admissions authorities and how they work to restrict choice, or covertly to select easier to educate children (Pennell, West and Hind (2005) and West and Hind (2003).

The admissions criteria relating to catchments and proximity, or the first preference first criterion, can also restrict effective choice. This is especially true where there is greatest polarisation of perception and therefore highly popular and unpopular schools – again more likely in the densely populated areas. It is therefore not surprising that some parents often complain that there is no real choice (Which Report 2005) and that the 17 nearby schools translate into two or three ‘real’ choices. In rural areas it is geography that restricts choice, making more than one or two options impractical.

There has been less work on how parents restrict their range of choices, what grounds they do it on and what number of schools between which they felt they had a real choice. It is not easy to generalise about such restrictions since each parent’s situation, preferences, and field of choice is unique. More research is needed to find out how much choice a representative sample of parents actually felt they had and what kinds of barriers to choice were actually cited by parents from their specific context.

### **How far would it be possible to meet every parent's set of preferences?**

The practical and financial limitations on the provision of schools mean that not all parental preferences can be met. Brain and Klein (1994) surveyed parents about their preferences in one English town and found that nearly twice as many secondary schools would be needed to satisfy all the preferences. Significantly, they concluded that greater diversity of provision would generate more kinds of preference and the problem of matching would have been worse.

The radical restriction on choice arising from logistics and practicalities coupled with the impossibility and economic inefficiency of providing enough diversity of whatever kind to satisfy what would be a growing range of parental preferences poses a serious problem for a policy of diversity. Defenders would presumably argue that whilst one cannot meet every preference more diversity is better than less, but then we would need a debate as to which preferences should be satisfied and which not and that leads back to fundamental questions of education that are not currently being adequately debated.

The greatly increased number of specialist schools together with the opportunity to select up to 10% of the intake by aptitude in particular subjects is a major part of the attempt to create real educational or curricular diversity between schools (Harris and Ranson 2005; DfES 2005). There is some doubt as to how far such specialism is taken into account by parents or actively promoted by schools. A study of the responses of schools to specialist status (Yeomans et al) found that there was considerable resistance to using the selective option and that only a small minority did so (around 7 to 11%). Secondly, a study currently underway of composite prospectuses of local authorities suggests that many specialist schools are not using this status to attract parents – the information that they are specialist schools is often simply not there except in highly competitive areas such as London<sup>11</sup>. There is a need to explore how far schools market their specialist status and how far parents in a variety of areas perceive such diversity and how they react to it.

### ***Do parents want more choice and diversity?***

Although policy documents and politicians often present their arguments assuming that parents want more choice and more diversity, there are good reasons for

questioning this assumption. The *experience* of choice of school is not necessarily positive. While the justification for choice is often based on economic theory, empirical claims about what parents want are also made. There is a need to test these empirical claims about parents' wishes that are used to justify policy. A consistent finding from qualitative studies (Which 2005; Boulton and Coldron 1996) is that parents have at least an ambivalent attitude to choice – they do not endorse it *per se* but want the room for manoeuvre it gives in their context.

### **Reasons to be doubtful: Choice and Anxiety**

It is a commonplace that making choices can be painful. Having the possibility of choice means a decision has to be made and this is a potential source of anxiety (Schwartz 2005) There is *prior* anxiety, for example about our capacity to make the right decision. We may become more aware of our ignorance that we are not up to it – we may feel we do not have enough time, or will, or information, or knowledge, or skill. This is a well founded anxiety for several reasons. First, there is difficulty in defining what a 'good' school is and how close any particular schools come to this. Studies of how parents choose have consistently shown that most parents reject one-dimensional definitions such as exam performance and look at a number of characteristics in combination (Coldron and Boulton 1991; Coldron and Boulton 1996; Flatley and Williams 2001; Which 2005).

The results of a focus group conducted in preparation for this paper illustrates that parental experience of choice of school is complex, diverse and individual<sup>12</sup>. It vividly demonstrates the many different meanings of choice and stands as a warning to politicians and academics not to over-simplify. It also indicates that there is a great deal more to be learnt about what choice of school can mean.

The Which report found that parents assessed schools in a three stage 'screening' process on the basis first of reputation, then on the quality of the school community and thirdly on its learning environment. At each stage parents make judgements about a complex institution on the basis of inadequate information. Some parents simply opt for the local school but, as noted earlier, a substantial proportion actively opt away. Given the complexity of the admissions process, the variations in criteria, the dire warnings in the composite prospectuses about how important it is to get it right, the

high stakes for the many parents who feel that they may not be getting the best for their child, it is not surprising that many parents find the process extremely stressful (Which 2005).

Clearly the status of the options for parents is important for their experience of choice. We do not currently know enough about how parents perceive or frame the options available to them, how they perceive the diversity between schools, or how much weight they attach to different characteristics.

### **Focus on collective effect**

One of the difficulties about gaining evidence as to the truth of the empirical claims about what parents want is that there is a built in individualistic bias to survey and interview methodology (Coldron 2005). Too often the explorations with parents have been about their individual choice (Bowe, Ball and Gewirtz 1994). But compositional diversity and individual choices made in response to it have collective effects. As the recent Which report (2005) put it:

*Popular schools are oversubscribed and face practical limits to the number of applications they can accept. Parents who are unsuccessful in applying to these schools will see their children placed in schools which, by definition, they find less attractive. In short, if one child gains a place at a popular school, another cannot have it. p13*

Individual responses may minimise the extent to which issues of collective effect are of concern to parents. Further, the issues are complex and sometimes technical (e.g. first preference and equal preference) and the implications of policies not immediately obvious. What is needed is a methodology that allows parents to express an opinion when they fully understand the issues for them and for other parents.

There is a potential moral problem for parents here, vividly set out by Adam Swift in his book, *How not to be a hypocrite: School choice for the morally perplexed* (Swift 2003). Little is known about how parents feel about the fact that the choices they make to enhance the life-chances of their children contribute to worsening the life-chances of other children. This possible tension may partly explain why it is that studies consistently report parents as wanting choice but also wishing that all schools were equally good (Which 2005). Focusing research on parents about their individual

choices, their perceptions and wishes gives a methodological bias away from a focus on the collective effects.

It is only through dialogue, where different moral positions and choices are discussed in relation to others, that each individual parent can be sure that their individual choices are fully informed and therefore conscientiously held. It should not be assumed that parents are aware of the collective implications nor of the policy options available to manage admissions. When parents are fully informed in this way, their answers to questions about whether or not there should be more choice and diversity have greater significance than those elicited through individual survey or interview methods. If the question, “Do parents want more choice and diversity?” is an important one to answer we need to explore methodologies other than those that ask individuals about themselves.

## ***Conclusion***

This discussion of diversity has attempted to raise pertinent questions in relation to the policy and to show that far from having a firm basis on which to proceed we are in fact largely ignorant concerning important aspects. I start from the position that providing room for people to have a say in what happens to them is in most parts of life a good thing and that diversity enriches society and the quality of experience and debate while uniformity tends to impoverish. My concern is that the current policies promoting choice and diversity in education borrow legitimacy from this common sense position but on closer inspection lack coherence and the claims about what people want are at best simplistic and at worst wrong. Provider diversity is enhanced while educational diversity is reduced; one kind of parental choice (market choice) is favoured and imposed in the face of a subtle range of kinds of choice; more and more information is showered on a public while the richness of debate and language through which to make sense of that information has steadily been depleted.

Specifically the following are some of the questions of diversity and choice to have emerged from this review.

How much actual choice do parents feel they have?

What kinds of barriers to choice are cited by parents from their specific context?

How much diversity between schools do parents perceive in their context of choice?

How far and in what ways do parents take account of the different kinds of diversity when choosing a school?

How much does each kind of diversity matter to parents in making their choice of school?

What do parents think about the educational diversity on offer and how it affects their choices?

Do parents want more or less choice? What kind of choice?

Do parents want more or less diversity? What kind of diversity?

What reasons are given for wanting more or less choice and diversity?

Do the answers to these questions vary in relation to parental characteristics and if so why?

Do the answers to these questions vary in relation to context and if so why?

What different kinds of approaches and meanings are there to choosing a school?

How do we develop appropriate methodologies that overcome the individualistic bias of interview and survey methods?

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Notes:

<sup>1</sup> Independent Schools Council, Oct 2006, <http://www.isc.co.uk>

<sup>2</sup> I have been unable to gain any definitive figures. This estimate is a personal communication from Education Otherwise.

<sup>3</sup> Education and Inspections Bill 2006.

<sup>4</sup> DfES data, <http://www.edubase.gov.uk/>

<sup>5</sup> The 15 English Local Authorities that have fully selective systems are: Bexley, Bournemouth, Buckinghamshire, Kent, Kingston, Lincolnshire, Medway, Poole, Reading, Slough, Southend, Sutton, Torbay, Trafford and Wirral.

<sup>6</sup> The areas with one or more selective schools are: Barnet, Birmingham, Bromley, Calderdale, Cumbria, Devon, Enfield, Essex, Gloucestershire, Kirklees, Lancashire, Liverpool, North Yorkshire, Plymouth, Redbridge, Stoke on Trent, Walsall, Warwickshire, Wiltshire, Wolverhampton and The Wrekin.

<sup>7</sup> In 1999 (the only data currently available) they were in the following authorities: Bexley (1), Herts. (6), Kensington & Chelsea (1), Kent (1), Kingston upon Thames (2), Lancashire (1), Lincolnshire (1), Medway (1), Peterborough (1), Reading (1), Southend (5), Southwark (1), Surrey (1), Torbay (1), Wandsworth (3) and Warwickshire (1).

<sup>8</sup> DfES data for 2006, <http://www.edubase.gov.uk/>

<sup>9</sup> The six LAs without religious schools are: Cornwall, North Somerset, Rutland, Shropshire, South Gloucestershire and Wokingham.

<sup>10</sup> It is likely to be one of the outcomes of a project currently underway mapping the admission arrangements of all admission authorities across England.

<sup>11</sup> This raises another issue of importance in the policy debate about diversity and choice and that is how far the policy is disproportionately affected by what happens in London.

<sup>12</sup> Colleagues and students from within the author's place of work were invited and 15 participants attended. It consisted of an hour and a half discussion concerning the experience of choice. The focus was steered away from the management and arrangements for choice (i.e. admission arrangements) and towards what the choice meant for them and a collective attempt to identify different kinds of choice. It was an attempt to explore both the affective aspect of choice of school and to begin to create a taxonomy of approaches to choice. The following themes and issues were raised:

- Choosing was part of being a 'good' parent fulfilling their duty to 'do the best for their children'.
- Choice brought with it a sense of a binding contract because the act of opting for a school brought with it a sense of responsibility to make it work.

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- The previous was associated with the similar, but slightly different, point that in being given the choice and exercising it you only have yourself to blame. You have to take the consequences.
  - Making a choice cumulatively closes off other options. Prior to choosing a school there are a number of ranges of possible choices. After the first choice there are fewer. Each choice closes more options down. This applied to the child's options in his or her future as well as to the specific issue of choice of school at 5 or 11.
  - Choice creates desires that were not there before. Simply having the option to go to a school other than the nearest kindles a wish to opt for another school. Implies that were it not kindled it would not have been a problem.
  - Choice for the sake of choosing. Exercising choice simply because one can. Implies that it is not necessarily associated with the meeting of any need other than the need to choose.
  - Greater diversity means that there are more schools about which information is needed. Makes the task more onerous.
  - Choices can be exercised creatively or destructively/positively or negatively. This seemed to relate to the distinction between voice and exit. The destructive or negative mode of choice was readily identified as opting away from a school and making it worse whereas it was not so easy to see how creative choice was characterised.
  - Choices take on different meanings in the context of broken relationships. For example they can become issues over who has control of children.
  - Choice taken by a group – father/mother, father/mother/child – have significantly different dynamics.
  - Choice of secondary school was an expression of the parenting style. The responsibility was given to the child to make an informed choice. Equally it could express an authoritarian style.
  - Choice of secondary school made by the child was an expression of difference from older sibling.
  - Choice involved cultural assumptions and was not likely to be shared by all cultures.
  - Choice of private school as conspicuous consumption.
  - Choice of school was not the same as moral choice e.g. whether to steal, or cheat on your partner. The differences need disentangling carefully.
  - Choice as inconsequential i.e. it will not make significant differences to the life chances of the child.
  - Choice as unimportant in the larger picture. One parent who had suffered traumatic near fatal illness had changed from thinking the choice of school was extremely important to feeling that it was relatively trivial and she had become much more relaxed.
  - We can be unaware of the many unintended choices we are making simply by not bringing them to our consciousness. This includes the passive relation to important aspects of schooling.
  - How sure can we be about the stability of our desires? We may get our choice but may change our minds about what it was we want. Choice then becomes a trap.
  - Reliance on our choices is difficult because of the unpredictability of circumstances. A school may be chosen for the quality of its headteacher but that headteacher may move early in your child's school career.