

Parental Choice and Education Policy

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The 1981 Education (Scotland) Act gave parents the statutory right to request places in schools outside their designated attendance areas and imposed greater restrictions on the powers of local education authorities. Proponents of school choice argue that the introduction of free-market approaches to education increases competition among schools and requires school staff to become more accountable to parents. Critics of the reform are concerned that school choice may increase the segregation of students with differing backgrounds, and will not necessarily improve the performance of schools. This *Briefing* reviews four studies that examined the effects of the reform on the provision of secondary schooling in Scotland.

- **The** majority of Scottish parents - nearly 90% - did not make a placing request for a non-designated school. However, parents in large cities were more likely to exercise their right to choose because of a wider availability of local options.
- **Parents** of higher social class and parents with higher levels of education were more likely to exercise choice.
- **Parents** tended to exercise choice to avoid the school in their catchment area, rather than to find the best school for their child. They rejected their designated school for reasons associated with social factors and disciplinary climate rather than academic quality.
- **Parents** tended to choose schools with higher average socio-economic status and better examination results. But, on average, the schools parents chose only marginally benefited their children's academic attainment. When faced with a comparison of schools with similar social class intakes, parents were unable to choose the most effective school.
- **Parents** considered official knowledge important to their choice process, but they also relied heavily on knowledge from social networks.
- **Segregation** between schools along social class lines increased substantially during the period when the choice reform was proceeding.

Background

During the 1960s and 1970s, Scotland reorganised its educational system along comprehensive lines. Selective schooling was replaced by a system in which a single type of school served all pupils in designated catchment areas. In 1982, when the 1981 Education (Scotland) Act became operational, over 95% of Scottish pupils attended comprehensive schools. Also, because of the dominant role played by the central Government, and the national system of certificate examinations, there was considerable uniformity of school goals, curricula and principles of organisation. Thus, Scotland's schooling system was arguably more uniform than most schooling systems in Europe and North America. Because many factors associated with the quality of schooling were constant across schools, the Scottish system was an ideal setting for the study of the effects of parental choice.

The 1981 Education (Scotland) Act gives parents the statutory right to request that their child attend a school outside of their designated attendance areas. The Act requires Education Authorities to take these requests into account, and restricts the circumstances in which local authorities can reject a request. To assist parents in their choice, the legislation also requires Education Authorities to publish brochures for each school that report examination results and other pertinent information. The first five years of the reform saw a rapid increase in the incidence of placement requests for non-local schools. As the incidence of requests increased, the proportion of requests refused also increased. Many refusals stemmed from popular schools reaching their maximum capacity.

This *Briefing* reviews a series of studies on the effects of the legislation on parental choice in Scotland. The Nuffield Foundation funded the project, "Standards, Tests and Parental Choice" which supported the work on the papers reviewed below.

Parents and their choices

The first study, from which the others ensued, was led by Michael Adler (1989) and his colleagues. It was based on interviews with 616 parents in three Scottish Educational Authorities. The authors found that parents who exercised choice were influenced by a desire to avoid the school in their attendance area rather than to find the optimal school for their child. When selecting a particular school, parents were more influenced by factors such as the disciplinary climate, a school's general reputation, and proximity, than by educational considerations such as teaching methods or examination results.

The Echols *et al.* (1990) study was based on the first national cohort of Scottish pupils to enter

secondary school in 1982, the first year that the legislation became operational. The authors found that the incidence of choice depended on the opportunities available in the local community. Parents who exercised their right to choose a school other than their designated school were better educated and had higher levels of social class. Parents disproportionately chose schools that had pupils with higher levels of attainment and socio-economic status. Moreover, chosen schools tended to be older, formerly selective, grammar schools that had been founded by the turn of the century and still included "academy" in their name.

The selection process

Willms and Echols (1992) later examined survey data from the 1989 Scottish School Leavers' Survey, which described the cohort that entered secondary school in the autumn of 1984. The authors were able to match some of the pupils' responses with the interview data collected by Adler *et al.* (1989) from the pupils' parents. They found that parents who exercised choice chose schools with higher mean socio-economic status and higher levels of "raw" (unadjusted) examination results than that of their assigned school. Parents did not seem to make optimal choices for their children as the chosen schools only marginally benefited their children's academic attainment. Also, when choosing between schools of similar social class intakes, parents had difficulty determining which school was more or less effective than another.

The ranking of schools based on unadjusted examination attainment is deceiving as the results do not take account of the ability and background of students when they enter school. Such comparisons are unfair to schools in low socio-economic areas because they misrepresent the gains in learning achieved in these schools, and they can incorrectly suggest that the quality of teaching and the standards attained are inferior. Some schools with relatively low social-class intakes provide above-average teaching and educational practices, and some schools serving pupils from advantaged backgrounds achieve high results mainly because of their pupil intake.

A number of studies worldwide have shown that the collective properties of a school have an effect on a school's performance over and above the effects of pupils' individual backgrounds. Researchers refer to this as a "contextual effect". Willms and Echols (1992) suggested that parents' choices were somewhat rational, in that by choosing a school with a high social class intake, or a high unadjusted level of attainment, they increased the likelihood of their child's success. This is because their child benefited from the contextual effect associated with school composition. The effects of making a move, however,

are not necessarily as beneficial as they may appear to be. In addition, when a pupil with an advantaged background transfers from a low social-class to a high social-class school, the “contextual effect” is strengthened for the chosen school and weakened for the school that the child left. This process has a negative effect on the schooling system as a whole.

Factors influencing parents’ decisions

In an effort to further understand the motivation underlying parents’ decisions, Echols and Willms (1995) conducted further analyses of the Adler et al. data. The children of these parents entered secondary school in 1984. The authors found that amongst parents who did not exercise choice, those with higher socio-economic status were more likely to have considered an alternative to the assigned school, and amongst parents who did choose, those with higher socio-economic status were more likely to consider more than one alternative. Amongst parents who made a request, over 60% considered only one alternative to their designated school.

Parents of higher socio-economic status were more likely to value information obtained from teachers and headteachers, from school meetings, and through visits to the school. Lower SES parents were more concerned with school disciplinary climate and reputation than were parents of higher SES.

Although almost one-half of the respondents believed that large-scale parental action would have a negative effect on the schooling system, a significant number were prepared to choose a different school because it might increase the chances of success for their child. These parents felt they could have little effect in improving their designated school.

Although the majority of the parents believed a good education was extremely important, issues of academic quality was not their main reason for rejecting or choosing a school. Most parents did not feel the need to examine all of the alternatives; rather, they wanted to find the nearest school with a strong disciplinary climate and a positive social atmosphere. Because parents did not choose schools on the basis of academic quality, and because factors like the disciplinary climate and social atmosphere of a school can change during the course of a child’s schooling, the research raises questions about the validity of the assumptions underlying market-model approaches to education.

Parental choice and segregation

One of the concerns about parental choice is that it contributes to the segregation of pupils with differing social class backgrounds into separate schools, thereby leading to a system similar to the selective system that

operated prior to 1965. Willms (1996) estimated the extent of segregation between schools of middle- and working-class pupils for the 54 Scottish communities that had at least two secondary schools. The findings revealed that during the first few years of the reform better educated parents or parents with higher social-class more often exercised choice. However, as the reform took hold, choice became more common amongst parents from working class backgrounds, and middle class parents were more likely to opt out of the state system altogether and place their child in a private school. As in the early stages of the reform, parents disproportionately chose schools that served pupils with above-average levels of socio-economic status.

The analysis also revealed that between-school segregation along social class lines increased substantially as the choice reform proceeded apace. The tendency has been for middle class pupils to increasingly become isolated in a small number of schools within each community. Segregation increased in large and small communities alike, but the biggest increase was in the isolation of middle-class pupils in Scotland’s five largest cities (Glasgow, Edinburgh, Paisley, Aberdeen and Dundee). Unlike markets for consumer products where all buyers can shift from one brand to another, it is not possible for all pupils to attend a school with a high social class intake. If choice and greater autonomy are to strengthen the hand of schools that are already advantaged, without safeguards to ensure equality, we will likely see widening disparities between the advantaged and the disadvantaged.

Implications for policy and practice

- The evidence does not support the free-market principle that consumers will consider a wide range of choices before making a decision.
- The research provides strong evidence that parental choice is one of the contributing factors to the increase in between-school segregation in Scotland, although other factors may also be relevant. Greater segregation is likely to result in greater inequalities in attainment.
- Policy makers must take into account the effects of parental choice on the entire school “community”. A school’s performance is contingent on the types of pupils attending it. It is not possible for all pupils to attend a school with a high social class intake. If the schools that are already advantaged are going to benefit most from choice, without safeguards to ensure equality, the disparities between the advantaged and disadvantaged are likely to continue increasing.

- Although some students benefit marginally from parental choice, the cost for others and for the system as a whole are high. Schools serving pupils in disadvantaged areas have lost many pupils to schools with higher socio-economic status, despite effective teaching practices. Parental choice could lead to the closure of some “good” schools.
- Scotland’s experience with parental choice raises questions about the effects of increasing choice mechanisms in any system. The results for Scotland suggest that the conditions necessary for healthy competition are difficult to achieve. (Willms and Echols 1992).

Further information

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About this study

The samples used in the research on parental choice in Scotland were taken from the following sources:

The Scottish Young People’s Survey (SYPS) (a series run by CES) of 1985, 1987, 1989, and 1991. These surveys targeted all pupils who started their fourth year of secondary school in a Scottish secondary school, either public or private, in the preceding academic year. Thus, the majority of the pupils covered by these surveys entered secondary school in 1980, 1982, 1984 and 1986.

The Fife Education Authority study. The survey, which was part of the 1989 Scottish School Leavers’ Survey (SSLS), covered all pupils who were in their fourth year of secondary school.

A sub-sample of the Adler *et al.* (1989) data. The sub-sample included interview data from 616 parents in three EAs. The children of these parents had entered secondary school in 1984. Within EAs, the sample included an over-sampling of parents who had made successful placing requests to the authority.

Publications

- Adler, M., Petch, A. & Tweedie, J. (1989) *Parental Choice and Educational Policy*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Echols, F.H., McPherson, A.F. & Willms, J.D. (1990) Parental choice in Scotland, *Journal of Education Policy*, 5 (3), pp.207-222.
- Echols, F.H. & Willms, J.D. (1995) Reasons for school choice in Scotland, *Journal of Education Policy*, 10 (2), pp.143-156.
- Willms, J. D. (1996) “School choice and community segregation: Findings from Scotland” in A.C. Kerckhoff (Ed.) *Generating social stratification: Toward a new research agenda* (pp.133-151). Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Willms, J.D. & Echols, F.H. (1992) Alert and inert clients: the Scottish experience of parental choice of schools, *Economics of Education Review*, 11 (4), pp.339-350.

CES Briefings

The following *Briefings* are also available, free of charge, from the CES:

- No 1: “The Participation of 16-19 Year Olds in Education and Training: Recent Trends” by Paula Surridge and David Raffe.
- No 2: “Leaving Home” by Gill Jones.
- No 3: “A Curriculum for All?” by Linda Croxford.
- No 4: “Guidance in Secondary Schools: The Pupil Perspective” by Cathy Howieson and Sheila Semple.
- No 5: “Guidance in Secondary Schools: Careers and the World of Work” by Cathy Howieson and Sheila Semple.
- No 6: “Improving Opportunities: Changes in S4 Examination Scores, 1984-1990” by Adam Gamoran.
- No 7: “The Early Impact of Youth Credits in England and Wales” by Linda Croxford, David Raffe and Paula Surridge.
- No 8: “Making a Move: Next Steps for Women. A follow-up study of Women Onto Work students” by Cathy Howieson.
- No 9: “Numbers that Count: The Changing World of Official Statistics” by Joanne Lamb.
- No 10: “School-to-Work Transitions in Ireland and Scotland, 1979-1991” by Emer Smyth and Paula Surridge.
- No 11: “The Social Context of Spending in Youth” by Gill Jones and Chris Martin.