

## MAKING SENSE OF SCHOOL CHOICE POLICY: PRINCIPLE AND FUNCTION IN ENGLAND

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Neo-liberalist educational reform has become widespread in English-speaking countries and Japan since the 1980s. The Education Reform Act 1988 fundamentally changed the educational system of England. This Education Reform Act 1988 regime has been maintained under the New Labour government, which advocates the “third way”.

While decentralization of authority is promoted, central government maintains control over education policy. The strategy of promoting neo-liberalist educational reform is to introduce a quasi-market system into education (Clarke et al. 2000, Whitty 2002, Thrupp & Willmott 2003). It looks as if governmental policy respects the will of parents and guarantees the parents’ right to their children’s education. Although this type of educational reform has been further refined, the introduction of a quasi-market into education has created problems.

This paper clarifies whether the will of parents to have their children educated is truly secured through parental choice and what such a reform brings to England’s schooling, focusing on the parental school choice system.

### *I. Parental Choice Legislation in England*

#### **(1) Education Reform Act 1988 as a turning point in educational policy**

When the Thatcher Government entered office in 1979, the government planned to introduce a school voucher system to state schools instead of having parental choice. However, the school voucher proposal was scrapped because of strong criticism and low cost effectiveness. Instead of school vouchers, it was planned that parental choice be accepted and that school governing bodies be activated.

The Education Act 1980, which was enacted in the second year of the Thatcher Government, established a formal right for parents to express a preference of school. It reflected the Conservative Government’s concern to empower parents as the most likely enforcers of Conservative legislation (Godber 1999). Since then, parental choice has affected the policies of individual schools.

Parental choice was fully implemented after the Education Reform Act 1988 under the third term of the Thatcher government. The Education Reform Act 1988 was enacted to fundamentally replace the state school system, which had continued since the Education Act 1944. Whereas the principle of the Education Act 1944 legislation had been to secure equal educational opportunities, the Education Reform Act 1988 aimed to accelerate competitiveness within schools and to strengthen the centralized control of education. It contained (1) abolishment of school districts (open enrolment), (2) expansion of school discretion (Local

Management Schools), (3) maintained schools that are not subject to Local Education Authority control (Opt out), (4) centralized control of the curriculum (National Curriculum and National Curriculum Test), and (5) publicizing of school academic attainment, and so on.

These reforms brought about four changes.

The first is a change in the role of the state from a supplier to an evaluator of educational services. The rise of the 'Evaluative State' instigated two shifts in the timing, purpose and location of the evaluation process. The first shift linked routine evaluation and strategic evaluation, and the other shift linked *a priori* evaluation and *a posteriori* evaluation. This shift does not mean that the state plays a smaller role in education policy. The state takes refuge in the clear and commanding heights of strategic "Profiling" (Neave 1988). The second is a change in the governmental relationship between central and local government. Through setting system goals and using criteria such as the National Curriculum, the state maintains its strategic control (Whitty et al. 1998). Rather than losing its influence, the state has more power through school funding. Local Education Authority (LEA) control of state schools became relatively weaker. The third change is the birth of the school 'market' in public education. Through parental choice, parents select state schools as 'consumers'. The fourth change is the growing significance of headship. Through these three changes, the proliferation of education management texts and courses, the so-called new managerialism or new public management, requires that the role and purpose of school managers be redefined (Gewirtz 2002). School heads are required to work as school managers to make their school more competitive under the performance criteria set by the state.

## **(2) School admission system in England**

The school admission procedure is proscribed under Articles 84 and 88, School Standards and Framework Act 1992 and the code of practice set by the Secretary of State in 1999. Each school has admission authority. LEAs work as admission authorities in the case of community schools and voluntary controlled schools. School governing bodies work as admission authorities in voluntary aided schools and foundation schools. The admission authorities set their own admission policies after coordination with other admission authorities within the relevant area.

Parents can choose their children's school according to their preference. Except for grammar schools and religious schools, each school has to accept entrance requests unless the number of applications exceeds their capacity. If the number of applications exceeds their capacity, secondary schools can select applicants for admission by objective, fair, academic examination. However, selection by academic ability is not permitted for primary schools.

## *II. Equity in Parental Choice*

### **(1) The reasons parents choose schools**

Securing the parental right to choose education is a perpetual issue. A policy of parental choice assumes that all parents can exercise choice equally. But is this premise true? What is equity in parental choice of school? Can the parental choice system offer all children equal educational opportunities? These are controversial policy issues as well as philosophical issues.

To answer this question, much data on the reasons for and means by which parents choose schools for their children have been accumulated.

In general, when parents choose a primary school, the most important factor is proximity, locality, and accessibility from their home. Hughes et al. interviewed 141 primary school parents in southwest England. A total of 79% of parents answered that accessibility from home was an important factor, 2/3 answered that good reputation or recommendation influenced them, and 38% decided based on a visit to the school (Hughes et al, 1990). The Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea sent questionnaires to 1655 parents who opted to send their child to primary or secondary schools outside the borough and received 437 returns. According to the study, 41% of 58 primary parents gave location as a reason, 36% gave religious reasons, 26% gave staff attitude as a reason, and 19% gave academic reasons (Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea 1993).

In case of secondary schools, discipline and academic record are given as more important reasons than for primary schools.

Stillman and Maychell carried out a large-scale study across four very different local education authorities (Stillman and Maychell 1986). A total of 52% of parents mentioned academic record as an important factor, 38%, good discipline and 28%, proximity. Hunter studied the reasons spontaneously given by secondary school parents in Inner London. A total of 47% of parents mentioned good discipline, 42% mentioned proximity, 39%, good examination results and 34%, accessibility (Hunter 1991). Although the most important reasons were different, good discipline and good examination results were the most important (15%). The study of the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea (see above) showed that 38% of 370 secondary school parents gave academic reasons for choosing a school in another borough. They include examination results, quality of teaching, and homework. A quarter of parents were influenced by recommendation, 23%, by discipline and 21%, by location. West et al. interviewed 70 primary school parents in Inner London on the reasons for choosing a secondary school (West et al. 1993). A third of parents spontaneously mentioned good examination results as an important factor, a third of them, the atmosphere of the school, and a quarter of them, proximity. A total of 27% mentioned academic record or good education as the most important factor.

## **(2) Two resources for parental choice**

As we saw before, academic record and discipline are more important reasons for parents choosing a secondary school. So, how do parents obtain information about academic record and discipline except by visiting schools or by reputations of schools from relatives or friends?

From the 1990s, school information has become open to the public in a more systematic manner. These school information system reforms may influence parental choice.

There are two kinds of public information resource that parents can use in choosing a school. One is performance tables or league tables, and the other is the school inspection reports issued by the Office for Standard for Education (OFSTED).

Performance tables began in secondary schools in 1992 and elementary schools in 1996 respectively. When the government releases the results of National Curriculum Test, General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) and 'A' Level examinations of every school (performance table), newspaper and broadcasting companies produce a school ranking table

(league table) based on the performance tables. National Curriculum Test started in 1991, and are taken at the KS2 stage (7 years old), the KS3 stage (11 years old), and the KS4 stage (14 years old), and the results of KS3 and 4 are open to the public as a performance table.

Another resource is the school inspection reports issued by OFSTED launched in 1992. An inspecting team inspects the quality of teaching, students' academic achievement, school management, etc. Each inspector's team consists of a registered inspector who is responsible for making an inspection report, team inspectors who have received training and are responsible for inspecting each subject, and a lay inspector who checks school management and atmosphere. The performance of each school is classified into seven grades once every four years, and a report is produced and submitted to each school and OFSTED. OFSTED makes a Performance and Assessment report (PANDA report) based on the school inspection report and sends it to each school. Although the PANDA report is not open to the public, anyone can see all school inspection reports on the OFSTED website.

### (3) Correction of school index

This information can misguide parental choice because the reality of school is not appropriately revealed by this information. To compare schools more appropriately, school indexes, which are open to the public, have been gradually corrected. For example, since the results of the National Curriculum Test does not necessarily reflect the quality of teaching, the rate of free meals has been added to school indexes to show students' socioeconomic background. Value-added rate has been adopted in school indexes to show students' development from school admission at secondary school since 2002.

A value-added approach means changing how school performance is measured from student attainment to student development.

The Department of Education and Skill (DfES) conducted a pilot project of value-added evaluation at 3% of elementary schools. In this pilot project, they focused not only on the National Curriculum Test score of KS2 students but also on improvement compared with the National Curriculum Test score when the same students were at KS1. The DfES report recommended introducing a value-added approach to primary schools as a school performance index (DfES 2003). They expected the value-added index to show quality of teaching and effort more effectively than just the test score.

A value-added approach, however, cannot solve the problem of adjusting deviation due to students' socioeconomic background or family background. Goldstein pointed out that although a value-added index could show student improvement at lower-grade schools or so-called failing schools, it is difficult to identify changes in the results of most schools (Goldstein 2000).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> According to interviews with head teachers of primary and secondary schools in the 2003 school year, heads of schools with difficult problems welcome the value-added approach, but heads of excellent schools tended not to welcome this approach to show their school's performance.

### III. *Parental Choice in Action*

#### (1) **Academic attainment as a pull factor**

How do parents use the public information on school performance? What are the effects of free access to school information?

According to a research report (RR278) by Sheffield Hallam University and the Office for National Statistics (ONS), which was conducted for LEAs and 2170 parents from 1999 to 2000, most parents used two or more information resources for choosing a secondary school.

Parents use the school information resources as below: 'visit to school' (78%), 'talking to other parents' (70%), 'school prospectuses' (69%), 'primary school teachers' (49%), 'LEA prospectuses' (45%), 'performance table' (39%), and 'OFSTED reports' (25%). Parents also stated that they collected information in person such as visiting the school, the primary school teachers or the PTA as an effective resource (DfES 2001, pp.76-78). It seems as though the performance table issued by DfES and OFSTED reports are less important as information resources in choosing a school.

The study shows, however, that 'academic outcomes' (43%) is important for parents in choosing a secondary school. 'Academic outcomes' exceeded 'convenience' (40%), 'travel convenience' (35%), 'the child preference' (31%), and 'school ethos' (15%) (p.130). As reasons for avoiding a particular secondary school, many parents gave 'poor discipline' (35%) and 'poor results' (31%) (p.144). Academic outcome, including student academic attainment, is an important factor in parental choice.

#### (2) **Parental choice as an urban educational system: Influence of regional difference**

There are differences between regions.

A total of 40% of London Borough parents did not choose the nearest public secondary school, whereas 31% in the metropolitan area and 21% in rural areas did not choose the nearest public school (DfES 2001, p.143).<sup>2</sup> In fact, only about two thirds of application (68%) were accepted in London Borough, whereas 88% in the metropolitan area and 89% in rural areas were accepted (p.119). More complaints can arise because of low-level location, lack of safety, multiethnic demography, denser population and so on.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, however, the results of the study show that there is greater school choice in urban areas than in rural areas. This may mean that It might means a system of parental choice system is more suitable for urban areas.

<sup>2</sup> It is a kind of choice when parents "choose" the nearest state school by their own will. However, in this paper, I refer to parents who do not necessarily choose the nearest public school as "people making full use of the parental choice system".

<sup>3</sup> When parents have a complaint about the school admission decision, they can submit a statement to an appeal panel. A total of 5% of parents made complaints to the appeal panel and 25% of appeals were accepted (DfES 2001, p.121).

### **(3) Parental choice for the middle class: Influence of cultural and socio-economical background**

Cultural economical background has a greater influence on parents choosing a school than regional difference.

According to RR278, 53% of mothers who have a 'degree or equivalent or higher', used performance tables to choose a secondary school, whereas only 23% of mothers who had 'no qualifications' did so. It is less than half of parents who are higher education graduates (DfES 2001, p.82). As for social class, about half of mothers (49%) whose occupation is professional, managerial or technical (Class I & II), used performance tables. Compared with Class I & II, 32% of mothers, whose occupation is skilled, partly skilled and unskilled (Class III, IV, V) used performance tables. Only 19% of mothers who had 'never worked' mother used performance tables. As for tenure, 43% of 'own occupier' used performance tables, whereas only 27% of 'social rent sector tenant' used them. These differences might derive from the gap in concern about education and academic attainment.

On the other hand, it might derive from the gap in information accessibility. Walden pointed out that a quasi-market system like parental choice ignores the objection that not all parents have the information or educational background to make sensible choices (Walden 1996). When we highlight the disparity of information accessibility between parents, the parental choice system is essentially more suitable for the middle class than the working class.

Gewirtz, Ball and Bowe had studied 137 families and 119 schools, and pointed out that the multiplying effect of self-interest of demand (parent) and supply (school) caused causes inequality in the education market (Gewirtz et al. 1995). On the supply side, schools want new potential students in order to survive as institutions in the marketplace. On the demand side, parents as consumers choose schools that provide maximum advantage to their children. The self-interests of both sides are in competition. However, the ability of parents as choosers is different. Gewirtz et al. set three categories: 'the privileged/skilled chooser', 'the semi-skilled chooser' and 'disconnected chooser'.

For the 'privileged/skilled chooser', school choice is a major concern. They take note of the social class of classmates. They have social and cultural capital so that they can collect and interpret various information sources (including public information such as performance tables and OFSTED inspection reports). They can utilize the possibility of school choice and maintain a degree of healthy skepticism about the information. The 'semi-skilled chooser' is oriented to the same school type but has less inside knowledge of the school system and less interest in matching between school and their child. They do not choose schools as effectively as the 'privileged/skilled chooser'.<sup>4</sup> The 'disconnected chooser' is detached from the education market. Although they have their own concerns about education and children, they do not think of school choice as a tool to facilitate their children's success at school. As they see quality of teaching as much the same, they do not examine a wide range of schools, and they choose according to transport convenience, proximity, and facilities.

Gewirtz et al. pointed out that these categories of parents as choosers are strongly class-related; the 'disconnected chooser', in particular, is overwhelmingly from the working

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<sup>4</sup> Gewirtz et al. show an example in which the 'semi-skilled chooser' does not resort to the appeal panel when the school does not accept their initial choice.

class. This means that the parental choice system is strongly related to reinforcing social class divisions. State schools might be increasingly oriented towards meeting the demands of the 'privileged / skilled chooser', mostly the middle class, through parental choice.

#### IV. *Perspective for the Future*

Resolution of problems with parental choice has been gradually attempted by elaborating the school performance index. However, fundamental issues remain.

##### **(1) Inevitable school ranking: demerits of league tables**

Over-subscribing schools are able to select entrants. Schools can select the academically best students to raise students' test scores. As we saw before, academic attainment attracts parents' attention.

The GCSE league table in the summer of 2003 showed that it is very difficult for non-selective schools to obtain a higher position in school ranking. There were only 4 non-selective schools among the 60 highest secondary schools in London and Southeast England.<sup>5</sup> Parents who want to choose academically better schools use league tables. School ranking shown by league tables might reinforce the stability of top schools and reproduce social inequality.

According to RR278, 23% of parents perceived performance tables as being very important, and 48% perceived them as fairly important (DfES 2001, p.151). A total of 56% of parents answered that they saw students' academic attainment by school (league table) in the newspaper, whereas only 38% regarded school publications as a means of seeing a performance table of individual schools (p.79). Parents regard school 'ranking' (league table) as a tool for recognizing school performance in choosing a school.

Levacic and Woods pointed out that schools with fewer socially disadvantaged students tend to improve school academic attainment easily, whereas those with more socially disadvantaged students tend to improve less. They claim that labeling by school ranking such as league tables highlighted students test scores and made school improvement more difficult (Levacic and Woods 2002).

##### **(2) Substantial gap of accessibility to information resources**

Fewer than half of parents read LEA prospectuses (46%). Only 4% use the Internet to collect school information in choosing a school (DfES 2001, p.76). The entire contents of the inspection report of each school are open to the public on the OFSTED website. Parents who do not use the Internet to see OFSTED reports are restricted, receiving only partial information on the content.

As for the number of formal publications used by parents, 41% of the 'highest educational qualification of mother' used three or more resources, whereas only 16% of parents with 'no qualification' used three or more resources and 33% do not use formal published

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<sup>5</sup> This ranking is calculated by the percentage of students who obtained A\* or A at GCSE 2003.

information (p.85).

This disparity might derive not only from the gap in information ability but also from preference. However, it is noteworthy that even if the government promotes a policy of free access to school information, it is difficult for all parents to be equal because of the gap in information accessibility.

The second Blair government gives priority to educational reform. The green paper "Schools: Building on Success" in 2000 by the first Blair government proposed differentiation of secondary schools. This de-comprehensive trend has interacted with parental choice policy and may enlarge social inequality. The presupposition of parental choice policy should be reconsidered in that all parents should be able to choose schools on their own initiative so that parental choice is equally.

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