

## **Social selection, social sorting and education**

Geoff Whitty  
Institute of Education

### ***Opening comments***

*As Director of the Institute of Education, I am delighted to have a chance to contribute to this conference. The Institute sees the support of education in London as a key part of its mission. Founded in 1902 as the London County Council's day training college for teachers, it has maintained its local role even as it has also become a national and global player. In recent years, we have enhanced this role in a number of ways including through the formation of the London Centre for Leadership in Learning. And now, I am delighted that our work on education in the capital has been given an even stronger presence through the creation of the London Education Research Unit, and I am pleased the Unit has had a hand in this important conference, along with the Mayor's Office and Greater London Authority and the London Education Research Network.*

### **Introduction**

Today, I am going to look at how schooling in London is socially differentiated and how emerging policy trends in London (and elsewhere) may impact, either positively or negatively, on current patterns.

### **Diversity and choice**

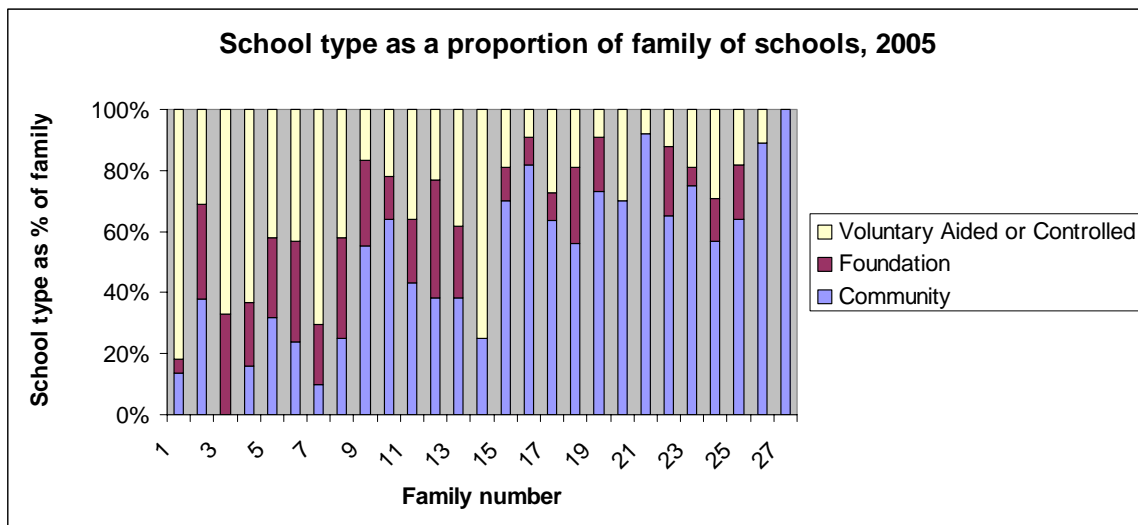
My initial comments relate to the increased differentiation of schools under both the Conservatives and New Labour, and the government's belief that differentiation plus choice will lead to higher standards (DfES, 2005a: 8). The Schools Commissioner, Bruce Liddington, appointed by the government last year as a champion of diversity and choice, has characterised the English secondary school system as a "Spectrum of Diversity" – a range of schools of different types from which parents will increasingly be able to choose freely according to their children's needs (SSAT, 2007).

The problem, as many of the contributors to this conference make clear, is that not all schools – and not even all types of school – are equally desirable in the eyes of parents and not all parents are equally well-placed to gain places for their children in the most desirable ones. The danger of the diversity and choice agenda, then, is the creation of a 'multi-tier' system of secondary schools based on the sorts of children who attend them (Riddell, 2003). While the existence of such a system is regularly denied in official publications, and it is true there is not a rigid differentiation as in the days of the tripartite system, there are certainly trends that associate different types of schools with different types of children.

And the issue facing us is whether current policies are likely to mitigate that tendency or to exacerbate it.

In London, we can look at the present situation through the London Challenge publication *Families of Schools* (DfES, 2005b), which groups institutions into 27 'families of schools' according to various indicators, including prior levels of pupil attainment at Key Stage 2, and the proportion of pupils entitled to Free School Meals. The top two families of schools in performance terms are also clearly the groups with the lowest eligibility for Free School Meals. They have Key Stage 3 scores of approximately 29 or above, but have Free School Meals take up rates of 2-10%. The bottom two families on the other hand have Key Stage 3 scores of 24 or lower, and have Free School Meal eligibility rates of 35-75%, which is a much wider spread, and suggests significantly less social homogeneity than the top group. However, there is a general pattern of increasing social disadvantage being associated with decreased academic attainment.

But we can also look at the data in relation to the number and proportion of school types within each family of schools. In the chart below, put together by Sandy Leaton-Gray with help from Ruth Lupton, we see that family groups containing schools with higher proportions of students eligible for Free School Meals or with low prior attainment tend to have a majority of community schools. Thus the lower down the achievement and social inclusion scale, the more community schools a family of schools is likely to include as a proportion of its total.



*School type as a proportion of London Family of Schools*  
 Source: Department for Education and Skills (2005b)

The reasons for these patterns require further exploration, and this is a piece of research that I hope LERU will be able to raise funding for.

But, whatever the causes, there is other evidence that pupils eligible for Free School Meals, and low achieving pupils, are over-represented in community schools. Given the lack of time, I will cite just one example to illustrate this, one that I suspect you will have the opportunity to hear more about later on today in the session run by Anne West, Rebecca Allen, Hazel Pennell and Audrey Hind. As some of these authors showed in their paper to the British Educational Research Association annual conference just last month, overall, religious secondary schools in London educate a much smaller proportion of pupils eligible for free school meals than non-religious schools and their intakes are significantly more affluent than the neighbourhood they are located in (West, Allen and Pennell, 2007). Studies conducted by IPPR have revealed a similar picture at national level (IPPR, 2005). That some schools – and not just religious schools – have relatively high proportions of middle-class pupils and correspondingly low proportions of disadvantaged pupils generates a ‘virtuous circle’ of strong performance against government attainment targets and popularity among more affluent families, who proceed to colonise them and make them ‘safe’ for their children. This seems to apply at the level of both individual schools and types of schools.

### **Admissions**

I think we should acknowledge the changes made to the admissions code in recognition of this problem. These do make it more difficult for schools to manipulate their intakes at least in overt ways. As an advisor to the Select Committee that pushed the Government into giving the code more force, I suppose I am bound to say that. But I do actually think that the whole exercise was a good, if rare, example of evidence informed policy making in practice – even though the changes did not go far enough and the failure to reform appeals leaves a gaping loophole. I would also argue, as did some witnesses appearing before the committee that, especially in London, where half of all secondary schools are their own admissions authority, either all schools should have this status or none.

But should we go beyond tightening admissions codes? If so, should we make all schools the same in terms of status, funding and governance? Or, alternatively, should we invent yet more new types of schools to try and buck the trend? I have myself advocated the former approach over many years – at least in terms of level playing fields if not bog standard comprehensives – and would rather not be starting from where we are now. But I do think it worth pondering whether new types of school might be used to our advantage in terms of the equity agenda rather than being condemned out of hand as divisive.

### **Academies**

For example, will the addition of academies make things worse, as many here fear, or could they conceivably make things better? I know there are all sorts of problems about data on academies, but if we take the latest reports from PriceWaterhouseCoopers (PWC, 2007) and the National Audit Office (NAO,

2007) at face value I think there is an interesting issue. Academies seem to have improved more rapidly than their predecessor schools and the achievement gap between the best and worst performing academies is starting to narrow. PWC themselves were reasonably positive about performance in the academies they studied, but worried about the changes in social composition.

According to their 2007 report, the percentage of pupils from deprived backgrounds in their 24 academies fell from 42 per cent in 2002 to 36 per cent last year. At one academy, the number of pupils eligible for free school meals fell from more than 50 per cent to just 12 per cent. At first sight, these data are disturbing in that they may seem to support the view that these schools have exploited their freedom to recruit affluent and more biddable pupils. Indeed, the PWC report itself urges the government to investigate whether the freedom academies have over their own admission policies serves to exclude poor children. In particular, the report said that a system of 'fair banding' may be acting against the interests of children from poorer areas, a point emphasised in the *Daily Mail* report on the study (Clark, 2007).

Stephen Gorard (2005) commented some time ago that it would of interest to see whether academies follow the pattern of reducing their share of disadvantaged students once their admissions are not linked to those of the local authority and this does indeed seem to have been the case. However, it is possible to look at that in another way. If the reported improvements in performance were partly down to changes in the social mix of children, this is not necessarily a bad thing. Indeed, it is consistent with broader evidence that the presence of high achieving and well motivated pupils can impact positively on the performance of the whole school. As Margaret Maden (2002: 336) puts it, successful schools tend to have 'a "critical mass" of more engaged, broadly "pro-school" children to start with'.

What we need to establish is where the missing free school meals pupils are going: are they being absorbed into academies as they take a larger number of pupils to their predecessor school, are they being dispersed across schools, or are they simply going into new sink schools? Research to track these movements would enable us to identify the actual impact of academies and their admissions arrangements.

But if we find that improvement has been brought about in some academies by their use of ability banded admissions, this may not be something to regret. It may actually point to the benefits of a wider re-introduction of banding, but on an area-wide rather than individual school basis in order to ensure a more equitable distribution of children of different abilities across all the schools in an area rather than just create another socially imbalanced school down the road.

This may now be more feasible with the change of mood music about academies under the new government. If, as Ed Balls says, a greater role is to be accorded to local authorities in relation to the planning of these schools, this could also

begin to integrate the academies better within local systems of schooling and reduce the fear that they will merely undermine other struggling schools. Furthermore, if a key concern of critics of academies is the motivations of commercial sponsors, this is surely an argument for greater engagement by the higher education sector as 'sponsors', which the recent changes to the government's policy on academies also promotes.

All I'm really trying to say here is that, if we have to accept that there is going to be continuing diversity and choice in the system, there are ways of managing it that do not necessarily exacerbate existing patterns of differentiation and hierarchy and might even be used to challenge them.

### **Federations and trusts**

Similar arguments can be put about trust schools and here, I think, the most positive developments are likely to be where trusts involve federations of schools or what Tim Brighouse termed collegiates. This may allow weaker or more recently founded schools to benefit from the experience of more successful schools. There is obviously scope within federations for schools in more affluent areas to link with those in areas of relative deprivation.

There are, of course, already examples of federations. The first formal one in London was, I am told, that between Haberdashers Aske Hatcham College in New Cross and the recently founded Haberdashers Aske Knights Academy in Bromley. This particular example also provides a link, through the Haberdasher's Aske Foundation, to the independent sector – the elephant in the room of London secondary schooling, an issue that still needs serious attention twenty years after Peter Newsam suggested an imaginative plan for integrating the two sectors.

But, despite the need to address that if we are really to overcome the socially divisive effects of school choice in London at age 11, we can still make some impact by changes within the state sector.

### **Extended schools**

For example, early national findings for extended schools provision look promising. A three year evaluation of the extended schools pilot for the DCSF concluded that they improve GCSE results more quickly than the average. The number of pupils getting five good GCSEs in these schools rose by five percentage points between 2005 and 2006 – compared to a national average of 2.5 points. The researchers particularly highlighted the benefits of 'full service' extended schools for children eligible for free school meals and suggest that they make a "real difference" for poorer families by providing stability and improving their chances of learning. Indeed, the study found that the gap in performance between pupils eligible for free school meals and their peers had narrowed in these schools (Cummings et al, 2007).

One aspect of extended schools that we need to be aware of is the potential for the emphasis on local support for families that is embedded in the extended schools approach to come into tension with the need to provide schools with a social mix. This is where federations and trusts may be particularly useful in relation to extended schools: it may therefore be that the call for a 'good local school for every child' (Education Alliance, 2006) will best be met by a combination of extended school provision in the locality and federation with school with different types of intake.

An important caveat in all this, though, is that encouraging collaboration between schools will require changes in the way in which schools are judged – in particular, there needs to be a shift away from individual performance indicators towards collective ones and much more attention paid to the contribution of schools to the social inclusion and cohesion agendas as to the standards agenda (e.g. see Adnett and Davies, 2003).

### **London Challenge**

The London Challenge, of course, encompasses all of the developments that I have outlined so far. And again it does now seem to be having a tangible impact. Not only are the 'Key to Success' schools in London improving at a faster rate than the norm, the attainment gap for disadvantaged children in London is narrowing faster than elsewhere and is narrowing fastest in these particular schools. Using the entitlement to free school meals as a proxy for economic disadvantage, data provided to us by the DCSF suggest that attainment for this group of pupils within 'Keys to Success' schools has risen by a larger amount than the non-free school meals pupils (13.1 points compared to 12.3 points between 2003 and 2006), something that has not yet really happened much elsewhere.

### **Closing comments**

The developments I have outlined are not yet sufficient to suggest that education policy has broken decisively with the Thatcherite and Blairite legacy of neo-liberal marketisation. But there have been some early signs that the new government is more willing than the Blair regime to move social justice and social cohesion issues further up the agenda. The Director-General for Schools, within the DCSF, has recently questioned whether hitherto New Labour policies have been 'sufficiently granulated to focus on lifting the disadvantaged as well as the advantaged children' (Stewart, 2007). For those of us who have been arguing this case for some time, this is indeed welcome (Mortimore and Whitty, 1997), but as researchers we need to ensure that we have the evidence to judge the effects of this change of emphasis on the ground.

As Peter Wilby has put it, 'a Brown government will need courage and ingenuity to reconcile egalitarian ambitions with political realities' (Wilby 2007). Our work as education researchers needs to provide critique, but we also need to recognise the realities of the policymaking process, and be prepared to engage

constructively with apparently contradictory and counter-intuitive findings, such as those relating to academies' intakes. In this way we can provide more effective support to policy makers in addressing our concerns around education and social justice.

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