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LONDON FIGURES
SPRING 2008
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London's Secondary Schools: Diverse Provision, Social Sorting?

Contemporary English education policy supports diversity and choice of school provision, especially in the secondary sector. In particular, the current government has encouraged school autonomy as well as rapidly accelerating the policy of school specialisation.

Arguments for diversity of schooling include greater parental choice, a more diverse curriculum and enhanced competition leading to better quality. However, many critics are concerned that the greater the variation between schools, the more likely that middle class parents will use their economic, social and cultural resources to gain access to schools of their choice. Moreover, allowing some schools to operate their own admissions could enable them to select more advantaged students, and thus to improve their success rates and popularity with better-off families. The risk is that social sorting within the school system will increase, with less advantaged students left in lower performing schools. These concerns are particularly relevant in London, given its great social diversity.

This edition of London Figures aims to review the extent of social sorting in London's secondary schools, drawing both on existing work and our own new analysis. We find that:

- London has a more diverse pattern of school provision than other English metropolitan areas, with high proportions of faith schools, single sex schools and foundation schools. Altogether only half of London's maintained schools have the local authority as admissions authority.
- Students eligible for free school meals (FSM) are under-represented in schools which are their own admissions authorities, as are students with English as an additional language (EAL) or special educational needs (SEN).
- The same patterns are evident when we compare specialist with non specialist schools. Moreover, students with FSM are more likely to be in business and enterprise, arts and sports colleges than in schools with other specialisms.
- Further analysis is needed to establish whether sorting matters, and what kind of sorting matters. Schools which are and are not their own admissions authorities appear to make similar progress with similar pupils. However, specialist schools seem to achieve greater progress than non specialist.

London's Diverse School System

One of the striking features of London's school system is its diversity of provision.

The vast majority of state-funded secondary schools in England are maintained schools (ie they are funded by local authorities), although there is also a small number of Academies and City Technology Colleges (CTCs) that receive money directly from the government and also control their own admissions. Among maintained schools, local authorities control admissions in 66% of cases, including 63% which are community schools (owned by the local authority) and 3% which are voluntary controlled (VC) schools owned by charities (usually religious). The remaining 34% of maintained schools control their own admissions: 17% are foundation schools (owned by the governing body) and 17% voluntary aided (VA)(usually religious) schools owned by charities. Altogether 18% of schools have a religious affiliation (DCSF 2007). 88% of schools are co-educational (mixed gender) (DfES 2004).

Here we use January 2008 data from Edubase (the most up-to-date and complete list of educational institutions available nationally) to compare London with England's other large metropolitan areas: the West Midlands, Greater Manchester, West Yorkshire, Merseyside, South Yorkshire, and Tyne and Wear.

London stands out in many ways. Most evidently, the capital has the greatest proportion of single-sex secondary schools. In London as a whole, just two-thirds (66%) of secondary schools are co-educational. The proportion is even lower (60%) in Inner London. With the exception of Merseyside (71%), all the other metropolitan areas have between 80% and 100% co-educational schools. London also has a high proportion of schools with a religious affiliation (27%), exceeded only by Merseyside (38%) and Greater Manchester (30%).

The other notable feature of London's system is its high proportion of foundation schools (22%). Differences with the other metropolitan areas are marked. Greater Manchester, for example, has only 9% foundation schools. The London picture is accounted for by schools in Outer London (28% foundation) rather than Inner (10%). The high number of foundation schools, combined with the high number of faith schools, means that London has the lowest proportion among the major conurbations of maintained schools which are their own admissions authorities (50%) (Figure 1). Moreover, London has distinctive combinations of gender mix and school designation. In Outer London, single sex schools are more likely to be foundation schools than their co-educational counterparts. 31% of Outer London's single sex schools are foundation schools, compared with 13% in metropolitan areas outside London. In Inner London, a very high proportion (61%) of single sex schools are VA schools, compared with 41% of single sex schools in conurbations outside London.

These data suggest that both in Inner and Outer London school provision is more differentiated than in other major urban areas outside the capital. If diversity and choice does lead to social stratification, it is particularly likely to do so in London. We now focus on examining this using the London Families of Schools dataset published by the DCSF London Challenge.

Admissions Arrangements and Social Sorting

Others have shown (Ewens 2006) that there is a clear difference in London between the intakes of secondary schools which are their own admissions authority and those which are not. Here we show this with a separation of own-admissions schools in London that are religious (VA) and those which are not (Foundation, Academies and CTCs). We see that community and VC schools, where the local authority controls admissions, have significantly higher proportions of the more disadvantaged students; those eligible for Free School Meals (FSM), those who have special educational needs (SEN) or those who have English as an additional language (EAL) than own admissions schools. VA faith schools, in particular, have more advantaged intakes (Table 1). Allen and West (2007) have also shown that they tend to have more advantaged intakes than would be expected given the areas in which they are situated.

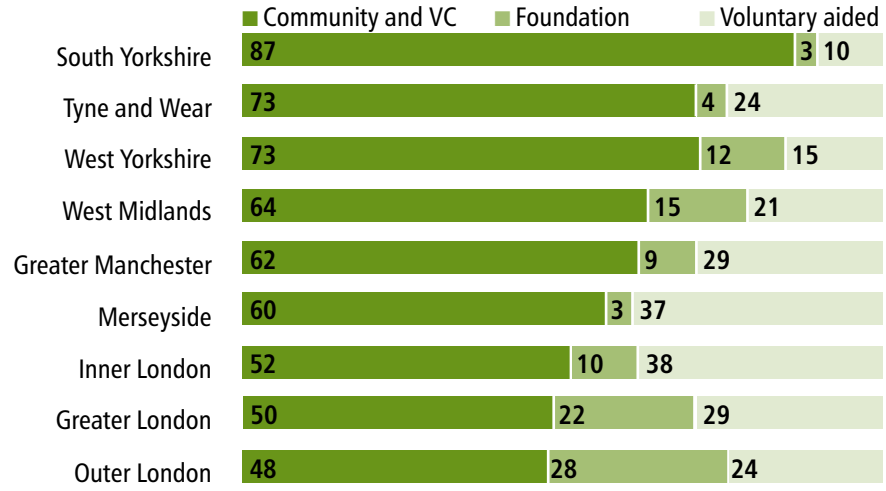
Both in Inner London (where socio-economic disadvantage is most concentrated) and Outer, co-educational schools have higher rates of students eligible for FSM than single sex schools, with boys' schools having the lowest rates. These factors combine to make very big differences between school intakes. For example, voluntary aided boys' schools in Inner London have FSM of 21%, compared with 47% for community co-educational schools.

The strength of the relationship between social sorting and school type and gender is illustrated in the characteristics of the 'families of schools' created by the London Challenge to enable schools to compare themselves with others in similar circumstances. Families of like schools are compiled on the basis of intake indicators including Free School Meals and prior attainment. There are twenty-three families. To simplify comparison, we have grouped them into four groups, the top

Table 1: Percentage of different kinds of students in schools with different admissions arrangements, 2005–6*

	Eligible for FSM	With SEN	With EAL	Minority ethnic
All secondary schools	24	19	32	49
Community and VC	30	23	37	50
VA	18	14	25	48
Foundation, Academies and CTC	18	17	28	45

Figure 1: Schools which are and are not their own Admissions Authorities



Source: London Challenge Secondary Families of Schools 2006 v2

five families (the 81 most advantaged schools, almost all in Outer London) and three remaining groups of six families. Figure 2 demonstrates that as we move from the richer families to the poorer families, the proportion of both single-sex and own admissions schools dwindles, as does the proportion that are both single-sex and own admissions.

Specialist schools and social sorting

A further element of diversity in the school system is school specialism. Specialist status can be gained by any school which is reaching an acceptable standard and can raise the necessary sponsorship. The government is encouraging all schools to adopt at least one specialism, which may be in technology, science, engineering, maths and computing, business and enterprise, humanities, language, arts, music, sport, special educational needs or combined subjects. All specialist schools may select up to 10% of students on aptitude, although most do not exercise this option.

80% of maintained schools in England are now specialist. Using Edubase data, we found higher proportions of specialist schools in the major conurbations, ranging from 86% in Greater Manchester and 85% in London to 93% in the West Midlands. The ubiquitous-ness of specialist status raises the question of whether specialism per se can be thought of as distinctive in the school choice market, especially since specialist schools must still follow the national curriculum.

In London, it is clear that there is a degree of social sorting between specialist and non-specialist schools, with non-specialist schools having more pupils eligible for FSM and with SEN (Table 2). They are also more likely to have below average prior attainment than non-specialist schools. For each type of school (community, VC, VA, and foundation) specialism adds another layer of sorting (Figure 3). The differences in intake between specialist and non-specialist schools are greatest among foundation schools. For example, foundation specialist schools have an FSM intake of 14%, similar to the national average (13%) while their non-specialist counterparts, all in Outer London, have FSM intakes the same as the overall London figure (24%).

Figure 2: Type and gender of schools in the families of schools (%)

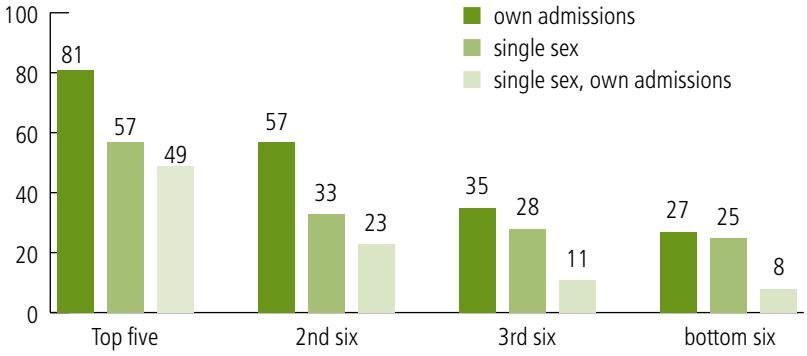


Table 2: Percentage of different kinds of students in specialist schools of different types 2005–6*

	No of schools	Total students	Eligible for FSM	With SEN	With EAL	Minority ethnic
Specialist Schools	290	319253	22	18	32	48
Non-specialist Schools	120	110618	29	22	33	50
Technology	64	73298	21	18	30	46
Arts	52	61519	27	21	36	51
Science	40	43907	17	15	32	48
Sports	31	32580	26	25	29	45
Languages	30	33084	21	14	34	49
Maths & computing	29	28578	17	15	34	53
Business & enterprise	28	27527	29	23	33	49
Humanities	8	10100	24	21	26	57
Engineering	4	4700	7	14	10	29
Music	4	3960	8	10	26	45

There are also differences in the intakes of different types of specialist school in London, with schools for sport, the arts, business and enterprise and, to a slightly lesser extent, humanities, having higher proportions of students eligible for FSM and with SEN. This pattern does not apply for EAL, nor is there a consistent relationship between type of school and proportion of minority ethnic students. Note that certain types of specialist school are more likely to be their own admissions authority than others. Approximately half of science, technology and maths and computing colleges in London control their own admissions, compared with one-third of sports and arts colleges, which may explain the patterns observed here.

Reasons for and outcomes of sorting

The analyses we present here do not necessarily indicate that increasing diversity of provision is increasing the level of social sorting between schools. It may be the case that school diversity simply reflects London's social diversity – that is to say that foundation and voluntary aided status and/or specialism in the more academic disciplines have been acquired in more affluent areas in response to (perceived) parental demand. To establish the influence of choice we need detailed historical, longitudinal and geographical analyses, which are beyond the scope of this publication. In particular, the relatively disadvantaged intakes of the minority of schools that remain non-specialist may reflect the fact that these schools are by definition those which are struggling or cannot raise sponsorship: i.e. those in disadvantaged circumstances, rather than any avoidance of non-specialist schools by advantaged families on the grounds of specialism.

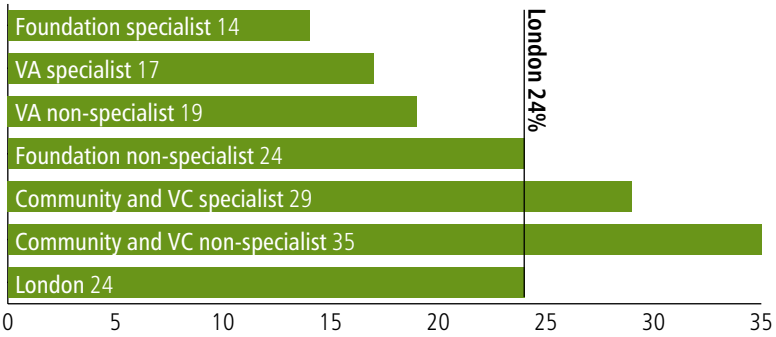
Within London we find some evidence that school diversity is an outcome of social stratification. The greater the variation in deprivation between small areas within a Borough, the greater the proportion of schools which are their own admissions authority, perhaps suggesting that schools have diversified in order to protect their social distinctiveness. There are higher proportions of both foundation and VA schools in boroughs that are more diverse, the difference being more marked and more consistent for foundation schools. Other work, however, shows evidence that choice processes are increasing sorting, rather than school diversity simply reflecting social diversity. Ewens (2003) shows higher levels of cross border mobility for schools which are their own admissions authorities and for maths, science, languages and business and enterprise colleges than for other types of schools.

Source: London Challenge Secondary Families of Schools 2006 v2. Schools with combined specialist subjects are classified under the first subject of specialism

The key question is whether social sorting matters for educational outcomes, leading to disadvantaged students attending schools of lower quality or with a disadvantageous social composition. Fuller understanding of what is happening demands a complex multi-level analysis. A cruder indication is given by the 'contextual value added' (CVA) of different types of schools, that is to say the average progress made by students taking into account their socio-economic characteristics. For London, raw attainment scores show that students in schools which are their own admissions authority and in specialist schools do better than students in other schools, and this also holds for children on FSM. However, there is little difference between the CVA of London schools which are and are not their own admissions authorities. Indeed community schools have slightly higher CVA than foundation schools.

On the other hand, specialist schools have higher CVA than non-specialist, as Levacic and Jenkins (2004) also found in their analysis of national data. When we combine specialism with school status for London, we find that VA and foundation schools which are also specialist have the highest CVA: community and foundation schools without a specialism the lowest. This suggests that sorting may matter: these most effective schools are precisely those which have the lowest numbers of disadvantaged students. Interestingly, Levacic and Jenkins also found that more able pupils did relatively better than less able pupils in specialist schools, thus the attainment gap widened. Pupil level analysis is needed to examine the extent to which this is happening in London.

Figure 3: Percentage FSM in schools of different type and specialism



Conclusion

Our findings point to the need for special attention to be given to the impact of school diversity polices in London, where the school system is more diverse than in other large English cities, and where particular forms of diverse patterning have emerged in Inner and Outer London. Evidence of social sorting between schools which are their own admissions authorities and those which are not, between specialist and non-specialist schools, and between specialist schools of different kinds, all suggest the need for ongoing monitoring of the situation, more research into social sorting processes, and, critically, into the impacts of sorting both on attainment and on attitudes to diversity, social mixing and social cohesion. Policy responses such as school collaborations and incentives may be possible within a diverse system to mitigate its effects (Leaton-Gray and Whitty 2007), as well as alternatives that alter the admissions landscape (such as area banding and lotteries). As the number of specialist schools increases towards 100%, there is a particular need to examine the difference that going to a specialist school of a particular type actually makes, and the extent to which specialism type impacts in the choice market. Finally, as specialism becomes the norm rather than the exception, our evidence points to the need to question the policy of preventing the worst performing (often the most disadvantaged) schools from becoming specialist, potentially trapping them at the bottom of a school hierarchy and making school improvement even more difficult.

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