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Segregation by choice? The debate so far

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Segregation by choice? The debate so far

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Abstract
This paper offers an extensive review and bibliography of the literature on school choice, and its effects on social and ethnic segregation between English schools. It finds that the evidence concerning whether "school choice" legislation has acted to increase or decrease the socio-ethnic mix within schools is open to multiple interpretations, affected by how segregation is conceptualised and measured. Difficulties in reaching definite conclusions are compounded by the changing economic and demographic landscapes that confound attempts to show whether policies of school choice cause or reduce segregation. By the author's judgement the policies have reinforced geographies of social segregation and of ethnic polarization in some places. However, this is not a failure of the principle of choice necessarily. Rather, it is a function of the constraints placed on that choice and an implicit if less spoken recognition of the value of local schooling.

Keywords
Schools, choice, social segregation, ethnic segregation, segregation indices, education policy

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See: http://www.gemengdescholen.eu/public/default.aspx

Introduction

> For us, we're in a situation where we've got five schools around. They're brand new builds … and a lot of children go out of the county; there aren't enough children at the moment. So everybody's fighting for children wherever you can get them… (Teacher at a secondary school; quoted by Sutherland, Yee, McNess, & Harris, 2010).

Concerns about social and ethnic segregation in English schools have been raised in respect to the 1988 Education Act and subsequent legislation under Conservative and Labour governments, and now a Conservative – Liberal Democrat coalition. These have promoted parental choice and greater competition between schools, permitting some to become self-governing, opting out of the control of local education authorities. The funding of each school has been linked to the number of pupils it can recruit.

In itself, choice is not new. The UK never had a definite commitment to neighbourhood schooling where every child from a neighbourhood attends the same local school. The 1944 Education Act that established free secondary education for all children in England and Wales said pupils should be educated in accordance with the wishes of their parents insofar as that was possible within the limits of public expenditure (Brighouse, 2002). In practice, however, the possibilities were limited to a local school, a fee-charging school or a school with religious connection – for which

commitment to the relevant denomination and place of worship would need to be demonstrated. *De facto* most children attended their local, state maintained school.

What has changed is the deliberate and active promotion of school choice as a way to raise standards, improve levels of attainment, encourage innovation and to promote charitable and commercial investment and the rejuvenation of schools, particularly in deprived neighbourhoods and especially under the Labour government's Academies programme. Some schools have affiliated with other schools nearby to form federations or partnerships with shared governance, management or facilities, sometimes bussing pupils between sites. Other operators and confederations of schools have emerged operating nationally. The use of standardised testing and the dissemination of results have permitted league tables comparing school performance in England but no longer in Wales, and neither Scotland nor Northern Ireland. These, together with the publication of inspection reports encourage parents to be active consumers not merely passive recipients of educational services and permit interventions to be targeted in underperforming schools.

To advocates of the policies they are a way to improve educational outcomes, to engage parents with their children's learning and to end 'selection by mortgage' whereby pupils from poorer neighbourhoods are priced out of the higher attaining schools by the house prices around them. The advocates might concede such policies could also increase ethnic segregation *if* pupils from different ethno-cultural backgrounds select different schools from each other. However, if one agrees with the social justice arguments in favour of such policies (Brighouse, 2002) then one must also

accept that choice – precisely because it is choice – can generate outcomes counter to other policy objectives, including those that seek to promote community cohesion and cross-racial tolerance. Whether they actually do or not is discussed later.

Yet, despite the rhetoric, no one has a free choice of state-funded school in England, just the right to express a preference. That preference will be met only if there are places available at the school. Classroom space and other practical considerations, including mandatory class size limits in the early years of primary schooling (elementary schools) mean a school cannot accommodate without limit. Moreover, across a local region or nationally, the financially most efficient outcome is achieved when the number of surplus places is minimised; that is, when all the spaces are filled. However, without a clear surplus of places available, one person's preference cannot be realised independently of the preferences expressed by other people. As a consequence, schools adopt admissions criteria to judge between applicants.

It is these admissions criteria that raise concern about fairness and the allegation that some schools 'cherry pick' pupils through selective admissions or more subtle mechanisms such as the cost of school uniforms. Admissions criteria usually include proximity to the school, with some schools operating preference zones, others straight line distance from home to school, and others the length of the most direct, navigable route between the two. Some schools select some pupils on the basis of excellence in their area of specialisation, whilst others may still select on the basis of familial commitment to a religious group. Some schools use attainment banding to try and get an equal mix of high and low attaining pupils, and one local authority has operated a

lottery, though not as the first or only selection criterion and apparently reinforcing the geographical determinants of admission (Allen, Simon Burgess, & McKenna, 2010).

Given the complexity of the system and also the priority given to residential address, critics of school choice argue social inequalities will be raised because higher status parents are better able to get their children into the more desirable schools, either through greater understanding of the admission process or by increased means to influence outcomes, by buying a house close to a well performing school for example (Gewirtz, Ball, & Bowe, 1995). The problems with choice are outlined by Weekes-Bernard (2007, p.1):

> [F]irst, it assumes the ability (and willingness) of all parents to make these choices on an equally informed basis; and, second, it assumes that the field in which they make these choices is an open one. Research on working-class parents has demonstrated that school 'choice' is more accurately allied to economic privilege, to the ability to work the system and to entrenched forms of middle-class social and cultural capital, while working-class and economically marginalized families are forced to make do with what's left

In itself, a critique of choice is not justification of the alternative. It remains unclear why limiting choice would produce socially more equitable outcomes. One reason it could is that choice separates those who are advantaged to exercise it from those who

are not in otherwise mixed communities. Another is league tables of school performance (which are barely useful: Leckie & Goldstein, 2010; but see Burgess, Wilson, & Worth, 2010) exaggerate the differences between schools, boosting the desirability of some whilst tarnishing the reputation of others, with material effects on funding as well as impacts on staff, student and parental morale.

In summary, the impacts of school choice can be theorised in either direction: to increase segregation or to decrease it.We therefore turn to the empirical evidence.

Assessing the policy interventions

Measuring the effects of educational reforms is not easy when they are confounded by other socio-economic and demographic changes. Whilst segregation has many dimensions (Massey & Denton, 1988), studies of segregation usually fall into two types, measuring either unevenness across a region or how isolated one social/ethnic group is from others (but see also: Allen & Vignoles, 2007; Goldstein & Noden, 2003; Johnston, Burgess, Wilson, & Harris, 2006; Johnston, Forrest, & Poulsen, 2002; Peach, 2009; Poulsen, Johnston, & Forrest, 2001).

Indices of unevenness have the form:

$$\text{Index value} = k\sum^{n}\left|p_{OBS} - p_{EXP}\right|$$

Where p_{OBS} is the proportion of the total study group within each neighbourhood, school, local education authority or some other discrete unit, p_{EXP} is an expected value – some average or contrast group –, the summation is across all *n* schools or places in a region (and sometimes additionally over subgroups), and *k* is a scaling constant.

This group of indices include the index of dissimilarity and the index of segregation used by Gorard, Taylor, & Fitz (2003). Although these two indices are correlated directly, the change in how p_{EXP} is defined changes the statistical properties of the index, aiding or hindering its interpretation and comparisons across study regions (Allen & Vignoles, 2007; Hutchens, 2004; Johnston & Jones, 2010). In general, indices of unevenness are interpreted as the proportion of the study group that would need to be reallocated to make the distributions of the observed and expected values the same across all *n* places.

The index of isolation (Duncan & Lieberson, 1959) has a different interpretation. It is understood as the probability of one member of a study group meeting someone of the same study group within their local neighbourhood, school, administrative zone or whatever. It has the form

$$\text{Index value} = k\sum^{n} p_{OBS} \times p_{EXP}$$

where, P_{EXP} is the proportion of the study group found in each of the *n* places and P_{OBS} is the proportion of each place's population belonging to the study group. The index is sensitive to the size of the study group, making cross study comparisons difficult. It can be modified to take into account areas with small representation of the study group (Cutler, Glaser, & Vidgor, 1999).

Although there has been an on-going war of words as to which index is best (see, amongst others, Gibson & Asthana, 2003; Goldstein & Noden, 2004; Gorard, 2000, 2004, 2007), none is definite. They all have their advantages and disadvantages and reflect differing conceptualisations of what segregation means. It is better to treat them not as competitors but to view their results in tandem.

Socio-economic segregation

Critics of school choice policies assume more affluent families are better able to exercise choice, leaving the least socio-economically advantaged pupils concentrated in the least popular schools where negative peer effects and insufficient funding perpetuate and deepen the inequalities. However, an early and important longitudinal

study suggested the opposite conclusion (Gorard et al. 2003). Focusing on secondary schools (high schools) and using a measure of unevenness, its broad conclusion was segregation fell nationally and in most local education authorities between 1989–95, with the overall percentage of pupils eligible for free school meals that would have to change school to create evenness dropping from about 35 to 30. It rose thereafter to 33 per cent in 2001 but not back to the level found in 1989. In other words, it appeared unlikely education policies were having the adverse impacts predicted.

However, appearances can be deceptive. The interpretation of the data is complicated by the measure of social disadvantage used, eligibility for free school meals (FSM). Eligibility is dependent upon personal circumstances that in some years will apply to more people than in others. It is not a consistent measure of pupils from the poorest fifth or so of households.

In fact, it would be unsurprising if differences between schools did fall in the early 1990s. The cause would be more due to macroeconomics than education policies; specifically, the descent into recession in 1990 and 1991 creating 'equality of poverty'. Allowing a lag period of one to two years, as the economy has improved so social segregation between schools has increased, falling again after 2007 as economic output fell sharply. This trend appears in Cheng and Gorard (2010) though they are more circumspect about linking the changes in the segregation index to economic cycles.

A second study, using a multilevel approach (Goldstein & Noden, 2003) also showed an increase in segregation, in the period 1994 to 1999, most notably in areas operating selective secondary education systems. On first reading this seems

counterintuitive: local authorities with selective schools operating entrance examinations already have a socially differentiated system so why should the 1988 Act increase it? A tentative explanation offered by the authors is that the selective system selects not only by attainment but also between households more or less likely to move off welfare entitlements as the economy improves.

A third study (Croxford & Paterson, 2006) used a measure of social class rather than eligibility for FSMs to provide some evidence that working class pupils became more unevenly spread between English secondary schools in the period 1990 to 1999, and managerial and professional pupils more isolated. Nevertheless, its overall conclusion is the evidence is mixed and there is no clear trend of increasing segregation.

Taken together, there is little agreed evidence across the literature to say social segregation either has increased or decreased as a consequence of school choice policies, albeit that from the 1990s onwards it did appear to increase back to levels present at the time of the 1988 Education Act, recently declining again.

The lack of a clear trend requires explanation. That changing economic conditions confound the analysis has been noted. Notwithstanding, it could be true: school choice policies are having little or no effect on segregation. This is not necessarily an attractive conclusion. It suggests the policies fail to increase social mobility and mixing; that they have enabled few pupils from more economically disadvantaged households to attend schools away from their immediate neighbourhoods.

If true, is it because school choice is more rhetorical than real for parents and their children? On first glance the evidence suggests not. One study showed that under half of secondary school students go to their nearest school, with only a quarter doing so in London (but almost 60% in rural areas). There is little difference by FSM eligibility. On average a secondary school has six others within a ten-minute drive from it, though approximately 45 per cent of schools in rural areas have no such competitors (Simon Burgess, Briggs, McConnell, & Slater, 2006).

However, looking more closely, less than half of FSM pupils (44%) have a top third secondary school defined by age 16 examination results as one of their three nearest schools. In contrast, 61 per cent of non-FSM pupils have. Pupils eligible for FSM travel less far to school than those who are not. Furthermore, whereas non-FSM pupils who do not attend their nearest school are more likely to be at a better not lesser attaining school by a ratio of two-to-one, for FSM pupils the ratio is one-to-one. As the authors comment, "clearly FSM-eligible students do commute away to reach better schools, but not to the same extent as more affluent students" (Simon Burgess et al., 2006, p. 11).

In areas where there are a higher number of secondary schools to choose between, school segregation is high relative to neighbourhood segregation (Simon Burgess, McConnell, Propper, & Deborah Wilson, 2004). Children from poor families appear not to benefit from the choice: they are significantly less likely to go to the highest attaining schools and their chance of doing so essentially is unaffected by the degree of choice (Simon Burgess & Briggs, 2006). The implication is the ability to exercise choice is more

constrained for poorer households than it is for others – precisely the situation that critics of the policies feared.

Turning to primary education, though the vast majority of pupils are in a first choice school, it may be that parents know they need to make a realistic choice. If they gamble and aim for a school their children are unlikely to get into they risk missing out on a school that is not their actual favourite but still preferable to other possible allocations. In fact, the primary motivation is similar across socio-economic groups: proximity or, more broadly, ease of access to the school (Simon Burgess, Greaves, Vignoles, & Deborah Wilson, 2009a, 2009b).

Of course, what is accessible for some pupils may not be for others. Determining factors include car ownership, public transport routes, nearby crime areas, safe routes to school and wider familial or friendship connections that assist in looking after the child before or after school. Although those from lower socio-economic groups generally are successful in getting their first or second preference schools, there is evidence that what they express on the application form is not really their true choice of school; it a more pragmatically constrained decision (Weekes-Bernard, 2007).

On balance, there is an uneasy tension between the emphasis on individual choice placed, for example, in the then Government's 2005 White Paper *Higher Standards, Better Schools for All* and the role of geographical determinants that shape, constrain and motivate school choice. Recognising the community role of schools, a general preference for ease of access and local schooling, and the impact of geographical admissions criteria upon the choice set, it is not surprising if the recent education

reforms have done little to increase or decrease social segregation. Put simply, the geographical determinants of separation are stronger.

Finally, a note on fee-charging independent schools in England. There are more than half a million pupils at these schools, comprising six to seven per cent of all pupils in English schools and paying an average of about £10 500 per year exclusive of any accommodation costs (ISC, 2010). A report on a sample of 161 628 independent school pupils revealed only 9.5 per cent were from areas with above average likelihood of FSM eligibility, only 13.8 per cent from demographic groups with household income below the national average, and that they were overwhelmingly drawn from the most prosperous neighbourhoods with all other types, except rural locations, underrepresented amongst the intakes. Although it would be wrong to characterise such schools as solely for the rich, and disingenuous to discount the bursaries provided to permit academically able pupils from disadvantaged neighbourhoods to attend, nevertheless the report's conclusion seems exaggerated: "our schools […] are facilitating social mobility in the UK" (ISC, 2009).

Ethnic segregation

Following the civil disturbances in three English cities in 2001, attention turned to whether there is a 'virtual apartheid' between communities and schools, and to the role of schools in challenging 'parallel lives' (Cantle, 2001; Ouseley, 2001).

According to the 2001 Census counts, 91 per cent of the English population were white. Unsurprisingly, then, of the 4.4 million students at primary school in the academic year 2001–2, 89 per cent were in schools where pupils of white ethnicity formed the majority. Six per cent were in schools with a substantial non-white majority, meaning 70 per cent or more of pupils. Of the 3 million at secondary schools, 92 per cent were in white majority schools and only four per cent in schools with a substantial non-white majority. No white students were in a school with a substantial non-white majority (Johnston et al., 2006).

More revealingly, though about 75 per cent of the Black population lived in census neighbourhoods with a majority white population, only 42 per cent of Black primary school pupils and 51 per cent of Black secondary pupils attended a school where the same was true. Similarly, though about 60 per cent of the South Asian population lived in white majority neighbourhoods, only 35 per cent of South Asian pupils were in white majority primary schools, and 46 per cent in white majority secondary schools. Indeed, 22 per cent of South Asian pupils were in primary schools where there was both a substantial non-white majority and at least half of that majority were Pakistani. Nine per cent were in primary schools where at least half of the substantial non-white majority were Indian. The corresponding figures for South Asian secondary school pupils were nine and ten per cent, respectively.

Overall the results show greater ethnic segregation in schools than in neighbourhoods, more so for primary schools than secondary schools, more so for Black and South Asian pupils, especially Pakistani ones, and generally more so in London than

in other places (see also Burgess, Wilson, & Lupton, 2005; Johnston, Wilson, & Burgess, 2005).

It might be inferred that the causes of post-residential segregation in schools are due to choice – either a general preference to be taught in schools where a sizeable proportion of each class are of the same ethnic group as oneself or, worse, because of fear, suspicion or avoidance of other ethnic groups. However, such a conclusion is too hasty when the comparison is of school populations (aged 4 – 18 years) against census populations (all ages). As Johnston et al. (2006) note the apparent increase in segregation from neighbourhoods to schools could be due to the different age profiles of the ethnic group. This is supported by a further study reporting that although segregation is relatively high in the country's schools, where it has increased in some cities during the period 1997–2003, that increase is due to the ethnic minority groups share of the school population increasing (Johnston et al. 2007). Except in a small number of places and with the exception of Black Africans in London's secondary schools there is no trend of increased ethnic segregation over the study period.

A third study directly compared the intakes of primary schools with the ethnic profile of pupils living in areas from which the school could plausibly recruit students. It also compared the profile of each school with those of local competitors – other schools recruiting from the same places (Harris & Johnston, 2008). Focusing on Birmingham and on Black Caribbean pupils it found that of 81 schools, 26 had more Black Caribbean pupils in their intake than expected given their locality, 19 'lost' such pupils, and 36 were as expected. Of the 26, seven deviated significantly from expectation. All but one

of these was a faith school. As an example, one school was expected to be 11.1 per cent Black Caribbean but observed to be 49.1 per cent so, whereas its nearest competitor had an intake only 1.87 per cent Black Caribbean.

Turning to London, of 78 primary schools with significantly higher than expected percentage of Black Caribbean pupils, 53 were faith schools. In both cities, the concentration of Black Caribbean pupils in faith schools is much greater than expected given the number of faith schools within the cities. Similarly, Weekes-Bernard (2007) finds that across three authorities, one each in Northern England, Eastern England and Inner London, high proportions of African and African Caribbean children are found in faith-based primary schools.

Herein lies another debate: are schools affiliated to religious faiths and denominations a cause of social and ethnic cleavages within society, or do they promote an ethos of social tolerance, of community and of religious understanding? Opinion is divided (Gardner, Cairns, & Lawton, 2005; McKinney, 2006), though government policy has tended to be supportive of such schools and their expansion under the Trust and Academies schemes.

Approximately one-third of state-funded schools are faith schools, of which the majority are primary schools (over 90%). In 2007/8 there were 4 642 Church of England (CoE) schools, 2 038 Roman Catholic (RC) schools, 115 other Christian schools, 37 Jewish schools, 7 Muslim schools, 2 Sikh schools, 1 Hindu school and 1 Greek Orthodox school (Berkeley, 2008).

The large number of CoE and RC schools has a historical lineage: both denominations were providing primary education to the poor and working-class populations before the introduction of a state system in 1870, a system that also brought an increase in the number of faith schools, giving them increased financial support. The growth of other types of faith schools has tended to follow patterns of immigration into the country. However, their number does not yet reflect the proportion of persons professing a non-Christian faith in the 2001 Census: six per cent.

A concern about faith schools is they are selective – either explicitly by making adherence to the faith an admissions criteria, or implicitly in the socio-cultural background or ability of pupils they attract (Allen, 2007). It has been observed, for example, that 11.3 per cent of pupils in CoE primary schools in 2005 (and 11.6% in CoE secondary schools) were eligible for free school meals, much lower than the 20.1 per cent (and 15.4%) eligible in non-religious schools (DfES figures, cited by NUT 2007). Corresponding figures for other groups of faith school are: RC, 15.6% (14.6%); Jewish, 3.1% (5.9%); and Sikh, 9.3% (10.8%). Only Muslim schools contained a higher proportion of FSM eligible pupils: 31.5% (34.1%) – a figure that hints at the uneven geographical distribution of faith schools, and at the intersections of class, religious and ethno-cultural identity with social (dis-) advantage.

A 2010 study by *The Sutton Trust* also reveals CoE, RC and other Christian secondary schools to be more socially selective than more secular schools (Smithers & Robinson, 2010). It is not clear that it is the existence of faith schools *per se* that creates variation between the schools but the links between religious identity and class, and the

consequences of the admissions criteria (Tough & Brooks, 2007). England's chief schools adjudicator has warned that some faith schools are inadvertently using criteria that benefit white middle-class families (Sharp, 2010).

However, it is important not to treat faith schools as a homogenous group:

> Although it seems reasonable to talk about 'church schools' in general, the character of Roman Catholic and Church of England schools is very different. Roman Catholic schools cater largely for the Roman Catholic families; they may accept some non-Catholic pupils, but the majority will have links to the Catholic Church. Accordingly, their intake tends to represent a community which is widespread geographically, but is socially cohesive. By contrast, Church of England schools function more as local community schools, with perhaps just a small number of places reserved for pupils from further afield who request a specifically Christian education (NUT, 2007, p. 17).

> Faith schools are often both single faith and mono-cultural, as faiths in Britain are generally closely aligned with race and ethnicity […] However, faith schools are not responsible for all mono-cultural schools, as these have also developed in greater number outside the faith sector. It must also be said that some faith schools, particularly in

large cities, are also amongst the most ethnically mixed schools in the country (Cantle, 2008, p. 220; cf. Brimicombe, 2007).

To some commentators there is no justification for state funding of faith-affiliated schools. It is a moot whether the expansion of faith schools reflects a demand for such schooling or creates it. However, as Osler (2007) observes, it is generally agreed that extending support to a range of faith communities is equitable, even when there is a division of opinion on whether it is desirable. The risk is of a self-perpetuating situation: as groups observe other faith communities achieving public funding for schools so, "it may leave some members of those communities, those who previously felt a secular system served their needs, wondering if faith schooling might be a means to reinforce either a faith-based or broader cultural identity through schooling" (Osler, 2007, p. 6; see also Judge, 2001).

Consequently, faith schools might be regarded as antithetical to the statutory requirement on schools to support and promote community cohesion. As Cantle (2008, p. 84) writes, "segregation and separation – whether at the spatial, social or any other 'layer' – does matter and is a significant barrier to community cohesion." However, a study funded by the Church of England found faith schools were rated higher than others by Ofsted inspectors on community cohesion (Church of England, 2009; Harrison, 2009). Furthermore, to not recognise the religious identities of (especially) black and minority ethnic groups could be counterproductive – enhancing a lack of self-esteem, a

sense of marginalization and constituting a barrier to academic achievement (Weekes-Bernard, 2007).

The potential for faith schools to contribute to community cohesion entails a move from places of singular faith identities and tradition:

> By seeing faith schools as schools for all the community, rather than as a means of ensuring exclusivity, the potential for learning about others' religions and faiths will be enhanced. This will in turn contribute to greater understanding of faith diversity in England (Berkeley, 2008, p. 5).

On this basis, the continued use of faith as a criterion for admission is hard to justify. It should be the choice of pupils and parents, not the school, whether they wish to be exposed to a religiously grounded education (Berkeley, 2008; NUT, 2007; Smithers & Robinson, 2010; Tough & Brooks, 2007).

Faith schools have the opportunity to promote community cohesion by broadening religious understanding, for instance by twinning with other non-religious schools. Experience of twinning has, however, been mixed. A report on community cohesion within schools of one of the cities experiencing racially motivated riots in 2001 noted that meaningful interaction between different groups remained limited. Although regarded as important and successful in changing the attitudes of children, it was undermined by lack of consistent support and funding, lack of time, the ad hoc nature of the interactions, and limitations imposed by the National Curriculum. Worse, the

majority of schools examined raised concerns about social segregation *within* schools, with a growing divide between rich and poor (ICOCO, 2008).

Conclusion

The introduction of a quasi-market has been the focus of educational reforms in England since 1988. It is quasi because state-funded schools are regulated by core curricula, standardised testing, and mandatory inspection regimes, teaching requirements such as citizenship classes, and by school admission codes. The intention of these reforms has been to raise standards and to allow more pupil mobility to a school of their choosing. The question is: have the reforms been successful?

We have seen conflicting evidence on whether social segregation has increased as a consequence of school choice policies. There is more agreement that it has not decreased, at least not independently of broader economic trends. Ethnic segregation, too, whilst not increasing and possibly decreasing, appears to be greater between schools than between neighbourhoods, and is in some places deeply entrenched (see http://www.measuringdiversity.org.uk/ to map examples). However, segregation by income and by ethnicity are related and may be confounded.

In regard to attainment, a 2008 report by Conservative think-tank *The Bow Group* written by who is not the Education Minister, Michael Gove MP, said that education inequalities were high and had grown under the Labour administration (1997–2010) (Gove, 2008). However, further analysis of the same data found a number of errors in the original study, ultimately reporting the opposite trend: one of improvement in educational outcomes (Lupton & Heath, 2008).

Nevertheless, there remains concern that “for all the political rhetoric about educational standards and opportunity, English schools do more to lock in intergenerational inequality than to promote social mobility” (Green, 2009, p. 7). This is because “educational attainment continues to be strongly associated with socio-economic background, despite some signs that social differences in examination results may have started to reduce” (EHRC, 2010, p. 300).

In 2009, only 29 per cent of free school meal eligible pupils achieved what are regarded as good grades at age 16 examination, as opposed to 54 per cent for those not eligible. Worryingly, this difference reflects that between the social, emotional and cognitive development of pupils aged five: 35 per cent of pupils that are FSM eligible achieve a good level of development compared to 55 per cent of pupils not eligible. There are differences too in attainment between ethnic groups at age 16. Chinese and Indian pupils are more likely to do better than average, Black Caribbean and Pakistani pupils less so, especially Black Caribbean boys (EHRC, 2010).

Have the policies of school choice failed? Not necessarily. As Weekes-Bernard (2007, p. 9) writes “social housing policies, patterns of immigration, levels of poverty and experiences of racism all contribute to residential segregation, which clearly affects segregation within schools rather than a set of individual preferences.” Revealingly, Gibbons & Telhaj (2007) discover almost nothing has changed over the period 1996 to 2002 in the way pupils of differing ability in the final year of primary school are sorted into different secondary school. This could be because where someone resides combines so greatly with the use of geographically based admissions that the

constraints on educational choices available to him or her are deeply entrenched and long during. The effects of location are so great that they can be used to predict exam results Webber & Butler (2007).

What can be done? One option would be to randomly assign pupils to schools or to make it a genuinely free choice not limited by geographical considerations. Whether that would actually be desirable is debatable. In fact, there has always been a tension between the individualistic and competitive underpinnings of school choice policies, and the desire for schools and other children's service providers to work together within their local community to be responsive to its particular needs. The focus on partnership working is explicit in the 2009 White Paper, *Your child, your schools, our future: building a 21st century schools system* (DCSF, 2009) which also proposed local authorities should gather parents' views on the school choices available in their area, and to publish a local plan for improvement if a high proportion of parents are dissatisfied.

On the one hand, the geographical constraints of choice maintain selection by mortgage if some pupils are priced out of the most desirable schools. A 2002 study reported a premium on surrounding house prices of 6.9 per cent for each 10 per cent improvement in the standardised test scores reported for primary schools (Gibbons & Machin, 2003). Another study found the opening of a new secondary school in an affluent part of a city in England inflated local house prices for detached properties (family houses) by 20 per cent above the average for the city during the period 2004–7: by £51 000, However, the opening of a new school in a less affluent area had little local effect (Jones, 2009).

On the other hand, knowledge of the geographies can be harnessed to achieve social ends. The city of Oldham has taken the bold step of merging and reopening some of its most ethnically segregated secondary schools, and moved others to different areas to generate a mixed intake (Woolcock, 2010).

In understanding and measuring segregation there is promise in a modelling approach that can explain not merely describe patterns of segregation, and also determine whether those patterns deviate from randomness (Goldstein & Noden, 2003; Leckie, Pillinger, Jones, & Harvey Goldstein, 2010; Willms & Paterson, 1995). It also is important to treat segregation as a process – of groups becoming or continuing to be separated from each other – which requires careful examination of what actually is happening in places: is there out-migration? What are the aspirations of the people who are found there? (Simpson, 2004)

Moreover, though it is used here, the language of segregation may itself be unhelpful, especially where it creates misleading stereotypes about race and immigration (Cantle, 2008; Finney & Simpson, 2009; Peach, 2009).

In the final analysis, what most parents want is access to a good local school where their children will be valued, respected and well educated. In especial regard to ethnic segregation we end with the following observation:

> There is a desire for ethnically mixed schools among White and minority families but the operation of the system of school choice is preventing this. School segregation, to the extent that it can be shown

to exist, is not a result of desire for self-segregation but a result of a mismatch between choice and outcome (Finney & Simpson, 2009, p. 185).

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