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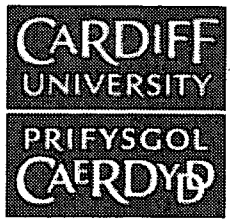
ABSTRACT

This paper examines the impact of England's specialist school program on secondary school admissions, discussing the early impact of policies intended to create specialist schools on school composition. Specialist schools are given extra resources to develop best practices in one of four areas of expertise: arts, technology, sports, and language. It outlines the debate surrounding specialist schools, noting whether this program could lead to a two-tier education system. It also presents research on specialist schools and on the changing composition of secondary school admissions. After noting findings on school diversity, the paper considers the development of the specialist school program in terms of its growing significance, forms of specialties being introduced, and the geography of the program. It identifies program impact on the socioeconomic composition of all English specialist schools and considers the impact on school admissions for a sample of local education authorities. The paper concludes that it is difficult to assess the advantages and disadvantages of increasing the proportion of specialist schools in England and that there is no easy answer to the issue of the relative costs/benefits of specialist schools. It suggests that schools that are selected, are their own admissions authorities, or are specialist tend to have increased socioeconomic segregation in school admissions. (Contains 11 figures and 21 references.) (SM)




MEASURING MARKETS: THE CASE OF THE ERA 1988

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# *Specialist schools in England: track record and future prospect*

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2001

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**Specialist schools in England: track record and future prospect**

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## Abstract

The specialist schools programme is seen as a key way of transforming the 'bog standard' comprehensive education system. This has been portrayed as meeting the local needs of parents. However, there is little evidence that such a programme can make such an impact. This paper examines the impact of the specialist school programme in England on secondary school admissions and, instead, suggests that the most likely effect will be in exacerbating the inequalities that some schools currently have in admitting children from privileged backgrounds. In particular, it is shown, schools that have control of their own admission arrangements will benefit the most and lead to the creation of a two-tier education system.

## Introduction: the specialist school debate

This paper examines the early impact of policies, such as the Technology Colleges Programme 1993, which were intended to create specialist schools in England. This impact could be on standards, choice, diversity, and school

composition. While all of these are important, it is the latter that is the particular focus of this paper. The discussion begins by outlining the emerging debate surrounding specialist schools and, in particular, whether this programme could lead to a two-tier education system. The paper then presents findings from our research on specialist schools alongside our wider conclusions on the changing composition of secondary school intakes. After presenting some of our findings on school diversity in general we consider the development of the specialist school programme, in terms of its growing significance, the forms of specialisms being introduced and the geography of the programme. The analysis then identifies the effects of the programme on the socio-economic composition of all specialist schools across England before considering in more detail the impact of the programme on school admissions for a sample of Local Education Authorities (LEAs). From this analysis we can begin to see some of the relative costs and benefits of the relevant parts of the recent Green Paper 'Schools: Building on Success', which suggests a very large expansion in the number of designated 'specialist' schools.

Our ESRC-funded study of the impact of parental choice on secondary schools is still in progress (see below). However, we have accumulated considerable evidence already so far. In summary, progress from 1988 to 2001 has been significant for many publicly available indicators of education. A natural experiment measuring progress in terms of examination results using fee-paying schools as a control group suggests an improvement of standards in state-funded education. Over the same period the well-established link between socio-economic background and examination results has reduced slightly. The achievement gaps between sexes, ethnic groups, economic regions and schools sectors have also reduced, all leading to a fairer though still far from ideal system. Schools themselves are now more mixed in the socio-economic

background of their student intakes, and are, thus, a better reflection of the wider society that they serve (Gorard, Fitz and Taylor 2001). While many of these changes are small, they are all at least in the right direction, and they suggest that the ongoing comprehensivisation of UK schools was being successful. Even more success would be desirable but it is not clear where the evidence is that increasing specialisation will be the driver for that success.

For the current government giving schools specialist status is a key mechanism to 'significantly enhance the diversity of secondary education, with every school having a distinctive mission and ethos and contributing to the community or to the wider education system' (DfEE 2001:42). Specialist schools are given extra resources to develop and spread best practice of particular elements of the National Curriculum. Currently there are four areas of expertise schools can be given specialist status in: Arts; Technology; Sports; and Languages. In the recent Green Paper, entitled 'Schools: Building on Success' (DfEE 2001) the main role for secondary schools is that:

> Every secondary age pupil must be competent in the basics of literacy, numeracy and ICT and experience a broad curriculum beyond. Every secondary school pupil, having achieved this basic competence, must have their particular aptitudes and abilities recognised and developed to the full, particularly after the age of 14, so that they achieve good formal qualifications by the age of 16 and the means to progress beyond to further and higher education or work-related training. And every secondary school should instill in its pupils a strong sense of independence and responsibility, to themselves and their wider community. Our goal across education is that every boy and girl, every

man and woman should have the opportunity to develop their potential to the full. (p. 4)

The Government apparently identifies a need to develop an education system that prioritises the needs of individual children. Inclusion too readily became an end in itself, rather than the means to 'identify and provide better for the talents of each individual pupil' (DfEE 2001:5). In order to foster the individual needs of children the Government commits itself to enabling schools to forge a distinctive character and mission. Therefore they propose to 'significantly enhance the diversity of secondary education, with every school having a distinctive mission and ethos and contributing to the community or to the wider education system' (p. 42). In the education quasi-market the specialist school programme is seen as contributing to horizontal diversity, a condition for an efficient market to operate (Higham et al. 2000). However, unlike the apparent 'failure' of two other supply-side programmes, City Technology Colleges and sponsored grant maintained schools (Walford 2000), the specialist school programme is unfolding rapidly as a feature of the education landscape.

The specialist school programme is offered by the Government as a key way of extending diversity and promoting best practice. Consequently they have stated that they will increase the number of specialist schools to 1,000 by 2003, with a further target of 1,500 by 2006. They will also lift the restriction on the number of specialist schools allowed within an Education Authority. One route to meet these targets is thorugh increasing the number of specialisms from four to seven, to include engineering, science and business and enterprise. A parallel development outlined by the Government is to establish 'a new category of advanced specialist school which would be open to high-performing schools after five years in the specialist school programme' (2001:48). This will not lead

to 'a free-for all between schools' nor to 'dismantling all local education services', since the 'freedom must be earned, not conferred at whim without regard to the interests of children or the needs of the local community' (2001:6).

Part of the evidence used in advocating the specialist schools programme is the study of their value-added performance by David Jesson (2001). In this report Jesson argues that non-selective specialist schools tended to perform better than non-specialist schools after controlling for different levels of entry in GCSE and A Level examinations. In particular, it was shown that specialist schools located in areas of high social deprivation had the greatest level of improvement. Jesson also suggests that the level of added value that these schools can generate should be seen against the fact that they are representative of the education system at large, 'many of them are sited in inner-city areas and other areas of relative or absolute social disadvantage. The success of these schools, sometimes described as 'against the odds', is very encouraging and offers 'signs of hope' for others [sic] schools similarly placed (2001:29).

However, while the report makes some reference to the issue of the structural advantages offered to a specialist school, such as from additional resources and increasing popularity of a school, it tends to play these down as explanatory factors:

> A number of possible hypotheses present themselves foremost amongst which must (be) [sic] the fact that these schools have and continue to receive additional funding in consequence of their successful bids for specialist status. However, whilst this is attractive as a starting point for discussion, it is surely the use to which additional funding is put that should be a more appropriate focus for investigation (Jesson 2001:28).

Evidence that one sector or another is performing better is often claimed but rarely substantiated (see Gorard 2000). The importance of student background factors in assessing relative performance is paramount (Gorard 1998). When Jesson (2001), for example, suggests via value-added analysis that non-selective specialist schools out-perform other non-specialist schools, he not only ignores the differential funding but also the fact that proportionately more designated specialist schools are single-sex, ex-grammar, and foundation than would be expected (see below). Yet Jesson feels able to compare the performance of, for example, secondary modern schools (taking those unwilling or unable to pass 11+) with that of specialist ex-grammar comprehensives. Note that while the headings in Chart 1 makes this unclear, stating that it compares non-specialist comprehensives and specialist comprehensives, cross-referencing the values with the text shows that the former group actually includes all of the secondary moderns. As we show below the socio-economic composition of the two groups is very different. While this does not invalidate the value-added analysis, it does suggest an alternative explanation not involving the specialism.

Critics of the specialist school programme are concerned that the establishment of these new forms of schools will lead to the advancement of a two-tier education system (Thornton 2001) and further vertical differentiation. A specialist school can expect to receive an additional £100,000 of matched funding towards capital expenditure. This money must be spent on enhancing the facilities that are required for the school's particular specialism. Specialist schools can also expect to receive a recurrent budget of £123 per pupil per year for the first four years to implement their specialist programme. Approximately a third of this should be targeted to assist in sharing innovative and best practice with other local non-specialist schools. However, both of these additional

resources can also have effects on the rest of the school. For example, capital investment improves teacher and pupil morale and can lead, on occasions, to greater pupil performance (PriceWaterhouseCoopers, 2001). It also means that the standard capital and recurrent resources available to all schools can be diverted elsewhere to other departments.

A second mechanism of the specialist school programme that could advance a two-tier system is the opportunity for schools on the programme to select up to 10% (or perhaps 15%) of their pupils on the basis of aptitude in their specialism. A debate has emerged surrounding the difference between selection by aptitude and selection by ability, the latter appearing to refer to selection by the general ability of a child rather than the specific ability of the child within the specialism. In either form, however, any kind of selection must enhance the school's ability to generate relatively higher examination results - at least in one subject. Given that opportunity it is interesting that only a small proportion of schools actually implements this. According to the Technology Colleges Trust only 7% of specialist schools do so, and a number of these had partial selection before joining the specialist school programme.

When schools (or LEAs) allocate places to pupils they can follow their published criteria in fact, but not in spirit. For example, a selective specialist school might allocate 10% of places on aptitude in one year, and whatever the argument for exceptional talents in one curriculum area it remains the case that all academic aptitudes tend to correlate with each other. Thus, selecting (for that is what it amounts to) some students tends to improve raw-score examination scores. In subsequent years the school could use its published criterion of favouring the brothers and sisters of those at the school *before* allocating the 10% specialist places. As general aptitude also tends to 'run' in families this

approach is likely to raise scores even further. Such 'covert' selection could repeatedly happen year-on-year. This may be partly why specialist schools appear successful to naive observers, but even this tactic will, of course, leave overall LEA and national indicators unaffected. The school is simply 'robbing Peter to pay Paul', and not contributing to any overall improvement in educational standards.

A further mechanism towards a two-tier education system is the requirement that a school must identify £50,000 from private sources in order to be eligible for specialist school status. It could be argued that the potential for schools from all neighbourhoods to raise this amount of private finance is not evenly distributed. For example, it may be very difficult for a school located in a poor neighbourhood of a deindustrialising city to find private partners who would be willing to donate up to £50,000. This major obstacle could perhaps prevent schools in the lower tier from ever moving in to the upper tier of a two-tier system. However, again according to the Technology Colleges Trust nearly a third of specialist schools are located in inner city areas. Whether these are actually located in challenging areas remains to be seen.

Indirect consequences of both the improved funding and/or the ability to select on aptitude may appear in open enrolment and per-pupil funding. The general popularity of a school on the specialist school programme may be enhanced by improvements in its infrastructure and examination results. A full and expanding school will benefit from per-pupil funding.

Specialism, or reputation for a curriculum subject, is anyway a negligible factor for families choosing a new school (Gorard 1999), both in the state-funded and fee-paying sectors (Gorard 1997). Ironically, market forces in the UK appear to

push schools towards a rather 'dull uniformity' rather than diversity. Most of the diversity in the school system is pre-existing and long-term (e.g. voluntary-aided) or else 'artificially' created (e.g. CTCs). In whichever direction the theoretical arguments surrounding diversity and choice go (Hargreaves 1996a and 1996b; Walford 1996a and 1996b) it is still the case anyway that the specialisms themselves are somewhat specious. It is already the situation that the cost of travel borne by families and LEAs limits the number and range of schools that they are able to consider.

**Methodological considerations**

The analysis below of specialist schools is derived from our datasets of the pupil composition and achievements of all schools in England and Wales from 1988 to 2001. There is insufficient space to rehearse here the sources, analyses, and findings of our wider study - a summary of which can be found in Gorard et al. (2001) or Gorard and Fitz (2000). However, we use here the areal segregation index and, in particular, the school-level segregation ratio, both outlined elsewhere (Taylor et al. 2000; Taylor et al. 2001). The segregation ratio is a measure that indicates whether a school is over- or under-represented with children eligible for free school meals (or other indicators such as additional educational needs, ethnic group, and first language). The measure is standardised such that changes in the overall levels of poverty between each LEA, and over time, are accommodated.

We have also conducted over 35 interviews with LEA admission officers and school headteachers across areas of England and Wales purposely chosen to reflect variations in geography, admissions procedures, and levels of socio-

economic segregation between schools. For the purposes of this paper we consider in more detail nine LEAs that have specialist schools (28 in total). These specialist schools represent all forms of specialism a school can currently become and represent all types of school (community, foundation and VA).

We use the term 'designated specialist school' to convey the confusion over the concept. There is, of course, no such thing a 'bog standard' school, since all have a distinct ethos and a distinctive skills portfolio among their staff (see Thornton 2001). In addition, there are several schools that have a clear, acknowledged and publicised specialism that are *not* specialist schools in current policy terms. An example is the former ILEA centre for music, which has specialist facilities and teachers, and selects 10% of students on the basis of musical aptitude.

Time is an important variable in our analysis. Snapshot designs by themselves are of little evidence value because they lack a clear comparator (such as what the situation was like before or after the situation of analytical interest). The nature of specialist schools has changed over time, and an analysis that groups them all together misses important distinctions. For example, the first cohort of schools after the Technology Colleges Programme 1993 were all grant-maintained (GM) or voluntary aided (VA). The proportion of specialist community schools has grown in each successive year. The actual subject specialisms have also changed over time, now including languages, sports and arts, and the proposal is for further ones. It is not clear, *a priori*, that all of these subjects are of a similar type, or will attract similar levels of students and funding. One clear difference is between subjects like music which would be very expensive for all schools to provide at an appropriate level, and others. The range of musical instruments alone suggests a need for specialist centres.

Subjects like maths, on the other hand, are more likely to be available at an appropriate level in all schools. All of these considerations add to the complexity of analysis, specifically where comparison is made between specialist and non-specialist schools. They also raise further questions about the nature of the evidence for the specialist school policy.

**General findings on diversity**

Socio-economic segregation of student compositions, as assessed by the proportion of pupils with a specific characteristic who would have to exchange schools for this characteristic to be spread fairly, declined from 1988 to 1997 (Gorard 2000). This decline in segregation was measured in terms of poverty, special need, first language and ethnicity. The period involved increasing parental choice, a growth in out-of-catchment placements, a large growth in appeals, and little increase in diversity of schools. Regions, such as Wales, in which the 'bog standard comprehensive' have been unchallenged by grant-maintained, fee-paying, selective schools and City Technology Schools have markedly lower levels of segregation than the national average. One possible conclusion is that choice *without* diversity tends to lead to lower levels of segregation than simple allocation by area of residence.

This improvement appeared in all economic regions, and most local authorities. However, areas of England that have retained or created diverse school types since 1989 provided exceptions. In general, LEAs with higher proportions of foundation, selective or specialist schools have higher levels of socio-economic stratification between schools. They also tended to remain static, showing less change in the already specified indicators of improvement over time. Within

LEAs the relationship between school types and segregation is an ogival one. Areas with high levels of selective, voluntary-aided, grant-maintained or fee-paying schools had higher levels of segregation than their neighbours, and show no change in segregation over time (e.g. Bromley, Buckinghamshire, and Haringey). Areas with large changes in segregation over time or lower initial levels of segregation contained only LEA-controlled comprehensive schools. Diversity *with* choice therefore appears to tend towards segregation/selection. This remains the case in the analysis of our national dataset whatever the publicised criteria of allocation to schools are (and the considerable range of these criteria can be seen in White et al. 2001).

Since 1997 the situation has changed somewhat. Both nationally and regionally, the school system is becoming more segregated by poverty at the same time as choice is being restricted in practice, and the diversity of schools is increasing. The School Standards and Framework Act 1998 has encouraged many LEAs to revert to catchment areas or to otherwise re-emphasise distance criteria in allocating school places. The Rotherham judgement 1997 and the Code of Practice 1999 both make it clear that the use of default choices (where no form is returned) are not permitted. Thus, places are no longer automatically reserved as back-stops for local residents, and the scale of over-subscription of some schools rather suddenly became clear with the growth of appeals. The Torbay judgement 2000 means that a chosen school remains the 'first real preference' of any family even when it was unable to offer them a place (because of selection for example). These changes make applying for non-local schools a more dangerous matter, so reducing out-of-catchment choices and favouring new LEA policies of 'local schools for local kids'.

## The rise of the specialist school

The rise of the specialist school may worsen this general situation. The number of schools awarded specialist school status in England has increased almost year-on-year since they were first introduced in 1994 (Figure 1). There was a slight fall in the number of schools entering the programme between 1998 and 1999, however, between September 1999 and September 2000 there were 134 new specialist schools raising the total number of schools on the programme to 529. By March 2001 there were already 73 schools designated as specialist schools that year, well on the way to equalling the take up for 2000.

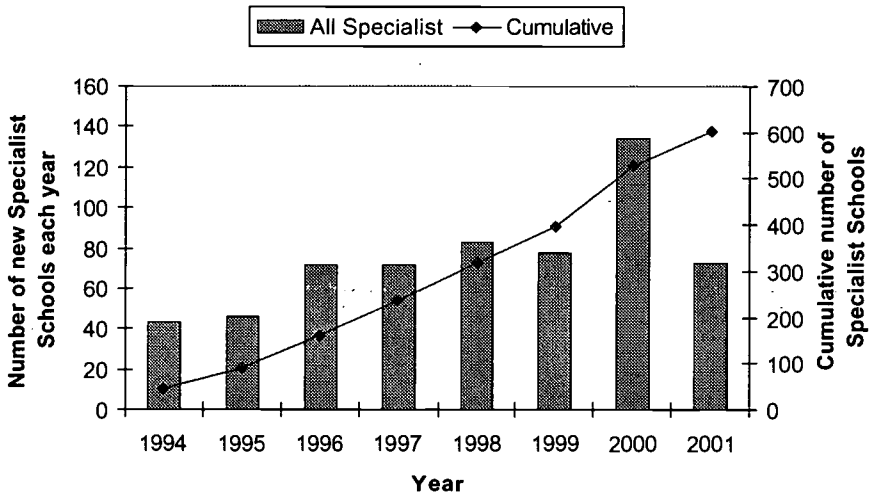


**Figure 1. The rise of specialist schools, by year: England 1994-2001**

NB. Figures are given for September of each year with the exception of 2001. Figures for 2001 are the number of schools 'designated' specialist school status as at March 31 2001, and will, therefore, not be the final figures for 2001. These schools join the programme in September 2001.

The year-on-year rise in the number of schools entering the specialist school programme has ensured that such schools are now a significant feature of the education landscape (Figure 2). By September 2000 just less than 15% of all state secondary schools were on the programme. According to the Government's targets specialist schools will account for an estimated 28% of all secondary schools by the year 2003. This proportion should be considered against the fact that the heavily-researched foundation (FD) schools and voluntary aided (VA) schools, two key elements of school diversity, account for 14% and 15% of secondary schools respectively. However, within the specialist school programme there is considerable overlap between these two types of schools.

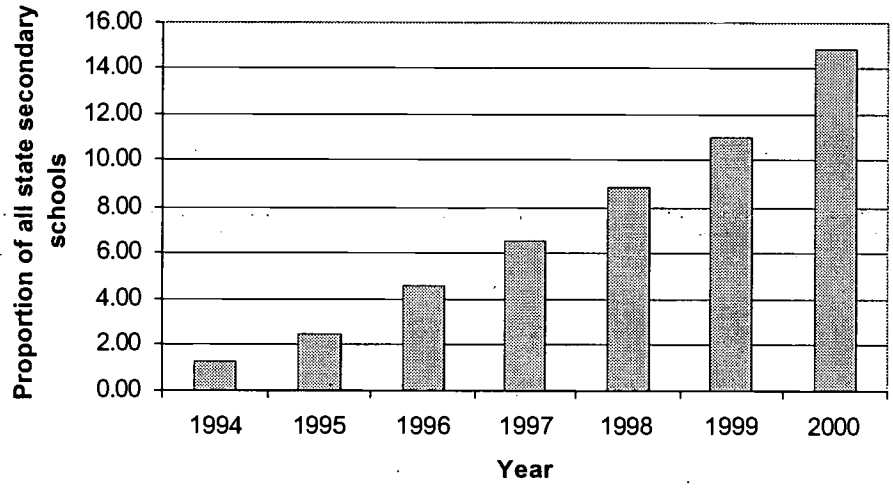


**Figure 2. The rise of specialist schools on the education landscape, by year: England 1994-2000**

The early specialist schools were either foundation or voluntary controlled schools (see Figure 8). However, community schools now provide the largest

share of specialist schools, followed by foundation schools, voluntary aided schools and voluntary controlled schools. But these are, of course, not proportionally representative of the overall composition of secondary schools in England (Figure 3). Only 15% of community schools are currently on the specialist school programme compared with around 26% of all foundation schools. Community schools remain under-represented on the programme.

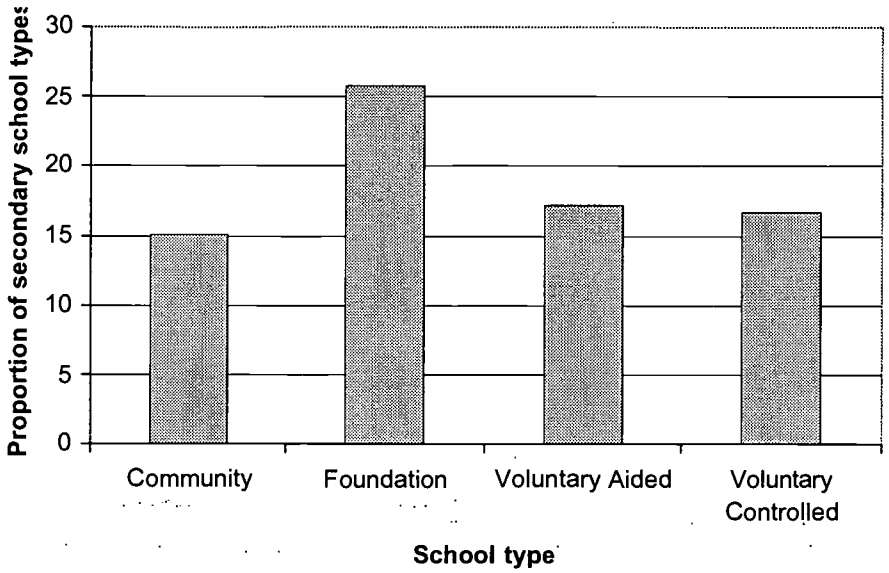


**Figure 3. Representative nature of schools on specialist school programme, by school type: England September 2001**

## Form of specialisms

As already indicated there are currently four forms of specialism a school can have:

1. technology (technology, science and mathematics)

2. languages (MFL)
3. sports (PE and sport)
4. arts (fine, performing and media arts).

By September 2000 the majority (58%) of schools on the specialist school programme had technology college status (Figure 4). This was in comparison to language colleges (19%), sports colleges (12%) and arts colleges (11%). It can be seen that the recent pattern of specialisms that schools have is largely a product of the earlier introduction of first technology college status, followed by language college status, and then arts and sports college status. However, in 2000 technology colleges still accounted for the greatest share of new specialist schools (Figure 5). Meanwhile, the other forms of specialisms were being introduced at an equal rate.

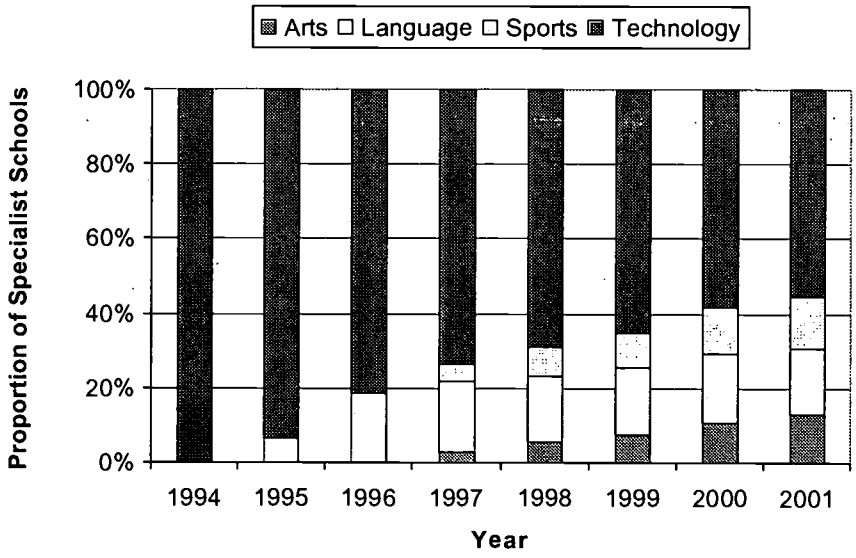


**Figure 4. Composition of specialist schools, by form of specialism and by year: England 1994-2001**

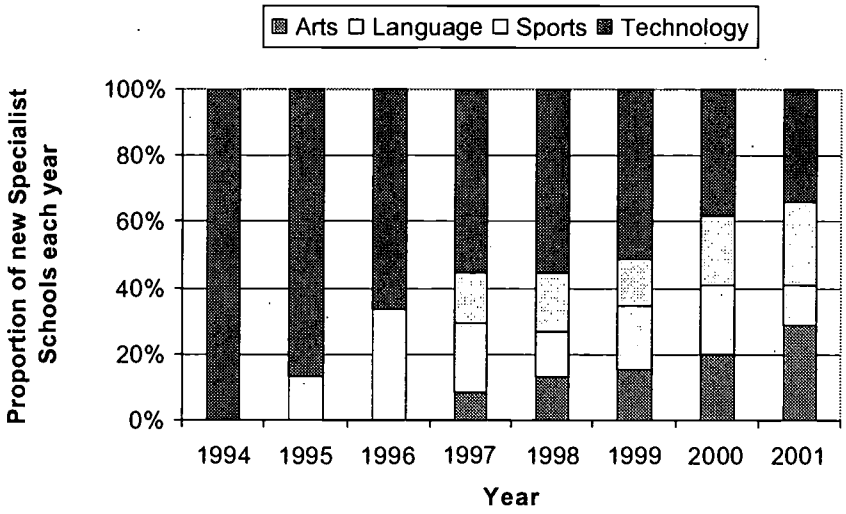


**Figure 5. Start-up of new specialist schools, by form of specialism and by year: England 1994-2001**

A significant association between the types of schools on the programme and their chosen specialism has also emerged. Figure 6 illustrates the forms of specialism by school type as at September 2000. Each form of specialism is somewhat more likely to be adopted by the different types of school. For example, technology specialisms account for an above average proportion of foundation schools, whereas sports specialisms account for an above average proportion of voluntary controlled schools. Similar associations can be seen for the other two types of schools – voluntary aided schools with language specialisms and community schools with arts specialisms.

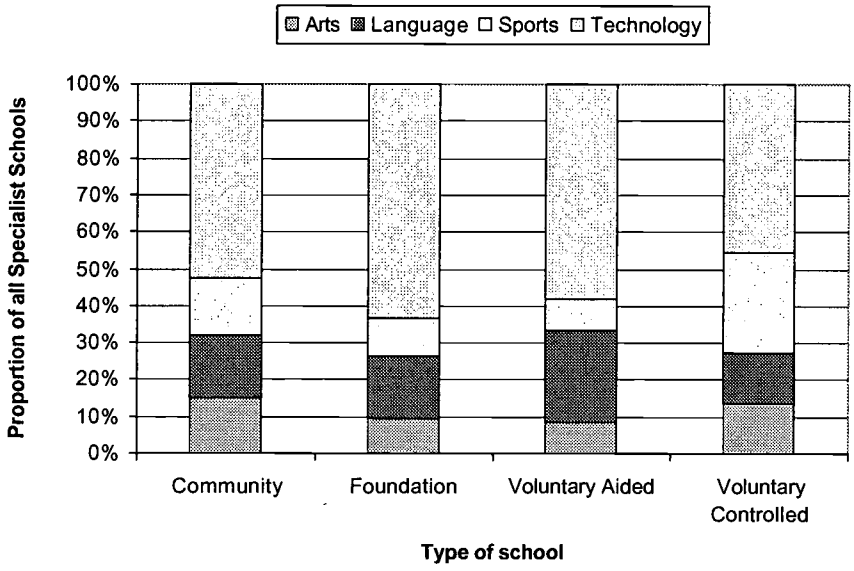


**Figure 6. Chosen specialisms of different types of schools: England September 2000**

## The geography of the specialist schools programme

One of the potential criticisms of the specialist school programme is that school membership may not be representative of all schools. In particular they may tend to be under-represented in socially disadvantaged areas. To examine the geography of the specialist school programme we will focus on Local Education Authorities (LEAs).

By March 2001 there were still 14 LEAs in England that did not have any schools on the programme. This contrasts with Wandsworth where more than half of the schools were on the programme, encompassing 64% of the secondary school age population. Similar proportions can be found in Hackney, West Berkshire and North Somerset. In Birmingham there are a total of 21

secondary schools on the programme, the highest in England. This is closely followed by 18 in another large LEA, Essex.

Generally it is urban LEAs that have the highest proportion of schools on the programme. But there are a number of key exceptions to this, including Cornwall (35% of schools), Durham (33% of schools), and Gloucestershire (29% of schools).

However, at an aggregated level this regional imbalance does not necessarily serve the critics' assertion that specialist schools will tend to be located in relatively advantaged areas. Figure 7 illustrates the relationship between the proportion of schools on the programme and the DfEE's Additional Educational Needs Index, which measures levels of social and educational disadvantage, for every LEA in England.

So why is there a regional imbalance in the incidence of specialist schools? The answer to this question may offer evidence as to whether there is a two-tier education system emerging. One answer may relate to the regional imbalance in innovation and policy take-up. For example, from the figures it is evident that foundation, formally grant-maintained, and voluntary aided schools were the first schools to gain specialist school status (Figure 8). It was not really until 1999 that community schools were entering the programme in similar numbers, but still less proportionally. Indeed, as already discussed, foundation schools still tend to be significantly over-represented on the programme. Consequently, it could be argued that the tendency to be innovative or to take-up new policy initiatives, which itself may relate to the incidence of foundation schools, may follow particular schools and particular LEAs - that appear to be keen to extend diversity of schooling.

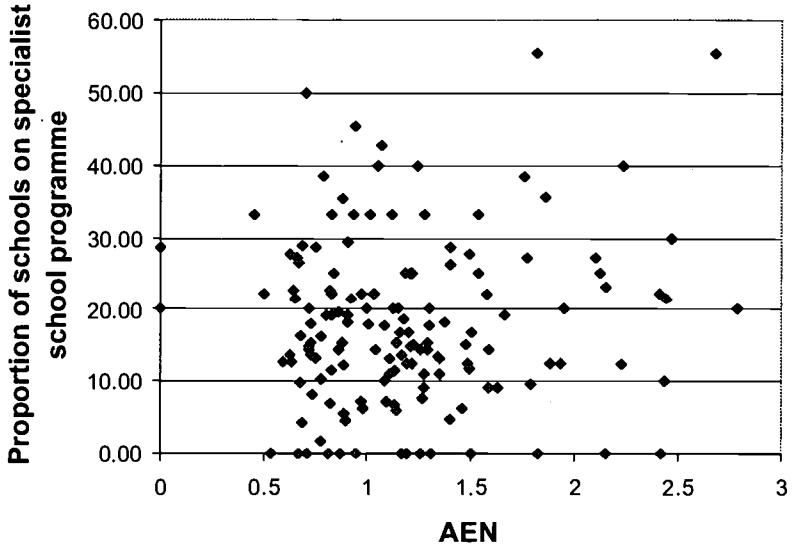


**Figure 7. Relationship between levels of social and educational disadvantage and incidence of specialist school programme: England March 2001**

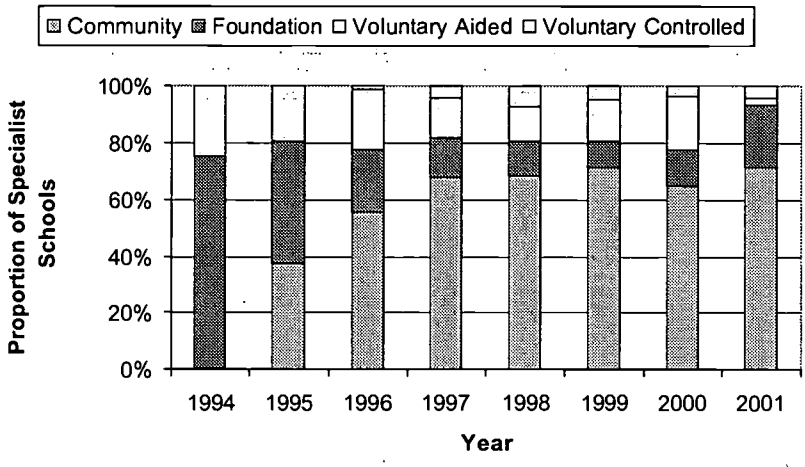


**Figure 8. Year of initiation and type of school, by year: England 1994-2001**

**Socio-economic segregation between schools**

29% of secondary schools in England became more 'privileged' in their intake between 1994/95 to 1999/00. In this instance, more 'privileged' means that these schools had less than their local 'fair share' of children from families in poverty, as measured by their entitlement to free school meals, **and** that this proportion, over time, declined further. It is, in essence, these 29% that are driving the move towards greater overall segregation in the system since 1997 – although there are, as ever, regional variations in this from 24% in the North West to 35.4% in the Eastern economic region. This trend towards segregation is considerably worse in grammar (69%) and upper-age 14-18 comprehensive (66.7%) schools than among secondary-modern (16.9%) or 11-16 comprehensive (16.1%) schools for example. It is also worse among specialist schools (37.2%), particularly those for languages (42.9%), and foundation (42.6%), and voluntary-aided CE (56.8%) specialist schools. The latter is particularly interesting showing that, however neutral the school admissions policies are except with respect to religion, religious schools are attracting or 'selecting' an increasingly privileged intake and this has implications for the current (at time of writing) proposal to expand this sector as well.

While the pattern is complicated by age-range, gender mix, and local authority, it is the case that those schools taking an increasingly privileged intake tend to be specialist, or selective, or their own admission authorities (e.g. GM or VA). Where more than one of these is the case the tendency is significantly enhanced. While 16.5% of the total school intake was eligible for free school meals in 2000, in specialist schools this was only 14.4%. However, this overall figure hides the variation within the specialist school programme. Specialist schools for sport and arts have similar compositions to all schools, and the difference lies in the

technology and especially the language schools (10.2% FSM). There is also variation by *type* with community specialist schools being more similar in composition to their non-specialist counterparts, while all other school types are more privileged, especially voluntary-aided catholic specialist schools (only 7.1% FSM) and selective schools (2.1%). This raises the question of whether it is the specialism, the prior school type, or the interaction between the two that is driving the segregation?

**Specialist schools and admissions**

The relationship between school diversity on between-school segregation has highlighted the difficulty in being able to distinguish between the potential and competing causes of changes to school compositions. This is particularly evident in the specialist school programme as there are many different elements to such schools that make it difficult to generalise from the whole specialist school population. To recall, there are different forms of specialisms, different types of schools on the programme, different admission policies, different lengths of time on the programme, and some schools allocate places based on selection by aptitude. Because of these complexities the following discussion examining the impact of specialist school status on admissions focuses on more detailed case studies of 11 English LEAs and their respective schools (28 in total).

Of these 28 schools ten had increasingly privileged intakes over time, as determined by their segregation ratios. Only five schools increased the relative proportion of children eligible for free school meals between 1994, the first year of the programme, and 2000. The intakes of two of these were still under-

represented with such children relative to other schools in their particular LEAs. The remaining thirteen schools saw no significant change to the composition of their school intakes, although 'no change' includes having maintained an already privileged intake.

The most notable feature of the ten polarising schools was that these were all their own admission authority, i.e. they had autonomy in their admissions arrangements from their respective LEA. This meant that they were able to apply their own oversubscription criteria, and in the order they preferred. The relationship between the autonomy in admissions and their specialist school status can impact on their intake in two stages. First, since specialist school status increases the popularity of a school (West et al. 2000) these schools are simply more likely to apply their oversubscription criteria, whatever these are, than other schools. And second, their oversubscription criteria could be applied to ensure they get the most able and consequently the most socially 'advantaged' children. The three most-used criteria were: selection by aptitude; interviews for religious affiliation; and the use of the family rule.

Few specialist schools report using selection by aptitude in their admissions (West et al. 2000). Of our 28 schools only four selected a proportion (10% in all cases) of their intakes based on aptitude in the relevant specialist subject. Three of these were VA (religious) schools and, consequently, also required parents to show their religious affiliation. One of these schools distinguished admission places allocated by selection and admission places allocated on religious grounds. However, the 'selective' places would only be allocated from those that applied, typically those that would have traditionally sought a place at this school. In the other two VA schools, both Roman Catholic schools, 10% of places were reserved for children that could prove their aptitude in the specialism

**and** whose parents proved their commitment to the Roman Catholic faith. This could be seen as 'selection within selection', almost guaranteeing that these schools admit the most academically able children.

It is perhaps not surprising therefore that the selective specialist schools, including the selective foundation school, have admitted an increasingly socio-economically 'advantaged' set of children (Figure 9). This indicates that these schools over time became increasingly under-represented with children eligible for free school meals, relative to other schools in their LEA.

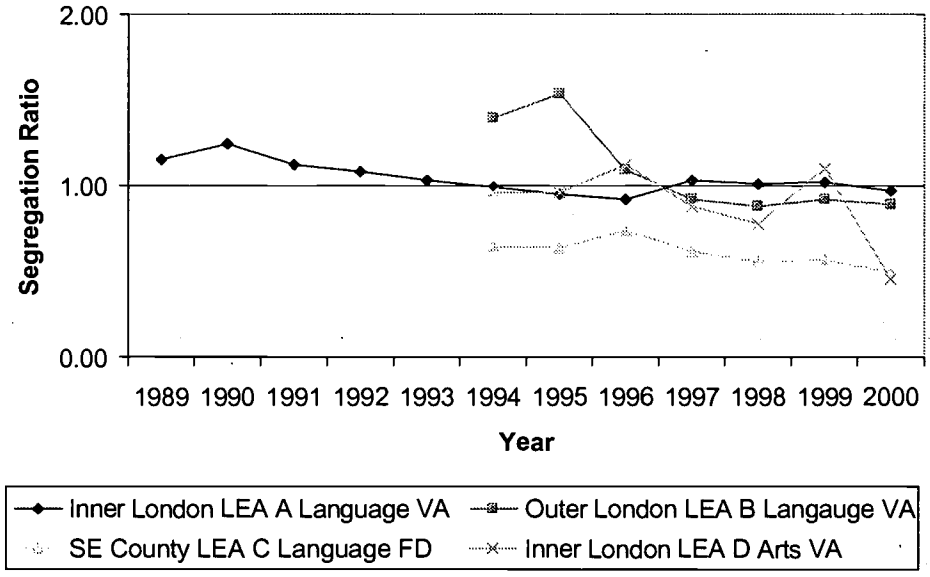


**Figure 9. Selective specialist schools – change in composition of school intakes**

Of the remaining 24 specialist schools in the detailed sample, another six had significant falls in their segregation ratios, again indicating that they became increasingly segregated, from other schools in their LEA, with more socially 'advantaged' children (Figure 10). Even though none of these schools applied

the selection by aptitude criteria in allocating places they still had autonomy in their admission arrangements. Typically they required parents to show their commitment to a religious faith (see above) or applied oversubscription criteria, such as the family rule, to provide 'selection by proxy', i.e. where parents are more likely to be given a place because of allocative procedures applied before the programme was instigated and before the 1998 Schools Standards and Framework Act attempted to make oversubscription criteria more fair and transparent.

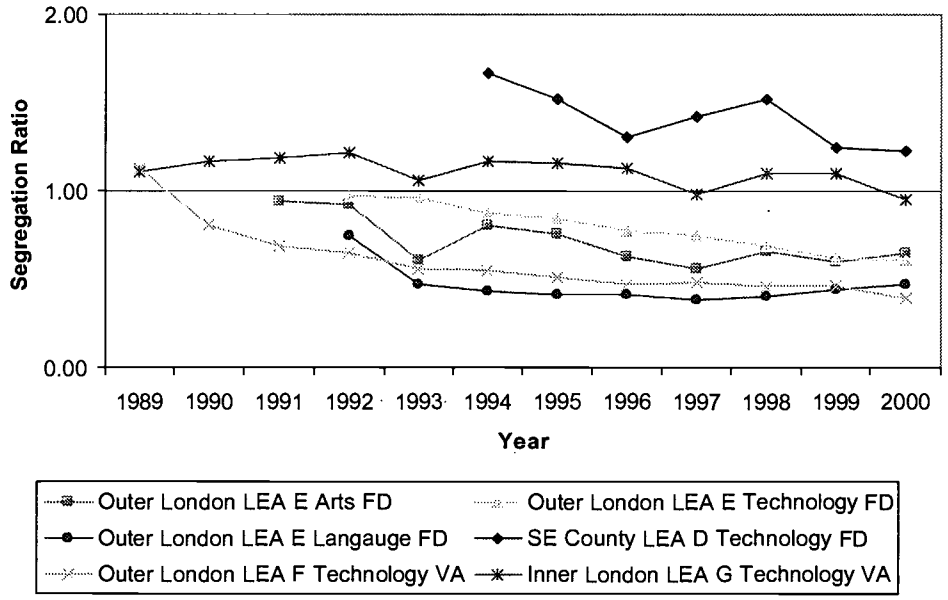


**Figure 10. Non-selective specialist schools – increasingly socio-economically advantaged intakes**

In one LEA (Outer London LEA E) for example, all three specialist schools there have always had less than their fair share - around half - of local poor students. And, since becoming specialist schools these have seen their share fall further. Thus, although not selective at all, these three ex-grammar foundation

schools were managing to recruit an increasingly privileged intake, and were therefore more likely to be successful in examination terms and so gain further in market appeal. One reason for this may be the family rule, whereby priority is given to those whose family members had previously attended or worked at the school. Another may be glimpsed in the views of the admissions officer in the LEA:

> I think we've got two at the moment. One's a language college and therefore highly sought after because if you're doing languages you're going to be bright and if you're bright it's going to be a good school, and if it's a good school you're going to go there. There is another one... but I think they're looking at that way to increase the ability levels of their intake, although of course it's only allowed to be a small percentage. But the knock-on effects.

However, in the sample there were three other specialist schools who had autonomy for their admissions yet did not show any indication of having more socially 'advantaged' intakes over time. Indeed these three schools took more children eligible for free school meals over time, relative to other schools in their LEA (Figure 11). Their stories may explain this apparent contradiction. First, the two specialist schools in Outer London LEA B typically have unfilled places each year (Fitz et al, 2001). In other words these schools would appear to be unpopular, even given their new status. Consequently these schools have not generally over the period been in a position to employ their own oversubscription criteria, irrespective of whether they have the particular criteria that would cream-skim their applicants. The third school is located in a south-east LEA H, and, uniquely it could be said for foundation schools, uses the same oversubscription criteria promoted by the LEA in all other schools. Hence

this school, it could be argued, is in no 'better' position to cream-skim its applicants than any other school. In addition the particular oversubscription criteria used in this LEA is 'designated areas'. As long as the applicant lives in the designated area of a school they are almost guaranteed[1] a place in that school.

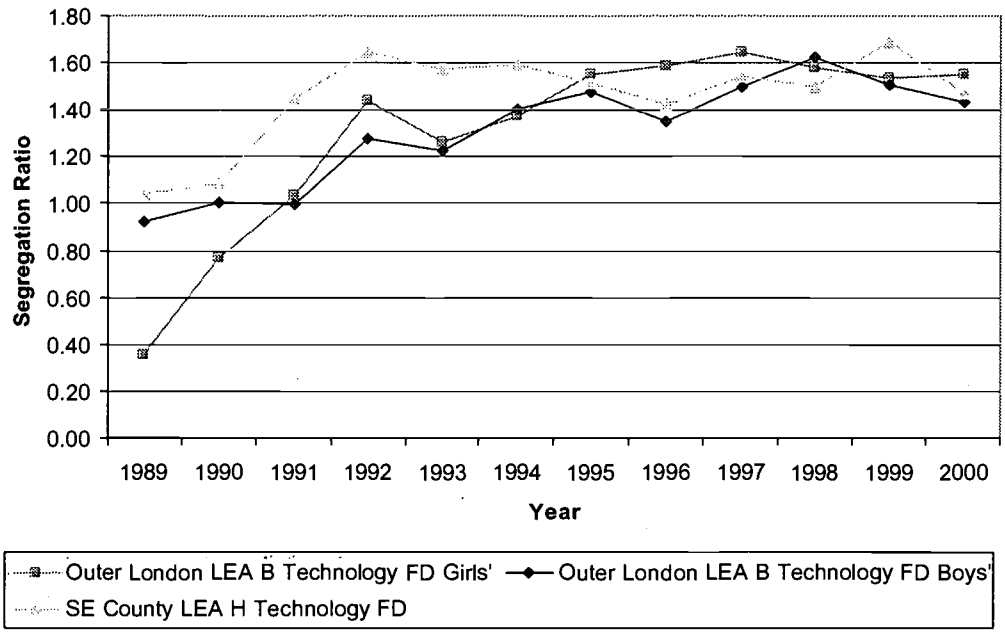


**Figure 11. Non-selective specialist schools with autonomy for admissions – increasingly socio-economically advantaged intakes**

This discussion has tended to focus on foundation or VA specialist schools. However, this has been purely coincidental, as these are the schools whose intakes have changed significantly over time. These types of schools are more likely to use selection by aptitude in their admissions, or have benefited via their oversubscription criteria from the potential increase in popularity arising from

their new status. Where there have been exceptions to this the unique situations of such schools has helped explain their non-conformity.

## Conclusion

Our first conclusion would have to be that it is difficult to assess the likely drawbacks and advantages of increasing the proportion of specialist schools in England. For, in addition to the standard difficulties of establishing a causal model, we face a very large number of confounds. The definition of specialism has changed over time, and the current definition is so recent that appropriate longitudinal data is scarce and volatile. The prior and continuing nature of each school - whether VA, GM, selective, modern, or community - may alter the impact of specialisation. The local method of, and changes to, allocating places at schools, the possibilities for travel, differential funding, and the actual subject specialism of the school are additional inter-weaving influences. The analytical importance of place, time, proportion, and hierarchies of implementation that we have encountered elsewhere in our study are confirmed.

Our second conclusion would therefore be that simple pronouncements about the relative cost:benefits of specialist schools, not based on such analytical complexity, are unlikely to be of much value (except perhaps politically).

Notwithstanding these comments, our study has suggested that schools that are selective, or are their own admissions authorities, or are specialist tend to increase the socio-economic segregation of school intakes (or retain higher levels in an era when segregation is decreasing more generally). When schools have

two or more of these characteristics together - foundation specialist or selective specialist for example - this tendency is far stronger.

In terms of social equity concern must be raised that the Specialist school programme can potentially help schools who have autonomy in their admissions further enhance their ability to attract the most able and socially advantaged children. This can be achieved in a number of ways. First the specialist school programme allows schools to select their intakes in three ways: selection by aptitude; 'selection within selection'; and 'selection by proxy'. Second, this is followed by evidence that some *forms* of specialism are more likely to select pupils with general academic ability than others. And third, if there is a relationship between popularity and the programme it is these schools that will benefit the most. Worse of all, perhaps, the overriding cause of this cream-skimming is not due to the specialist school programme but the autonomy given to some schools in arranging and administering their admissions. This is far removed from Hargreaves' (1996a) notion of diversity that retains the anti-selective comprehensive principle.

Clearly the accounts of specialist schools and colleges with superior facilities, 'magic' white boards in every room, higher salaries, four-day working weeks for staff, home-grown curricula etc. are impressive, and worthy of emulation and improvement. To achieve this for *all* schools it would be necessary, although not necessarily sufficient, for taxpayers (and perhaps other 'investors') to approve increased *per capita* resources across the board, and for a revision of existing legislation to release schools from government and local government control of their curriculum and day-to-day activities. Simply allowing more schools to become specialist, and perhaps allocate a proportion of their places to students on the basis of that specialism, cannot bring such changes about.

Rather, specialisation could lead to several clear disadvantages without any obvious compensation for most families. Many governors and school managers support this position (although on what evidence-base is unclear), seeing specialist schools as divisive and 'likely to increase the gap between advantaged and disadvantaged areas' (Thornton 2001). Policy-makers need to weigh up the purported advantages of specialist schools – in urban areas with preferential funding – against the potential disadvantages in terms of equity.

## Notes

1. The LEA is very active in monitoring the number of children living in each 'designated area', ensuring that there are always enough places for the 'local' children as well as having as many places as possible left over for parents who wish make alternative provision.


## Acknowledgements

The results reported here are part of a study, with our colleague John Fitz, of the impact of market forces in public policy, funded by the ESRC (grant number R000238031). The project website is at <http://www.cf.ac.uk/socsi/markets/>.

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