School Choice – is it informed? An exploration of the factors that contribute to parental choice at KS2 to KS3 transition.

Introduction.

The social and economic implications of globalisation are being felt by communities and individuals. In the United Kingdom recent evidence appeared to indicate that children and young people are aware of these implications (Blair, 2006). The belief that social and economic well being is generated through a competitive market economy has several significant consequences for the education system of England and Wales. Firstly, young people and their parents[1] are alert to the importance of success in assessment and testing. Indeed it can be alleged (Seldon, 2007) that this has increased levels of anxiety for the pupils themselves and their teachers. Secondly, central government has, for nearly two decades, sought to encourage diversity of provision in the education sector and, in some circumstances, an outright sense of competition between providers. These two elements operate as constants in the education system but it can be argued that the transition from Key Stage Two to Key Stage Three provision represents a point at which the issues are particularly apparent.

Since the 1988 Education Reform Act parents and their children have been encouraged to consider themselves in a client or customer relationship with the education system in general and schools in particular. Supporters of greater diversity and choice have argued 'that greater use of market mechanisms not only helps to solve economic problems, but also contributes to the well-being of the population by allowing individuals greater freedom and control over their own lives.' (Walford, pp7). The transition between Key Stage Two and Three would appear to be a point at which that perception is particularly strong. The transition from the primary to the secondary phase can be the first significant act of choice since the selection of the primary school at Reception. It therefore replicates some elements of the consumer –

[1] The term parent is used throughout to encompass all forms of adult carer.

producer model through the presentation of secondary school selection as a market-orientated environment in which the balance of power rests with the consumer as producers compete to demonstrate their attractive qualities (Cowley, 2003). The mechanisms of choice have therefore been a matter of considerable interest since the 1988 Act (Munn, 1993; Downes, 1994). Striking a balance between the autonomy of schools and the perceived rights of parents to make a choice has in recent years, generated debate regarding issues such as the role of faith-based provision (Brettingham, 2007). The consequences of different mechanisms of choice have also divided communities (Garner, 2007). However, significantly less attention has been given to the rationale for choosing. In guidance provided by central government, 'Choosing a secondary school' (DfES, 2005), parents are encouraged to ask five questions related to the needs of their child. These are: what school does your child prefer; where are their friends going; does your child need special attention; is there one subject your child is best at; and how will your child get to school safely? These questions occupy one column of a four page leaflet. The relationship between these prompting questions and the 'Practical Tips' about finding data, as well as the factual information about the different types of school is not established. It would appear that there is a perceived need for conscious awareness of the market mechanism that promotes choice whereas the rationale for making the selection is left as an individual matter.

The implications of not exploring the rationale for choice, focussing instead on the mechanisms of choice, are potentially significant for the education system as a whole and schools in particular. The popularity of a school will have a direct impact on its level of funding. If the understanding of why parents and children have selected a particular school is incorrect the school may be squandering money in marketing itself inappropriately. The same misconceptions may also result in different levels of parental engagement with the school, and the consequent implications that has on well supported teaching and learning. Why a school is or is not selected at this point of transition needs to be explored because of the social and economic

consequences of failing institutions and disengaged young people in the 11 to 19 sector.

Context.

The 1988 Education Reform Act (ERA) initiated the conceptualisation of state education as a market in which market forces would act as drivers of refinement and improvement. This process has continued to the present day and seems to reflect an underlying cross-party consensus.

> 'Their [socialists] wish to end parental choice in where and how their children shall be educated, in spending their money on better education and health for their children instead of on a new car, leisure, pleasure, is all part of the attempt to diminish self and self-discipline and real freedoms in favour of the state, ruled by socialists, the new class, as one disillusioned communist leader called them.' Rt. Hon. Sir Keith Joseph (Birmingham, 19th October, 1974)

While the language of the market place may work well in the field of political rhetoric it sits less comfortably as an accurate description of the education system as it has developed since ERA. Even supporters of the free market ethics in education (Tooley, 2000) prefer to consider the current state of affairs a choice mechanism, rather than a market in the classic sense. Defining the range of differences between those two concepts can be complex but broadly speaking they fall in to four areas (Walford, 1996). Firstly, if one regards the parent and child as consumer and school as producer in the state education system, it is clear that money is not changing hands between producer and consumer. Secondly, the quality and quantity of potential producers is tightly regulated through a legislative framework and inspection process. While it might be argued that no commercial or industrial market operates without regulation but it should be noted that the system of regulation as it applies to education allows schools that are publicly defined as failing to continue to operate, whereas a business is usually eliminated from the market under such conditions. Thirdly, schools as the producers are not necessarily orientated towards the maximisation of profit. Of the four

distinctions this may well be the one that some within the education profession feel to be the least valid in the current climate. Lastly, it is difficult to consider both parents and children as consumers and so we may need to regard parents as purchasers within the education choice mechanism and children as the consumers.

Regardless of the distinctions it is clear that some form of choice mechanism is in operation in the education system of England and Wales, and that the selection of a secondary school (usually at the end of Key Stage Two) is central to the exercise of that choice. Unlike the choice of initial primary school, the selection of the secondary school is a point at which the child is a conscious participant and that the decision that will conclude with consequences in the form of public examinations. Since the 1988 Act both Conservative and Labour governments have sought to extent the notion of choice by expanding the range of available secondary school provision. ERA enabled schools to take on greater autonomy in the form of grant-maintained status. The assisted places scheme could be presented as a means of introducing private education as a viable choice for parents. Academies, City Technology Colleges, support for the creation of additional faith-based schools and the adoption of specialist status by secondary schools can all be understood as a diversification of, and a means of encouraging distinctiveness in, that provision.

This high public profile has resulted in significant emphasis being placed on the selection of secondary school provision. However, the focus has remained on the mechanisms of choice, rather than the rationale for choice.

In attempting to begin an assessment of the rationale for choice it seemed appropriate to begin with an institution where the Key Stage 3 intake appeared to be present through positive selection, rather than an institution that might be regarded less favourably. If over-subscription can be taken as an indicator of positive selection St Richard's Catholic College in Bexhill-on-Sea meets the requirement. In the 2005 to 2006 academic year over 281 applications were made for a Year Seven cohort (September 2006) of 180.

The college is a voluntary aided, 11 to 16 comprehensive. The pupil population in September 2006 stood at 980. The pupil population is drawn from a wide geographical catchment area extending from Rye in the East, to Seaford in the West and Hailsham in the North. The majority of the pupils are drawn from three conurbations: Bexhill-on-Sea, Eastbourne, and Hastings/St Leonards. The college does not select on the basis of ability but, as a voluntary aided institution, the admissions criteria favour firstly Roman Catholics and then other Christian denominations ahead of those applicants of other or no faith. In the 2006 to 2007 academic year the pupil population was predominantly composed of Roman Catholics and other Christian denominations although the proportions vary from year group to year group.

The popularity of St Richard's as a voluntary aided school is not unusual. As Johnson (1990) notes 'voluntary aided schools in particular may find themselves 'oversubscribed' even when the age cohort of pupils is not creating any general pressure for places' (pp52). However, the level of oversubscription indicated that those applying to the College were doing so as a positive choice, rather than as the least-worst option.

Methodology.

In researching the issues surrounding parental choice several issues became apparent as requiring consideration. These issues can be summarised under three headings (Oppenheim, 1978). Firstly, how is the data to be collected? Secondly, how are the respondents to be approached? Thirdly, how is the survey to be constructed? Each of these was resolved in a process of negotiation (Delamont, 1992) and adaptation to the context.

The data collection method selected for this first stage of the research was a survey. A survey appeared to offer a method that could be employed across an entire cohort while being time and resource efficient. Access to the entire cohort for data collection through a survey presented issues with advantages and disadvantages. Direct distribution through the postal system guaranteed the survey arriving on the doorstep but to achieve this, the college would need

to disclose information without the prior consent of the recipients. Distribution via the pupils obviated the need for disclosure but created the risk that a proportion of the surveys would simply not be successfully transmitted from school to home and then back again. This may be a factor in drawing conclusions from the data gathered. Would a particular agenda make a response more or less likely? It was difficult to distinguish what manner of issue would have an impact on responses from particular parents. However, relying on the pupils to deliver and then return the survey may well have had an adverse impact on the number of responses.

As a self-administered activity a survey offered the possibility of a good rate of response and therefore, potentially a representative sample from which to work. The survey was distributed and, out of a potential 205 responses, 33 were returned (16%). As a self-selecting sample this can be presented as an acceptable (Cohen et al, 2001) total. However, despite the apparently random nature of the potential responses the representative qualities of the sample are open to question. While it can be asserted that there was no element of researcher-bias in the representative value of the responses as this was a non-probability method of distribution, the choice to respond may have been driven by an undisclosed factor that could have made the sample unrepresentative. For example only those parents with the most engaged commitment to faith-based education may have decided to respond. This may be borne out by the higher proportion of category one and two admission choices who responded, although they do represent the largest proportion of the sample population too.

At this first stage of the research a survey was employed to acquire raw data regarding the reasons for application to the college. As Oppenheim (1978) observed ‘Surveys can not usually show a causal connection; all that they can do is indicate connections or correlates, and so we must be careful in our interpretation of results.’ (pp6). It was the intention of this first stage of the research to gather data and correlate it against the available existing literature and research regard the rationale for choice in school selection. This could

then act as a platform for limited extrapolation which might inform the next stage of the investigation.

The survey was constructed in a closed question format. Given that the object was simply to draw initial impressions regarding the reasons for parental preference it seemed appropriate to present a range of factors and acknowledge that the understanding of the terminology employed may encompass a considerable range of differences. In selecting the range of factors to present in the survey previous similar exercises in the United Kingdom and the United States provided guidance.

Jowett's (1995) consideration of parental preference based much of the analysis in a widespread Local Education Authority (LEA) based survey conducted by NfER. The survey was conducted across ten LEAs and received nine hundred and ninety responses from parents. The identified factors in that survey were: caring environment, good learning facilities, good local reputation, strong discipline policy, support for children with special needs, range of extra-curricular activities and school uniform. Elliott's (1982) examination of parental preference indicated that the following factors might be appropriate to include in the survey: proximity, views of the child, academic record, behaviour, reputation, recommendation, faith, single-sex or co-educational provision and discipline. H. Lankford and J. Wyckoff, cited by Cohn (1997), developed a study based in New York State that considered academic standards, values and religion, discipline, teachers and finance as factors influencing parental choice (in this case specifically of Catholic schools). This correlation between previous studies began to illustrate the core issues that should appear in the survey and offered the potential for the correlation of results.

Accordingly the survey offered a range of eighteen choice factors. These were as follows: brother or sister attends; friends of the Year Six child attend or will attend; reputation; location; preference of the Year Six child, church-aided school; non-fee paying school; standard of uniform; academic results; standards of behaviour; buildings/facilities; extra-curricular activities; pastoral

care; subjects in the curriculum; and the recommendation of a range of agencies (family members, primary school teacher, minister or priest and friends or colleagues). None of the factors were presented with words that might emotionally load the context of the factor (Oppenheim, 1978), such as 'strong discipline' or 'high standard of uniform'.

In order to begin to develop some conclusions from the responses two cross-referencing elements were introduced to the survey. Firstly, the survey presented the criteria for admission to the college and asked the parent to identify which category applied in their case. This was done by thirty of the respondents, with three additional responses not indicating the category of admission. Secondly, the responses were offered on a numerical scale from 1 (not important) to 6 (very important), with an additional option of 'not applicable'. The use of an attitudinal scale suggested the relative emphasis of the variety of factors but it can not exclude the range of interpretations that may be found for the factors themselves and the personal definitions of relative importance.

Findings.

Although common themes did emerge from the data there were distinctions to be drawn between the different admissions criteria based groups. The small numbers of respondents in each category make it difficult to achieve secure conclusions but they are worth noting and may deserve closer consideration in a later stage of the research. Breaking the cohort in to admissions criteria based groups resulted in no available data for category four or category six parents. Three of the responses did not disclose the admissions category. The two categories that provided the largest number of responses (eight in each) were category one and two. These two groups also represent the largest proportion of admitted children in the year group. Category five parents formed the third largest response, with six returns. This is a disproportionate number in relation to the percentage of child admitted from category five. Categories three and seven each produced four responses.

For all except the responses where no category was identified reputation formed one of the most significant factors in determining the choice of school. For these respondents reputation was ranked as six (very important) on the scale in the overwhelming majority of cases. It may be that this finds an echo in Jowett's (1995) assertion that popularity in itself can have an attraction, and unpopularity can act as repulsion, 'nobody likes choosing a school that is considered unsatisfactory by one's friends.' (pp58). Or it may be that reputation acts as a code for other issues. Presumably in this case reputation was taken to mean good reputation, in which case the question is raised about how that is defined. Is it a conscious assessment or does it represent an individual or collective intuition?

Also scoring highly in the very important (6) ranking were non-fee paying school, standard of behaviour, academic results and pastoral care. What makes these four factors particularly interesting is that they do not include church-aided school. While none of the responses from those who identified their admission criteria group placed church-aided school in the bottom two points of the scale, the degree of positive influence exerted by this factor appeared to be mixed. In categories one, two, three and seven only one of the responses in each group prioritised this factor as very important (6). This rose to two level six responses in category five and the group where no admission criteria category was identified, although the latter also included one response on this factor that placed it at number one (not important) on the scale. This appears to run counter to a study by the Central Advisory Council (1967, vol.2, app.3, para. 3.8) cited by Johnson (1990) of 3000 parents that placed religious reasons as the second highest factor in the selection of a school. Data employed by Lankford and Wyckoff (Cohen, 1997), drawn from the US Department of Education (Office of Educational Research and Improvement) indicated that, in the selection of a Catholic school values and religion were significant for 29.9% of the parents. If one selects the top two places in the number scale (5 and 6) for the survey of St Richard's as representing 'important' the percentage results demonstrate that the responses are possibly more influenced by this factor than examining the 'very important' ranking alone suggests, with church-aided school achieving

25% in category one and three, 75 % in category two, 17% in category five, 50% in category seven and 67% in the group where no admissions criteria was identified, giving an overall result of 43%. This appears to support the assertion by Lankford and Wyckoff (ibid) of the importance of a values orientation to parents who select faith-based schooling.

The four factors (non-fee paying school, standard of behaviour, academic results and pastoral care) that ranked beneath reputation as influences of choice all represented a 'very important' (6) ranking being given in over 50% of the responses to that factor. The responses were also largely consistent across the cohort in assigning all four factors a similar degree of significance. The only noteworthy exception to this was that the admission category one responses gave slightly less emphasis to the factor of pastoral care, with 25% at six on the scale and 38% at five, whereas the average was 52% at six on the scale across the remaining groups.

The LEA based study cited by Jowett (1995) indicated that 90% of parents would take the child's preference in to account and that 62% parents agreed that attending the same school as friends was important. The responses from the survey indicated a much more mixed assessment for the factor of friendship. On average the cohort assigned 50% of the responses to this factor between the scale of one to three. Of the responses that were outside of one to three on the scale no pattern emerged for the cohort. In the admission criteria seven responses all indicated that this factor was not applicable, perhaps indicating children who were in a minority as not attending from a Catholic or other Christian denomination primary school. The preference of the child was usually assigned a priority of three or greater on the scale by the majority of responses across the cohort. Only three of the responses rated this factor as not important (1) on the scale, amounting to an indication that 90% of parents would at least take the child's preference in to account, in line with the cited study. 76% of the parents cited (Jowett, 1995) considered it to be 'advantageous that children from the same family should attend the same school.' (pp40), a sentiment that in combination with the

preference of the child, probably exerts a considerable influence over the eventual choice.

Of the remaining factors no pattern emerges across the cohort or within each admission criteria based group. In particular neither the subjects in the curriculum or the recommendation of various family members, friends or authority figures (such as priests and ministers) showed any clusters on the scaling. In itself this perhaps demonstrates the significance of the core five factors rather than the insignificance of the remaining ones. It would seem from the overall results that the survey, small-scale as it was, has a degree of congruence with earlier research that provides some security regarding the representative qualities of the results.

Conclusion and recommendations.

The results of the survey conducted at St Richard's Catholic College would seem to indicate that five core factors define the parental choice of secondary school. Those five have one chief factor, that of reputation. As a term reputation seems to be both blindingly obvious and totally obscure. Blindingly obvious because reputations do not spring in to being without pedigree, instead they are formed on the basis of historical and contemporary developments. Totally obscure because the term itself may be composed of elements that vary widely from one person to another, perhaps reflected in the following four most significant factors. It may well be that non-fee paying school, standards of behaviour, academic results and pastoral care are the components that together form the notion of reputation.

The survey bears out Oppenheim's assertion that most attitudinal scales

> 'will probably do quite an adequate descriptive job, as long as not too much precision is required of them, but the problems of predictive validity are a long way from being solved.' (pp152, 1978).

We can not be sure how the different factors are related to one another. If pushed to prioritise would academic results, for example, be given preference over the wishes of the child or the absence of friends in the new school?

Some studies (Ball et al, 1995) suggest this is the case but that choice is a culturally determined term, with working class parents being more inclined to give priority to the preference of the child than middle class parents. However, this might be considered to be an artificial exercise as the act of prioritisation implies that any one factor may be the determining one, when it could be that precisely the opposite is true and no one factor is the determining one.

The mechanism of choice in our current context places emphasis on those factors that can be quantified, especially examination results and attendance. In contrast the New Relationship with Schools has established an inspection framework where that quantifiable data is employed as a tool in the (more significant?) act of self-assessment, culminating in the Self-Evaluation Form (Part A) drawing on a qualitative understanding of the institution. How interesting then that the chief factors of parental choice appear to have long embodied that selfsame synthesis. For those developing policy in this field it would seem that the challenge is to determine how to best make qualitative and quantative data available in a manner that informs and facilitates choice.

In developing this research further the focus could be in three areas. To conduct the same survey in a different context and thereby throw up potential comparisons between a faith-based school and a secular one, or between an under-subscribed and over-subscribed school. This would still leave open the issue of how the terms employed in the survey are understood. It may be desirable then to focus on the terminology, seeking through open-ended interviews to draw out the components that compose notions such as reliability. This may offer the potential to explore the issues in depth although there is the attendant risk that 'parents may rationalize their decision in terms of the criteria they believe the researcher might want to hear' (Walford, pp57). Finally, a more pragmatic route may be to explore where this information is derived from and how schools can assist in making the act of choice as well informed as possible.

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