

# Juxtaposing some contradictory findings from *research on school choice*

Yuxtaponiendo algunos hallazgos contradictorios de investigaciones acerca de la elección escolar

Juxtaposant quelques trouvailles contradictoires de recherches autour du choix scolaire

Justapondo alguns descobrimentos contraditórios de pesquisas feitas sobre a escolha escolar

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ANTHONY KELLY

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHAMPTON, HIGHFIELD, ENGLAND  
a.kelly@soton.ac.uk

## Abstract

Research over the last twenty years on school choice and local markets in education has been contradictory or inconclusive: some supports the movement to give parents more freedom in choosing schools; other findings support the view that greater choice further disadvantages the already disadvantaged. Irrespective of philosophical position, it can be said that school choice is driven by political economy in that its benefits and shortcomings are as a consequence of engagement with political or socio-economic imperatives. This paper juxtaposes some findings from the UK, the US and Europe in a socio-political context and discusses their theoretical implications.

## Key words author

School choice.

## Key words plus

School choice, research, school choice, sociopolitic aspects.

## Transference to practice

This paper brings together international research on school choice and will enable policy makers and school leaders better to understand its benefits and disadvantages.

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**Palabras clave autor**

Elección escolar.

**Palabras clave descriptor**

Elección escolar, investigaciones, elección escolar, aspectos sociopolíticos.

**Resumen**

Las investigaciones durante los últimos veinte años acerca de la elección escolar y los mercados locales en educación han sido contradictorias o no han sido conclusivas: algunas apoyan la iniciativa de dar a los padres mayor libertad a la hora de elegir escuelas; otros resultados sostienen que la postura de que una mayor selección incrementa las desventajas en quienes ya son menos favorecidos. Sin tener en cuenta la posición filosófica, se puede decir que la elección escolar depende de la economía política en que sus beneficios y defectos son consecuencia del compromiso con los imperativos políticos o socio-económicos. Este texto yuxtapone algunos resultados del Reino Unido, Estados Unidos y Europa en un contexto socio-político y discute sus implicaciones teóricas.

**Transferencia a la práctica**

Este extracto reúne investigaciones internacionales sobre la elección escolar y permitirá a los políticos y líderes escolares comprender mejor sus beneficios y desventajas.

**Mots clés auteur**

Choix scolaire.

**Mots clés descripteur**

Choix scolaire, recherches, choix scolaire, aspects sociaux politiques

**Résumé**

Les recherches des 20 dernières années autour du choix scolaire et des marchés locaux d'éducation ont été contradictoires ou bien elles n'ont pas été concluantes: certaines appuient l'initiative de donner aux parents une plus grande liberté à l'heure de choisir une école; d'autres soutiennent la posture qu'un plus grand choix augmente les inconvénients des plus démunis. Sans tenir compte de la position philosophique, il est possible de dire que le choix scolaire dépend de l'économie politique, où bénéfiques et défauts sont la conséquence de l'engagement avec les impératifs politiques ou socio-économiques. Ce texte juxtapose quelques résultats du Royaume-Uni, des États-Unis et de l'Europe dans un contexte sociopolitique et met en discussion leurs implications théoriques.

**Transfert à la pratique**

Cet extrait compile des recherches internationales autour du choix scolaire et permettra aux politiciens et dirigeants scolaires de mieux comprendre leurs bénéfices et inconvénients.

**Palavras-chave autor**

Escolha escolar.

**Palavras-chave descritor**

Escolha escolar, pesquisa, escolha escolar, aspectos sociopolíticos.

**Resumo**

As pesquisas realizadas durante os últimos vinte anos sobre a escolha escolar e os mercados locais de educação tem sido contraditórias ou não chegaram a uma conclusão: algumas apóiam a iniciativa de dar aos pais mais liberdade na hora de escolher as escolas; outros resultados sustentam a postura de que uma seleção maior aumenta as desvantagens nos que já são menos favorecidos. Sem levar em conta a posição filosófica, pode-se dizer que a escolha escolar depende da economia política em que seus benefícios e defeitos são consequência do compromisso com os imperativos políticos ou socioeconômicos. Este texto justapõe alguns resultados do Reino Unido, dos Estados Unidos e da Europa em um contexto sócio-político e discute as suas implicações teóricas.

**Transferência à prática**

Este extrato reúne pesquisas internacionais sobre a escolha escolar e permitirá aos políticos e líderes escolares entender melhor seus benefícios e desvantagens.

## Introduction: neo-liberalism and the political debate

The facility for parents and pupils to choose their secondary schools free from government constraint is increasingly popular in a growing number of developed countries, though it has not been proved beyond doubt to raise pupil achievement (e.g. Glenn & de Groof, 2002; Holmes, DeSimone & Rupp, 2003; OECD, 1994). In the US, the growing number of Charter Schools being founded by parents- and in the UK, the growing number of Academies- is creating a pro-choice public school system *ipso facto* more responsive to parental demands. The neo-liberal view of education, underpinned by the desire of some parents to use their resources to benefit their own children, has contributed to this, though some studies have shown it may also lead to increased social segregation (e.g. Bagley, 1996; Goldhaber, 2000; Karsten, 1994; McArthur, Colopy & Schlaline, 1995). Competition between schools creates winners and losers, and 'aspirant' parents naturally seek out the former. Poor schools are shut down (which is the whole point!) and informed parents transfer their children to better schools, but perhaps at a cost to society's fabric so that choosing a school is something more than a pragmatic purchase. Some commentators (e.g. Ball, 1990; Bridges & McLaughlin, 1994; Bush, Coleman & Glover, 1993; Ranson, 1990) see this as a political struggle between social democratic liberalism and neo-liberalism, but it could just as easily be construed as a debate between the vested interests of those who work in education and those who depend on it to realise their social and material ambitions.

The claim by opponents of school choice that it harms the underprivileged and lays bear the fabric of society is not without dispute either. Those in favour of choice claim that it offers the best way of escaping poverty and generating opportunities for marginalised families, and creating better schools for everyone as a result of competition. Others argue that it provides working-class families only with enough education to perpetuate their 'domesticity and powerlessness', and promote a 'mindless acceptance of social inequities' (Fecho, 2001, p. 622). And treading a middle path is a phalanx of policy-makers and commentators who see pro-choice public school initiatives as a marriage of the best in state and private education. Their basic creed is that every child deserves an opportunity to access a quality education and the state has an obligation to support that aspiration even if it means going outside the traditional public system (Califano & Bennett, 2000), even if critics suggest that this places public schools under an intolerable and unsustainable burden (Ahonen, 2000).

In the US, choice programmes designed for low-income urban families are popular and demand exceeds supply (Bulkley, 2005; Geske, 2003; McElwee, 2005; Witte, 1999; Woodhead, 2002), but there are concerns among opponents that they threaten the legal separation of church and state (Barton, 1995; Scalia, 1989) and discourage diversity (Ravitch, 1992). In the UK, where the literature suggests that teachers are more opposed to school choice than is the case in the US (Hatcher, 1994), the legal basis for choice programmes is the 1988 Education Reform Act (and to a lesser extent, the 1980 Education Reform Act), which introduced school league tables and open enrolment in local catchments. It was hoped that bad schools would thereby close due to unpopularity (because funding was tied to enrolment) and good schools would grow in popularity (Whitty, Power & Halpin, 1998), but research (e.g. Conway, 1997; Hook, 1999; Levacic & Hardman, 1998; Reay, 1998) has found that, under the Act, families *already* advantaged were more likely to gain places at desirable schools than disadvantaged families, so that schools became more socially polar-

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### Article description | Descripción del artículo | Description de l'article | Artigo Descrição

The paper is based on a theoretical review of research.

ised because 'families with knowledge of the system' and 'the ability to transport children to non-adjacent schools' were 'more likely to look for places in popular schools' (Gorard, Taylor & Fitz, 2002, p. 368).

### **The emerging advantages and disadvantages of school choice**

It has been suggested that school choice is attractive to parents and pupils because it appeals to certain 'cherished desires' and cultural liberties: the primacy of the family; consumer expectation; and the cultural experience that suggests that choice and quality are intrinsically related (Jeynes, 2000, p. 232). However, any beneficial effect of introducing choice may be minimised by the fact that parents do not have complete information when choosing. Disadvantaged parents rarely have the right information at the right time to enable them to make the right choices (Edwards & Whitty, 1992; V. Lee, 1993; Martin & Burke, 1990; Wells, 1993; Willms & Echols, 1992). The literature also suggests that increased school choice may contribute to and reinforce social inequality (Bagley, 1996; Ball, Bowe & Gewirtz, 1996; Gillborn, 1997; Goldhaber & Eide, 2002; Tomlinson, 1997; Woods, 1996), though most research has concentrated on the selection of *pupils* rather than on the selection of *schools*. Nor is it axiomatic that introducing markets into education and turning parents from partners into customers is in the wider public interest (Bottery, 1994; Gewirtz, Ball & Bowe, 1995; Wringe, 1994) and opponents suggest that since social class and race largely determine access to and benefit from schooling (Gewirtz et al., 1995; Hardy & Vieler-Porter, 1990; Murphy, 1990), greater choice accentuates differences in attainment along socio-economic and racial lines (Lynch & Moran, 2006). The contrary view is that school choice can actually *reduce* social inequality (Moore & Davenport, 1989b): there is evidence from Germany and France suggesting that it is of greatest benefit to disadvantaged minority and working-class students (Glenn, 1989; Moynihan, 1989); and evidence from the US that African-American families favour school choice programmes more than white or other race families (Kirkpatrick, 1990) because school choice provides greater social and economic opportunity for disadvantaged groups (but see Gelber, 2008, on Boston's 'Magnet School' programme).

Of course, the *exercise* of choice is different from the *existence* of it. Research suggests that better-educated parents are more choice-exercising, irrespective of whether they are from lower or higher socio-economic groupings (Bosetti, 2004; Eccles & Davis-Kean, 2005). Since school choice is driven by the value placed in western economies on consumer freedom, rather

than by concerns for social equity or the needs of local communities, the onus has been put *on parents* proactively to lobby for choice and take responsibility for exercising it properly, which itself takes a certain amount of social and cultural capital. Yet policy-makers, rather than parents, are best placed financially and politically to see that the less fortunate in society have the means to acquire the socio-cultural capital necessary to enjoy the supposed benefits of choice.

There is some evidence that greater school choice is linked to gains in pupil attainment, but again the research is inconclusive (e.g. analysis by Gorard, 2009, on UK Academies). For example, a correlation has been found in the US between school choice and improvement in reading and numeracy scores (Powers & Cookson, 1999), but other small-scale choice programmes there do *not* show any significant gain, except (albeit importantly) for African-American students (Gill, Timpone, Ross & Brewer, 2001). So, while choice can reasonably be claimed to be effective in raising attainment for ethnic minority students, who typically need the most help and show the greatest improvement as a result (Jeynes, 2000), one needs to be cautious. Just as it is difficult for opponents of school choice to claim that choice *per se* increases social segregation, it is equally difficult for advocates of choice to claim that its introduction, especially when accompanied by other reforms, has a causal relationship with improvement.

### **Independent and faith schooling**

It has been suggested that school choice policies should involve independent schools in order to succeed (Chubb & Moe, 1990; Doerr & Menéndez, 1991), but policy makers are unsettled as to the extent to which choice programmes should express *selfish* as opposed to *societal* preferences. Richard Armey and William J. Jefferson (1991), for example, suggest that choice programmes that include independent schools may signal an end to quality public schooling and that state aid to private education will promote 'economic and racial stratification' (Jeynes, 2000, p. 233), but this is disputed by others who point out that greater choice involving independent schools carries with it the accompanying promise of better quality education because independent and faith schools generally outperform public schools (Coleman, Hoffer & Kilgore, 1982; Lee, Bryk & Holland, 1993). Supporters believe that choice forces the worst schools to close and improves the lot of all students (e.g. Chubb & Moe, 1992; Finch, 1989), which stance appears from the literature to unnerve academics and practitioners more than it does parents and pupils (Honig, 1993), though such a system would

be bound to benefit those who make choices and disadvantage those who do not (Glenn, 1989).

Unfortunately, in the US, the picture has been complicated by the fact that school choice has become a battleground for the wider struggle between religion and secularism in American society. This is the result of the widespread perception – at least partially justified – among religious-minded parents there that public schools are intolerant of religious expression (Barton, 1995; Case, 1996), although Geoffrey Walford (2008, p. 697) suggests that in the UK most religious-minded parents are satisfied for their faith ‘requirements’ to be met in secular schools. In many areas of the US, the choice for parents is often between fundamentalist independent religious schools and completely secular state schools whose values are akin to ‘those of the shopping mall’ (Brighouse, cited in Cush, 2005, p. 438). Religious-minded parents suggest that as a consequence, the values taught in public schools are not just *intolerant of religion*, but actively *anti-religious* (Doerr & Menéndez, 1991; Olasky, 1988; Spiro, 1988), a situation exacerbated by the fact that in response, parents committed to their religious beliefs have largely abandoned the public school system for independent or home schooling, leaving an irreligious remnant behind to justify the (now self-fulfilling) allegation of bias. In the UK, where faith schools have existed since the advent of state education in the Nineteenth Century and continue to enjoy government support (e.g. DfES, 2001), a similar trend towards secularisation is emerging (Gokulsing, 2006) and as a consequence, parents, teachers and students who remain in the state system tend to be less religiously committed than would otherwise be the case. In Canada, against the backdrop of a similarly secular society, Catholic schools have been in the vanguard of the school choice movement (A. Taylor, 2001) and in New Zealand, the church’s dual mission to ‘protect the faith’ while accommodating growing material aspirations and prosperity among its members was well served by its faith schools (Collins, 2005).

Of course, faith schools the term refers to schools with a religious character that exist *within the state sector* are not always chosen for religious reasons, as for example research from the Netherlands shows (Denessen, Driessena & Slegers, 2005). There, religion is an important factor in segregation within the educational system (Dronkers, 1995), particularly for Muslim and orthodox Protestant parents (Driessen & van der Slik, 2001; Denessen *et al.*, 2005). A similar situation is emerging in Canada where the commitment to secularism in schooling is strongly resisted by Muslim groups; for example, Somali immigrants in Toronto (Collet, 2007). In many countries, the faith schools issue goes to the heart of the debate about school

choice and the fundamental purpose of education (e.g. Meer, 2007). According to Denise Cush (2005, p. 436), it is ‘a debate that cuts across traditional clusters of allegiances’ though it is not so much a ‘debate’ as an ‘elephant in the room’. Faith schools, the literature suggests, give children a sense of their own identity and despite serving marginalised communities as part of their moral mission for example, Roman Catholic schools in England admit twice as many Black African and Afro-Caribbean children as non-faith schools (McElwee, 2005, p. 32) they achieve better academic results than secular schools (Garrod, 2003), though in countries like Denmark, the picture is complicated by factors like the clustering of special education students and the nature and extent of religious schools is a voucher-led private sector (Schindler-Rangvid, 2008). Opponents challenge the assertion that faith schools achieve better examination results when other variables are factored into the equation (Pring, 2005; Schagen, Davies, Rudd & Schagen, 2002). They maintain that faith schools are socially divisive and hinder racial equality (Gokulsing, 2006), that their admission policies are unfair (Garrod, 2003) and that they do not provide an education that allows pupils to understand their own beliefs while simultaneously preparing them to tolerate the pluralities of a society that depends for its existence on such an appreciation.

Notwithstanding these conflicting findings, what the literature *does* show is that parents who *actively choose* schools, faith or secular, are better educated and wealthier than those who *passively accept* them (Bosetti, 1998; Gewirtz *et al.*, 1995; Goldthorpe, 1996; Hatcher, 1998; Smrekar & Goldring, 1999; Whitty *et al.*, 1998), which leads some to the conclusion that introducing school choice *for everyone* is a way of counteracting the effect of wealth and privilege on educational outcomes and gives opportunity to low-income families who would not otherwise have it (Bosetti, 2004).

### **Contradictory findings on choice and pupil attainment**

There is some evidence, though not enough to be conclusive, to suggest that greater school choice results in an increase in pupil attainment (Meier, 1992; Peterson, Greene & Noyes, 1996; Witte & Thorne, 1996). Choice is coming to be regarded as a necessary, though not sufficient, condition for improvement in pupil attainment (Chubb & Moe, 1992; Meier, 1992; Tooley, 1993, 1994), though the effect (in the UK at least) of introducing conflicting initiatives simultaneously like greater curriculum uniformity and ever more diverse qualifications and schooling arrangements is unknown. Reports on their own attainment from

students involved in choice programmes are generally good, especially from students from disadvantaged backgrounds (Colopy & Tarr, 1994). It has been suggested that the frustration felt by many parents at the lack of real improvement in non-choice schools as a result of government reforms (Jeynes, 2000) reinforces this success. Affluent and better-educated parents are more selective about the schools they choose, especially when governments do not extend their choice programmes to include the independent sector or provide the necessary transport assistance to increase participation rates (Eccles & Davis-Kean, 2005; Gewirtz *et al.*, 1995), and this also generates resentment. However, the claimed increase in pupil attainment is not proven: some of the cities in the US that have implemented choice programmes in public schooling and which are held to be models of successful practice in the literature, like Minnesota and Massachusetts, have very low participation rates (Colopy & Tarr, 1994; Nathan & Ysseldyke, 1994) so care must be taken not to extrapolate too much from their outcomes. In fact, Sharon Gewirtz, Stephen J. Ball and Richard Bowe (1995) and others have suggested that empirical research on school choice and its effect on student attainment has been 'inadequate'. There have been generic difficulties in fairly selecting cohorts to supply the data (Bosetti, 2004; Jeynes, 2000; Schultz, 1993) and findings have been affected by the many and various factors that might account for differences: social class, ethnicity (Ball, 2003; Gewirtz, 2002), level of education of parents (Duckworth & Sabates, 2005), family income (Davis-Kean, 2005), parental involvement in learning, time spent in school-related activities, home values and beliefs about education (Bosetti, 2004), family circumstance (Chiu & Ho, 2006; Downey, 1994; Kiernan, 1992; Milne, Myers, Rosenthal & Ginsburg, 1986) and the uneven allocation of resources (Bodine, Fuller, González, Huerta, Naughton, Park & Teh, 2008). Yet there is some hard data from projects like the one in Alum Rock, California, and from the three States in the US with the largest number of Charter Schools (Michigan, Texas and Arizona) which suggests a positive correlation between choice and higher attainment (Hoxby, 1994, 1995; Kirkpatrick, 1990; Peltzman, 1992; Rapp, 2000), and suggesting that teachers in choice schemes work more diligently (Arrow, 1984) to reduce principal-agent problems.

### **The tensions of social class and the emerging calculus of risk**

Education policy in most developed countries emphasises the role of parents in school choice, but there are differences between socio-economic classes

in terms of access to choice and how they deploy their parental agency. The literature suggests that knowledge about (and attitude towards) 'expert' issues are important factors in parental engagement with school choice (Denessen *et al.*, 2005). High-achieving parents typically feel responsibility for their children's education and act knowledgeably on their concerns. They are unwilling to leave education solely to the school, and they manage educational risk and leave as little to chance as possible; for example, with 'shadow' tuition in Ireland (Smyth, 2009). Research suggests that parents who exercise choice are better educated and have better jobs (Willms & Echols, 1992), though some high-achieving parents 'maintain a distance between themselves and the schooling process' (Vincent, 2001, p. 350) because of their own lack of *educational* achievement. At the other extreme, low-achieving parents see home and school as separate entities. They have only superficial knowledge of the system and they manifest a reluctance to get involved with (and even visit) schools. This behaviour is typical of immigrant communities especially; they have high levels of dissatisfaction and rely solely on schools to educate their children while seething with mute anger at their children's lack of progress. Less educated parents and those who have 'worked their way up' give greater support to clear hierarchical systems and defer to 'professional autonomy' (Vincent, 2001, p. 350). They trust the hierarchies of expertise in schools more than high-achieving parents, who are ready and willing to act as advocates for their children. Although most families, whatever their social class, want to guard against their children moving down the social pecking order, what differentiates the professional classes from others is that they accept higher levels of risk (Hatcher, 1998). Working-class students can maintain their social positions simply by completing their compulsory schooling in public schools. Professional families, on the other hand, risk social demotion by trying and failing, and this risk to middle-class families is what makes them more favourable disposed to engage in school choice programmes. The literature suggests that if greater school choice is to be extended meaningfully to economically disadvantaged families, there must be greater financial incentives for good schools actively to recruit pupils from low-income families. Schemes such as the (now abolished) Targeted Individual Entitlement scheme in New Zealand, the (now abolished) Assisted Places Scheme in the UK, and Charter Schools in the US, were all designed to provide financial support for low-income pupils to gain admission to the top schools (Gaffney & Smith, 2001), even if some programmes, like the one in Alberta, Canada, benefited middle-class families more than others (Bosetti, 1998; O'Reilly & Bosetti, 2000; Taylor & Mackay, 2008). There may be a case for a new, more widespread use of voucher

schemes for low-income families, like those in operation in the US. There they are predominantly used by non-white families whose children are doing poorly in the public school system, and by the children of better-educated single mothers who understand the benefits of education as a means of escaping the poverty trap (Cooper, 2007; Duckworth & Sabates, 2005; Geske, 2003; Standing, 1997).

Anthony Giddens (1991) suggests that the very fact that pupils and parents can choose schools 'has implications for their self-identity' and lifestyle, but there are individualised risks associated with that freedom, which Sharon Gewirtz, Stephen J. Ball and Richard Bowe (1995), Alison Taylor and Lorraine Woollard (2003) and others have suggested encourages the commodification of social relations. Studies from New Zealand support these concerns (Pearce & Gordon, 2005; Waslander & Thrupp, 1995). An education market, with its associated risks, works as a class reproduction strategy for the middle classes (Ball, 2003), which perhaps explains why school choice has gained popular acceptance. Its effects are difficult to measure and different social groups are likely to take up different positions, but choice seems particularly important to parents who demonstrate an *awareness* of risk. Stephen Crooks (1999) suggests that a neo-liberalism that emphasises individual freedom and individual responsibility is the reason because the role of the state is then only to provide information to encourage individual self-reliance, which appeals to policy-makers (even if the idea that the risk involved in school choice is purely individualistic is clearly an over simplification).

Today, society presents individuals with a range of choices and they are thus increasingly held responsible for their own actualisation, even if not everyone has equal access to equally profitable selections. Those from poorer backgrounds tend to make passive choices from necessity; better-off families actively engage with choice and cultivate risk as part of who they are. However, the literature suggests that middle-class parents remain ambivalent and find stressful the burden of school choice and information gathering (Ball, 2003; Crooks, 1999). As (Taylor & Woollard, 2003, p. 623) put it, they fear 'not being good parents and the impossibility of knowing whether they have ever made the right choice'. They are largely dependent on education to acquire and maintain their position, so they tend to be more apprehensive both as a group and as individuals (Ehrenreich, 1989). Families from lower socio-economic groupings tend to be more fatalistic and unlike middle-class parents, do not spend time using their social capital to manage risk on behalf of their children (Ball, 2003; Ball & Vincent, 2001). Middle-class parents rely more on the 'hot' knowledge derived from social networks of shared values (Taylor & Woollard, 2003) to

provide reassurance about risk, and not on the 'cold' formal information provided by and about schools (Ball, 2003), which is the staple diet of working-class families. Yet in many ways, school choice can be as much about who else chooses a school as choosing it oneself, and although parents are concerned with the notion of 'community', particularly in countries like France (Raveaud & van Zanten, 2007) where there is a highly developed sense of social contract, they also want control over the social and ethnic mix that their children experience (Taylor & Woollard, 2003). Pupil and family identities are in part constructed through actively choosing (rather than passively accepting) a school. It provides pupils and parents with a feeling of control, but neither increased competition nor the promotion of self-interest is likely to foster the kind of school community valued by them, so an obvious tension is emerging from the literature between *what parents want* for their children and *what they say they value*.

Markets individualise 'cultivated risk' and may also exacerbate social inequality as the more privileged move out of poor neighbourhood schools to better ones further away, leading to further community decline. Individual attempts to find personal solutions to minimise the risk of choice by drawing on resources not available to everyone increases disadvantage for already vulnerable groups (Douglas 1992) and reinforces social divisions (Ball, 2003). It opens up what Ulrich Beck (1999) has called a 'threatening sphere of possibilities' and can fuel the anxieties that families feel about the future. The middle classes, whose enthusiasm for advancement is an important driver in the school choice movement, do not generally question the fundamental principles of choice and risk, even when it results in unfavourable outcomes like community breakdown and increased segregation. They are locked into participation, or as Alison Taylor and Lorraine Woollard (2003, p. 632) put it, find themselves 'caught within the discourse'. Risks abound for them by the very act of engagement as they face the haunting prospect of generational decline in a society that is preoccupied with futures. They must work harder to maintain their advantage going forward, though of course and by definition, they have more advantages to start with.

It is possible to extrapolate from this that independent schools exist and function in response to middle-class risk. Independent schools minimize the impact of the same school being chosen by those who might lessen their benefit, and they provide boundaries that prevent the kind of mixing that dilutes middle-class aspiration and work ethic. Of course, independent schools come at a financial cost to those who choose them, but the riskier society is perceived to become, the more those who can afford it turn to them. It is a particularly middle-class response, which is not to infer

that middle-class support for public schooling is insignificant, but it carries with it opposing senses of social guilt: for choosing private schooling when not everyone can afford it; or for *not* choosing private schooling and thereby failing to provide for one's children to the best of one's ability. This caricature of guilt-ridden, middle-class habitus is one of hard work, ambition and reproducing in children the values and aspirations of the class. The middle classes look to the future on their children's behalf and while the commodification and marketisation of education through greater school choice may have increased exponentially the permutations, it has also increased the risks and consequences of being wrong.

### **Contradictory evidence on choice and segregation**

Segregation in the context of literature on school choice can be thought of as describing the situation wherein children from different socio-economic, ethnic or religious backgrounds attend different types of school as a result of that difference. Research on school choice and segregation in the Netherlands suggests that in addition to the quality of education on offer, parental reasons for school choice are principally religion, social status and ethnicity. In the Netherlands (and in culturally similar countries like Denmark), support for school choice is not confined to white, middle-class families, but is also strongly supported by immigrant especially Muslim families. In the Netherlands, where there is total freedom of school choice (Whitty & Edwards, 1998) and where catchment areas do not exist, both public and faith schools receive equivalent funding from government, and despite an increasingly secularised Dutch society, the number of faith schools has remained constant, suggesting that parents choose them primarily for non-religious reasons (Denessen *et al.*, 2005, p. 364). Political theory would suggest that segregation is most likely to occur and increase where parents make *group-specific* choices (Bagley, 1996; Ball *et al.*, 1996; Goldhaber, 2000; Lubienski, 2005), but the jury is still out on how much of this is cause and how much is effect. Some studies have found that greater choice does not necessarily increase segregation (Gorard, Taylor & Fitz, 2003) nor does it result in more disadvantaged students attending poorly performing schools; in fact, it may actually *decrease* segregation by encouraging people to choose schools *other than* on the basis of race or residency, or *moderate* the effects of segregation where it does exist (Gorard, Taylor & Fitz, 2002). However, as with other issues relating to school choice, the research is inconclusive: some research finds that students from inner city ethnic minorities and poor

children do better through choice schemes than their peers elsewhere (Howell, Campbell & Peterson, 2002; Kozol, 1991; Parsons, Chalkley & Jones, 2000); other research finds that choice and competition does in some circumstances increase social and racial segregation to the detriment of disadvantaged minorities, especially those in inner city communities (Gillborn, 1997; Goldhaber & Eide, 2002; Stambach & Becker, 2006; Tomlinson, 1997). In Detroit, for example, there is evidence that choice operates in such a way as to exclude economically deprived African-American students from the most popular schools, and that despite having significant financial incentives to recruit such students, popular schools are found to ignore them in favour of targeting students who add status (Lubienski, 2005). Similarly in Spain research on school choice and social exclusion has found that under market conditions, the middle and upper classes tend to congregate in popular (mostly independent) schools, while economically disadvantaged groups and ethnic minorities tend to get trapped in the declining public sector (Bernal, 2005; see also Engel, 2008, on the impact of globalisation on schooling in Catalonia). These research findings are so confusing as to suggest that it may be that methodology and scale are factors for example, Carl Bagley (1996) and Stephen Gorard, Chris Taylor and John Fitz (2003) have noted that small-scale research is more likely to report increased segregation though even within a single education system, there is no reason to expect uniform effects. There may be just as much variation between schools as between countries.

It is ironic that there is contradictory evidence (Gorard *et al.*, 2002; Parsons & Welsh, 2006) about whether, under choice, unpopular schools lose numbers and increase their proportion of socially disadvantaged students. As Gorard, Taylor and Fitz (2002) point out, one of the few things both advocates and opponents of school choice agreed upon was that poorly performing schools should enter a 'spiral of decline' as a result of choice. Advocates saw it as a mechanism for closing bad schools, even if that did not *always* happen; opponents saw it as penalising those who could not make informed choices. In the US, the effect of choice programmes on integration and segregation is similarly complicated and unclear. For one thing, Charter Schools have slightly lower academic attainment than public schools because of the type of pupils enrolling, and voucher programmes permit minority pupils to attend independent and religious schools that also include middle-class white pupils (Geske, 2003).

Notwithstanding the evidential confusion, critics of choice still maintain that public schools contribute to the common good by promoting the values and attitudes necessary for a democratic society, and by implication, suggest that 'civic socialisation' is less ef-



fective in a system with choice. They further suggest that choice schools and parents act together to create a school system that reinforces existing social hierarchies (Stambach & Becker, 2006) and go on to argue that any possible benefit to *individuals* is outweighed by negative *societal* effects. Supporters counter that the only substantiated empirical research in this area finds that the parents of pupils in schools of choice are overwhelmingly satisfied with their performance (Geske, 2003), which should count for something in the debate.

### Choice and geographical location

The efficacy of school choice policy is thought to depend in part on the number of accessible schools within a given geographical catchment area (Butler, Hamnett, Ramsden & Webber, 2007; Taylor, 2002). Pupils living in urban areas generally enjoy greater choice of schools than those living in rural areas where parents have greater concerns about the *availability and cost* of transport. Some schooling policies are in fact inherently biased against rural schools; for example, certain provisions of the *No Child Left Behind* programme in the US are such that small and rural schools are more likely to be incorrectly labelled as failing and as a result, find it more difficult to attract and retain competent teachers (Jimerson, 2005). However, the problematic effect of geographical location is not *confined* to rural communities. It also features in urban areas where parents have concerns about the *safety* of children traveling on public transport.

Poorer families trying to avail of the (alleged) benefits of choice are hardest hit by 'geography', as research on public school choice schemes in New York shows (M. J. Lee, 1993; Levin, 1991; Moore & Davenport, 1989a, 1989c). The poorest students generally tend to stay in the community in which they grow up (Mickelson & Southworth, 2005; Vincent, 2001; but see also Goyette, 2008), so to counteract this, in some choice programmes like the one in Minnesota, the state pays for associated transport and childcare costs because experience there has shown these to be barriers to participation. In Massachusetts, for similar reasons, schools themselves pay for transport and there is an information centre in every school to help parents make better-informed decisions (Bamber, 1990). The literature suggests that geographical inconvenience and the extent to which a school is viewed as part of a local community are also prominent reasons for choosing (or not choosing) schools in the UK and the Netherlands (Bagley, Woods & Glatter, 2001; Hughes, Wikeley & Nash, 1994; Hunter, 1991; Morgan, Dunn, Cairns & Fraser, 1993). People make choices informed by the sense they have of their own identity (Butler, 1995; Massey,

1995), so geographical mobility is closely related to social mobility (e.g. Butler & van Zanten, 2007). Working-class parents tend to choose schools for geographical convenience whereas professional middle-class parents tend to choose schools that best fit their ideologies and aspirations, their children's abilities (Echols & Willms, 1995; McArthur, Colopy & Schlaline, 1995) and in countries like China, the shifting sands of culture and politics (Wu, 2008). Perhaps all that can be done by policy-makers in response is to ensure that pupil selection is fair and selection criteria transparent (Thrupp, 1999).

### The rationality of group and individual decision making

A school's reputation is important in the area of school choice (Hammond & Dennison, 1995; Hughes *et al.*, 1994; Morgan *et al.*, 1993), as is discipline, examination performance and to a lesser extent the curriculum on offer (Hammond & Dennison, 1995; Hunter, 1991). The 'good discipline' theme is echoed by Frank Echols and J. Douglas Willms (1995) whose research suggests that having taken a child's own preferences into account, parents then frequently choose a (non-local) school primarily on that basis. In the Netherlands, the most frequently mentioned reasons for school choice are religious affiliation, ethnic composition and geographical convenience (Teelken, 1998).

Stephen Ball, Richard Bowe and Sharon Gewirtz (1996) identify three types of parental engagement with school choice, determined more or less by social class and level of educational attainment: 'skilled at choosing'; 'semi-skilled at choosing'; and 'disconnected'. Disconnected parents are typically working-class; parents skilled at choosing are typically middle-class professionals; semi-skilled choosers tend to be from a variety of backgrounds. And research suggests that parents 'skilled at choosing' have the social capital to operate more successfully in the education marketplace and have the *nous* to use information to compare schools with respect to the characteristics they consider important (e.g. research in Scottish Independent schools by Forbes & Weiner, 2008). Research on the impact of parental religion and ethnicity also suggests that Muslim and immigrant parents rate religious affiliation and the possibility of coming into contact with other cultures as more important determinants of school choice than other parents (Denessen *et al.*, 2005), but there is no evidence that school choice *per se* leads to group-specific selection of schools by those from higher social classes (Gorard *et al.*, 2003) or that

social class or level of parental education affects the way parents *order their reasons* for choosing schools.<sup>1</sup>

Enhancing parental involvement, customer satisfaction and a sense of community are all perceived to be part of the mission to provide choice in schooling (Chubb & Moe, 1990; Driscoll & Kerchner, 1999; Smrekar & Goldring, 1999). Supporters argue that in a liberal democracy, parents have the right to raise their children in a manner consistent with their beliefs, and that education is a natural extension of those preferences (Bosetti, 2004; Levin, 2000). Opponents counter that school choice results in the creation of markets to cater specifically for the needs, values and interests of advantaged groups who have the economic, social and cultural capital to benefit from it, and that this in turn contributes to social fragmentation (Bosetti, 2004; Fuller, Elmore & Orfield, 1996; Gewirtz *et al.*, 1995). When parents make educational decisions, they rely on personal values and social and professional networks to collect information (Coleman, 1988). Therefore, parents without this kind of access typically those outside the educated professional classes are *more* disadvantaged by *greater* choice.

Rational choice theory suggests that parents maximise utility, act rationally in full knowledge of the needs of their children, and have clear choosing criteria and are aware of all the options available when they make schooling decisions. It follows that the most successful parents are therefore the ones that are most proactive in getting teachers to act in the best interests of their children (Bosetti, 1998; Fuller *et al.*, 1996; Goldthorpe, 1996; Hatcher, 1998), but Lynn Bosetti (2004) suggests an alternative theory, supported by research (Bauch & Goldring, 1995; Bosetti, 2000, 2001; Reay & Ball, 1998; Reay & Lucey, 2000): that parents invest a *mixture of rationalities* when choosing schools. In return for choice, parents assume responsibility for the advocacy of their children's needs and accept implicitly that they must re-engage with the market should their school of choice come up short in any way. The *quid pro quo* for having school choice is a market in which parents act selfishly in the best interest of their *own* children and put pressure on all schools to be more responsive, but research has found a significant difference in what different groups of parents do when acting in that way (Bosetti, 2004): state school parents typically send their children to designated schools without first seeking information; independent school parents typically seek information first. What distinguishes the latter from others is the range of information sources available and used, and the degree to which their search is deliberate and rational. Others rely more heavily on friends and other

parents, are less likely to consult published school performance tables and the like, and more likely to take into consideration the experience of *other* children.

### The political economy of school choice

In May 2001, Nord Anglia, a commercial company, took over the management of a state school in England. Since then, it is increasingly accepted that public services can better be delivered by a mixture of public and private means (Brighouse, 2003), though in recent months, with more public-private failures coming to light, this is being challenged. It is claimed by supporters that public schools run by commercial companies on a for-profit basis improve by importing the culture of the marketplace, and that market discipline reduces inefficiency, encourages innovation and increases attainment. Public opinion for and against marketisation largely reflects anticipated personal cost and benefit: parents across the social spectrum are generally in favour; teachers are generally against (Belfield, 2003). However, although it is common throughout the literature, it is *not* correct to theorise that marketisation is always the result of government policy and that public opinion is incapable of driving its own course. In Ireland, for example, despite the government's *reluctance* to adopt the choice agenda, middle-class parents are found increasingly to be using their economic capital to *create* an alternative independent sector to 'secure the class futures of their children' (Lynch & Moran, 2006, p. 221). Schools collude in this by encouraging or discouraging certain kinds of entrants in order to gain competitive advantage and to reduce the risk of undesirable pupils lowering the perceived benefit to others, but in Ireland at least, the rationale for it did *not* come as in other countries from government-driven neo-liberal ideology, but from a cultural predisposition in favour of parental choice (e.g. Buchanan & Fox, 2008), domestic constitutional pressures and a booming economy. Situations like this could be said to illustrate the theory that public preference in schooling is reflecting perceived utility, which individual families seek to optimise even when constrained by financial considerations. Education is a 'proxy good, reflecting all the beneficial attributes for the household that are associated with greater levels of education' (Belfield, 2003, p. 156). Since it must be paid for by families, indirectly in taxes or directly in school fees and out of the same budget as general goods, any increase in the price of general goods reduces both the amount available for education and a family's willingness to support public spending on it. Small families in particular reap fewer benefits from public education and so per-

<sup>1</sup> There are contradictory findings in this respect from the UK (Ball *et al.*, 1995, 1996) and from the Netherlands (Denessen *et al.*, 2005).

ceive themselves as subsidising larger 'under-paying' and 'over-consuming' families.

Like the general public, academics are divided on the issue of privatisation in education. Harry Brighouse (1998, 2003) has argued against contracting out the management of schools to private companies and voucher schemes, claiming that the former cannot yield greater efficiency because the contracting process is insufficiently competitive, and the latter cannot work because private companies will become unwilling to participate fully in a sector with such high social justice and democratic accountability expectations, though at least with voucher schemes parents rather than governments make the choices and independent schools are drawn into the public mission (see also Smyth, 2008). Others argue in favour of commercial companies being given a fair chance at delivery in developing countries too, (Tooley, 2007; Tooley, Dixon & Gomathi, 2007) or more extremely, the complete privatisation of education (Tooley, 2000), though there is literature suggesting that profits made by private companies from public partnerships 'represent a net loss to the service' (Brighouse, 2003, p. 37; Pollock, Shaoul, Rowland & Player, 2002) and that profits must by definition come from employees working harder without getting higher pay.

It is difficult to gauge from published research the success of private sector involvement in public schooling in England because the UK government provides substantial subsidies in the case of each privatised (previously failed) schools, and the contracts awarded to private companies involved in running them are necessarily short-term to ensure competition in the re-tendering process. The companies also face a regulatory regime in (what most commentators agree is) a state of perpetual flux so they 'lack incentives for long-term planning and investment, since they have no guarantee of reaping the benefits' (Brighouse, 2003, p. 39). In the US, the involvement of commercial companies in the management of public and public Charter Schools is no more promising.<sup>2</sup> When Edison Schools Inc., the largest such commercial company, was launched in 1991, the plan was to open 200 new privately-operated schools within five years, but it was later reorganised simply to manage existing schools (Molnar, 2006). The fundamental premise of the business was that it could save money through economies of scale and raise achievement while spending less per pupil than 'ordinary' public schools (Levin, 2001; O'Reilly, 2002; Symonds, 2000). The Edison strategy was therefore to gain a large number of schools and to standardise their operation so that they could

<sup>2</sup> See also *Standard & Poor's* involvement in 'corporatizing' the school curriculum in the US (Sloan, 2008) and Zahra Bhanji, 2008, for a perspective on transnational corporate involvement.

significantly lower *per capita* administrative costs. However, by March 2002, Edison had hinted that its economic model was 'not viable'<sup>3</sup> (Molnar, 2006, p. 627) and there is a lingering suspicion that similar difficulties beset other firms operating in the sector (like *Knowledge Universe* and *K12 Inc.*). Generally, it is difficult to see how commercial companies undertaking the management of public schools can make profits large enough to balance the risk involved. How this will affect government programmes to privatise public schools is anyone's guess, especially given the current economic meltdown. If commercial companies will not get involved, it may be that governments must offer more and bigger subsidies; or that the schemes will be shelved for lack of public acceptance of such subsidies.

The UK school choice market is of course a *quasi*-market because the government, not the consumer, makes market decisions in the belief that both competition and cooperation promote higher levels of academic attainment. 'Coopetition', defined by Nick Adnett and Peter Davies (2003, p. 393) as competing in some markets and cooperating in others, is a dominant strategy in the business sector, but until recently policy-makers have been slow to promote it in schools. Some policies, such as open enrolment and publishing league tables, aim to stimulate *competition*; other policies, like Beacon Schools (to share best practice), Excellence in Cities schemes and Education Action Zones (to encourage partnerships), and Specialist Schools (to stimulate community-wide initiatives) aim to encourage *cooperation*. Competition and cooperation (not to be confused with collusion) are related to national examination performance, but schools respond as much to local as to national incentives, sometimes to the detriment of socially disadvantaged and ethnic communities. In Detroit, for example, schools and districts open and close their boundaries to non-residents depending on their proximity to poorer communities and on their relative status within the local market hierarchy (Lubienski, 2005). Schools target high-status students and the extent of competition depends largely on parental activity. High-performing faith and selective schools have very little competition from schools that rely on local intake (Ball, Bowe & Gewirtz, 1995; Gorard, 1996; C. Taylor, 2001) and competition between dissimilar-type schools is often not as significant as it is between similar schools.

<sup>3</sup> An audit in 2001 of Edison's contract with Pennsylvania concluded that the contract was awarded without proper regard to state procurement law and there have been questions subsequently about its *educational* effectiveness. Critics have alleged that there has been little by way of innovation and that claims about better-than-average pupil performance are ill-founded (Molnar, 2006). In May 2003, the company revealed to the US Securities and Exchange Commission that it was in default on loans totaling nearly \$60 million, after which it was taken private by its founder.

## Conclusion

*Market* states are replacing *nation* states across the globe and this can be seen most easily in school choice schemes, where a new devolution of provision to non-governmental agencies is replacing (local) government delivery. The belief that society has entered a new post-capitalist phase is widely held, providing a foundation, in the UK at least, for the belief that an explicit partnership between the state and agents of the free market transcends the old contrary falsehoods of capitalism and socialism. A market state perceives its role as a minimal provider of opportunity to enable the most dynamic of its people to generate prosperity for everyone, but the theory seems from the research literature to have come up short as far as school choice is concerned: social mobility has not increased with the emergence of market states and it seems even less likely to increase in the current economic climate. Instead, a new under-class to replace the old manual working-class is emerging and governments have shifted their allegiance from the principle of choice between private and public provision, to what could be called *privatised public provision* wherein the role of the state the 'partnership state' is to guarantee access to basic public services but not to provide them.

It is difficult to see how commercial companies (currently or in future) undertaking the privatised public provision of schooling can make profits large enough to balance the risks involved. If commercial companies withdraw from involvement, it may be that governments must then offer more and bigger subsidies; or as seems more likely, that the schemes will be shelved for lack of public acceptance of such subsidies. School choice schemes may be operating at a cost to society's fabric and they have not been proved beyond doubt to raise pupil achievement, but they remain stubbornly popular in many countries, especially among low-income urban and immigrant families, who believe with some justification that they provide social and economic opportunity for racially disadvantaged groups and counteract the effect of wealth and privilege on educational opportunity. Supporters claim that choice programmes can decrease segregation by encouraging people to choose schools other than on the basis of race or residency, but there are subtle transfers of agency at work in the new paradigm: in return for choice, parents now must assume responsibility for educational failure and for engaging with the market whether or not they have the wherewithal to do so competently.

All the evidence suggests that the best choice schemes involve the faith school sector, which in many ways is the 'elephant in the room'; so obviously present but not spoken about or properly researched. The

reluctance of policy makers to engage with this issue is not so much a reluctance to express a preference in the debate about the separation of church and state as a reluctance to engage with the demands of an increasingly vocal Muslim community who want the same routes to prosperity through education as their Christian fellows. There is no corresponding reluctance to discuss social class however, though it seems inherently lazy to make the assumption that middle-class parents constitute a single homogeneous group. Throughout the literature, the term seems to be shorthand for those who aspire to desirable outcomes for their children, but if 'middle class' simply means 'aspirational' it obviously skews research on choice and its outcomes, and adds to the generic difficulty of fairly selecting cohorts to supply data on 'choice pupil' attainment.

Just as it is difficult for opponents of school choice to claim that choice per se increases social segregation, it is equally difficult for advocates of choice to claim that its introduction, when accompanied by other reforms, has a causal relationship with improvement. All that can be said for certain is that choice is inherently bound to uncertainty and favours those who are risk-friendly, or at least risk-aware. If choice schemes are to succeed in their mission, whether or not one agrees with the principle, those from poorer socio-economic backgrounds need support to move away from being merely passive recipients of government policy.

## About the author

**Anthony Kelly** is Professor of School Improvement and Political Economy at the University of Southampton. He lectures and researches in the general area of education policy and school improvement, and is particularly interested in the development of theory (and methodology) in these fields. He is founding editor of the journal *Education, Knowledge & Economy* and his latest book *School Choice and Student Well-being* is published by Palgrave Macmillan.

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