Neoliberal Policy and the Meaning of Counterintuitive Middle-class School Choices

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abstract: This article considers how the nature and effects of neoliberal policy in education are illuminated by the outcomes of a study of white middle-class families choosing ordinary state secondary schools in England. Having described the main features of the study and some of its findings, consideration is given to specific ‘global’ dimensions – one in terms of parental perceptions and the other drawing upon analysis of the global effects of neoliberalism, an example of which is illustrated with reference to an influential UK policy. The article concludes
that the conditions so generated not only provide advantages to those making conventional choices in keeping with a marketized service, but that they may also bring advantages to middle-class families making ‘counterintuitive’ choices as well.

keywords: educational policy ♦ middle class ♦ neoliberalism ♦ school choice

Introduction

Michael Apple speaks for many when he notes the ‘increasingly powerful discourses and policies of neo-liberalism concerning privatization, marketization, performativity, and the “enterprising individual”’. Apple also suggests ‘that any analysis of these discourses and policies must critically examine their class and race and gender effects at the level of who benefits from their specific institutionalizations and from their contradictory functions within real terrains of social power’ (Apple, 2001: 409; emphasis added). This article attempts to enter into such a critical examination with regard to ‘counterintuitive’ educational choices among white middle-class families in urban England. We begin by describing a research study that has provided data and analysis which we feel help to illuminate the issues at hand. We then suggest two ways in which the situation being studied is ‘globally connected’ – one to do with parental readings of social change, the other to do with neoliberal discourse. This leads us to highlight the importance of a mutual affinity between middle-class families and state secondary schools in performative conditions. Finally, we argue that dominant themes in policy do not reflect the complexity and subtlety of the relationship between social class and education, and that contrary to appearances, the experiences and effects of counterintuitive school choice suggest the continuation of class-based advantage being realized through educational means, albeit in a subtle and unusual form.

A Brief Outline of the Research

The UK Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) funded project Identity, Educational Choice and the White Urban Middle Classes (Award reference RES-148-25-0023) investigated a cross-section of ‘counterintuitive’ examples of school choice, where white urban middle class families in England eschewed more apparently dependable state and private alternatives available to them and instead chose ordinary state comprehensive secondary schools for their children. The purposes of the study included
attempting to understand school choice practices and processes in terms of orientations and motivations, and ethnicity and class. It aimed to investigate how such practices were related to identity and identification in the light of contemporary conceptions of the middle-class self. We interviewed parents and children in 125 white middle-class households in London and two provincial cities in England, ‘Riverton’ in the South-West and ‘Norton’ in the North-East. In each case, families had made a positive choice in favour of a state secondary school that was performing at or below the England average according to conventional examination league tables. The study began in mid-2005 and covered a 30-month period, concluding in 2007, and was part of the ESRC Identities and Social Action Programme. The following paragraphs present a brief outline of the research, including several themes to which we return in later sections of the article.

The parents concerned were themselves very highly educated indeed: 83 percent to degree level, with over a quarter also holding some form of postgraduate qualification. A very high proportion (69 percent overall) were ‘incomers’ to the area in which they now lived, and in 70 percent of families, at least one parent worked in the public sector. A range of motivations appeared to underpin counterintuitive school choice. Some parents were motivated by a commitment to the welfare state, to state-funded education and/or to egalitarian ideals. Many had an active dislike for privileged educational routes on the grounds that they were socially divisive, and clearly thought that their own choices could avoid this effect. Yet alongside this, and often of more importance, many parents were motivated by a desire that their children should have an educational experience that would prepare them for a globalized, socially diverse, multicultural world.

The desire for a multicultural educational experience was closely connected to the ways in which our parents, particularly those in London and to some extent in Riverton, identified as white. Their whiteness was constructed in opposition to that of both the white working classes and those white middle classes who made more conventional middle-class school choices. Rather, these parents positioned themselves in a way we termed ‘a darker shade of pale’, as part of a more culturally tolerant and even anti-racist white middle class (see Reay et al., 2007). They felt strongly that higher-achieving schools, which were often less socially and ethnically mixed, would not provide the kind of experience of ‘the real world’ that their children needed. At the same time, they were not persuaded that General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) examination results were a valid indicator of the quality of education on offer in any particular school.

Contemporary political concerns about social cohesion often focus on segregation between schools and communities. We were interested to see whether counterintuitive school choice made a positive contribution to
social mixing, and therefore, potentially, to social cohesion. Our research found segregation within schools with white middle-class children clustered in top sets, often benefiting from ‘Gifted and Talented’ schemes, with little interaction with children from other backgrounds. The children rarely had working-class friends and their few minority ethnic friends were predominantly from middle-class backgrounds. There was much evidence of social mix but far less evidence of social mixing. Despite the often declared hopes of parents that their children would make friends across ethnic groups, on the whole friends were other white middle-class children. Both parents’ and children’s attitudes to classed and ethnic others sometimes displayed a perception of cultural and intellectual superiority that would work against social cohesion and the development of common ground and common understandings. The research points to an urgent need for curricula areas such as citizenship studies and Personal, Social and Health Education programmes to find new ways to foster empathy and informed understandings of the situations of those who are ‘not like us’. Even in this group of pro-welfare, left-leaning parents there was little declared support for measures to tackle inequalities; even with respect to the Gifted and Talented scheme of which many were critical, they made no protest at the schools’ intent upon further advantaging their own children by allocating them to the scheme. While many of the children appeared to have an understanding of wider social inequalities, this did not transfer to understanding the consequences of material disadvantage for educational attainment. Rather, a lack of achievement and social mobility was primarily seen to be the fault of individuals.

The white middle-class parents in the study were strongly represented on school governing bodies. In 57 percent of the London families (36 out of 63 families), at least one parent was currently serving or had served as a school governor. There were 11 chairs of governors, (these were all secondary apart from a mother who was chair for a primary school). In Norton and Riverton the figures were lower but still substantial: in Riverton 43 percent of the families (13 out of 30) had a parent who was a school governor, while the equivalent figure for Norton was 22 percent (7 out of 32). In a majority of cases, becoming a school governor was rooted in a desire to make a civic contribution. However, as we found with the many other explicit connections with schools (friendships with teachers or the head, or professional links with education), being a school governor was also a way of maintaining a close watch, of managing the risks in sending children to inner-city state schooling. In turn, schools seemed especially responsive to the wishes and concerns of white middle-class parents and their children.

Other than being a governor, there was surprisingly little civic and other local engagement that could be expected to contribute to social cohesion. While most described themselves as ‘left-wing’ or ‘soft left’ or
'liberal', only a very few were politically active in any formal sense. The most politically active parents were in the London sample, where there were three Labour Party activists, a chair of the local neighbourhood society, a couple who were campaigning against a local Academy (a new school, part of a controversial programme to bring private investment in to replace ‘failing’ state provision) and two members of a pressure group supporting state education. But for the most part, civic engagement and activism lay in our participants’ past histories, and many talked about their disillusionment with politics, and especially, New Labour, particularly following the Iraq invasion. While almost all talked about their commitment to the welfare state, the communitarian ideals that were once pursued by many of these parents had mostly given way to a pragmatism and pessimism about the possibilities of political action and community involvement. One of the parents, Elaine Booth articulated the sort of agility we saw across many cases:

*Elaine:* I mean I, I, . . . (she sighs) I think, first of all, I think everyone has a right to be a hypocrite for their children, ‘cos whatever your politics you just . . . when it comes to your children, you just have to do what’s right for them, and that’s what I did.

Counterintuitive school choice was for the most part experienced as a risky strategy, and it generated considerable anxiety which we found was linked to parents’ attempts to monitor and manage the process (see Crozier et al., 2008). The accounts of many of the parents suggested immense difficulties of acting ethically in an unethical context. At the same time, however, we were surprised by the extent to which school choice was seen in individualized, instrumental terms. This was far more prevalent across the cases than commitments to comprehensive education or to locality and community. Family history (and schooling history in particular) was usually highly significant in the way that contemporary options were understood. Once under way, school experiences were very closely monitored and managed, and some parents said they could and would ‘pull out’ if things did not go well, suggesting they saw the school as a service provider and themselves as consumers who could keep the choice of provider under review. (For further details of these and other findings, see especially Crozier et al., 2008; James and Beedell, 2010; Reay et al., 2007, 2008.)

**Globalization, Neoliberalism and School Choice**

While at one level it is the most personal and individual of acts, counterintuitive educational choice must be understood socially, for example in terms of its effects on others, its relationship to social class and in how it is framed by themes in globalization. There seem to be two of the latter
that are particularly worth noting. The first is to do with parental perceptions of the changing social world, the second to do with the influence of neoliberalism.

Parents often alluded to the ways in which the social world had changed in the last few decades, and prominent here was a view that society was more ‘mixed’, that economic activity was becoming ever more international and that it was no longer possible for people to live their lives in relatively isolated social groups. The cosmopolitan nature of contemporary urban life was seen as being in contrast to their own backgrounds for many of the parents in the study. A majority had been to secondary schools that were either state selective, or private (of the 250 parents for whom we had data, 32 percent had attended selective grammar schools and 27 percent private secondary schools, often in rural or suburban locations). Their experiences in this respect were highly bound up with familial social class background, and for some, a major motivation for contemporary choices was to avoid a repeat of the social ‘narrowness’ of their own schooling, even where this would bring them into conflict with relatives. This ‘narrowness’ could mean several things. In some cases it was about what schools offered in terms of curriculum emphasis, socialization, beliefs and values, and reflections on this ranged from perceptions of schools being overly academic, out of touch with the real world, or in one instance, brutalizing. In other cases, ‘narrowness’ referred to a privileged route and trajectory, and some parents were consciously trying to prevent their son or daughter from developing an impression that their background and circumstances would give them an easy ride.

However, in most cases ‘narrowness’ of schooling was about the qualities and characteristics that were thought to depend on the mix of social and ethnic backgrounds that surround the child in a school setting. Parents were aware that many private and higher-achieving state schools did not contain much diversity in this respect, and their rationale for the choice of the below-average-performing state secondary school rested heavily on the opportunities presented by social and ethnic diversity per se. As one mother put it, ‘experience of a wide social mix will make my daughter a better doctor’. In such views, a schooling that successfully prepares young people for living in a multicultural society is itself necessarily multicultural. Parents were concerned that their children develop qualities such as respect and tolerance, or not being persuaded by racist stereotypes. These parents are identifying an important form of capital which, due to its social and geographical location, the home setting is limited in its capacity to develop (foreign holidays notwithstanding). The conventionally ‘best’ schools, with their narrower social mix and their emphasis on an academic curriculum, might also fail to develop it. Having
said this, our analysis also suggests that it was not cultural difference in general that was being celebrated, but rather, what May has termed ‘a controlled and managed form of difference’ (May, 1996).

Thus, many parents in the study had diagnosed a gulf between the types of secondary schooling held up as ‘best’, and the qualities and capacities their children would need to develop in a social world characterized by more social and ethnic diversity. This was sometimes combined with a perception that exposure to diversity was part of an essential process of ‘toughening up’ or ‘becoming streetwise’. Such qualities of resilience and worldliness were seen as a necessary part of growing up to become equipped to operate successfully in a changed social environment. Linked to this, a regularly expressed benefit of the chosen schooling was that young people very often found themselves in top sets. In some cases this was anticipated and seen as natural, and described as a benefit of attending an ordinary school, while in other cases it was more of an unexpected bonus.

The second, and more important theme for its cross-cutting of our data and analysis, is that of neoliberalism and its probable effects. Olssen argues convincingly that a transnational pressure to release economic activity from state regulation, operating over the last quarter of a century, has been a major obstacle to democracy and has provided for ‘a huge escalation of inequality in the distribution of incomes and wealth’, both between countries and within them (Olssen, 2004: 231–2; see also Blanden and Machin, 2007; Rutherford, 2008). Similarly, Tabb has summarized the aim of neoliberalism as ‘to put into question all collective structures capable of obstructing the logic of the pure market’ (Tabb, 2002: 7). The energy with which these principles are pursued is explained by Harvey in his account of the origins and spread of neoliberalism: ‘The assumption that individual freedoms are guaranteed by freedom of the market and of trade is a cardinal feature of neoliberal thinking’ (Harvey, 2005: 7). He adds:

. . . to presume that markets and market signals can best determine all allocative decisions is to presume that everything can in principle be treated as a commodity. . . . The market is presumed to work as an appropriate guide – an ethic – for all human action. (Harvey, 2005: 165)

In educational activity, examination results are the most commonly modified feature. Of course, they have always been used to make judgements about the quality of schools, and no doubt have often been given more significance than they deserve. However, the use of educational indicators in international comparisons, and the assumption that these have sufficient validity and reliability to function as a barometer of national progress, has taken on a new significance in recent years. At the
national level, the Leitch Review of Skills (Leitch, 2006) in the UK is a prime example of a highly influential policy that is driven by international comparisons of skill (qualifications) levels and the imperative to bring about a step-change in the rate at which these skills are produced so as not to be left behind in a global economy. It also perpetuates the highly questionable assumption that ‘economic competitiveness and social inclusion are two sides of the same coin [which is] . . . fast becoming part of a cross-party consensus’ (O’Leary, 2008: 137). At the international level, in his analysis of the ‘Dakar framework’, the joint UNESCO, G8, World Bank and IMF ‘blueprint’ for the development of education by 2015, Tamatea points to a specifically neoliberal reframing of educational processes and activities. For example, ‘quality’ is a term that is appropriated so as to ‘validate’ neoliberal strategies, but in ways that also assume ‘an unproblematic reduction of the emotional and value-laden to something objective’, and on a global scale (Tamatea, 2005: 318). What these examples illustrate is that the faith in league tables – specifically, in England, those based on GCSE results at the end of compulsory schooling – is far from being just an isolated national obsession. It is structured into the very terms and conditions of international policy relations as currently conceived and conducted, and functions to permit forms of comparison between nation-states just as it functions at all levels ‘below’ this, including comparisons of cities and regions right down to the comparison of two schools in a small town.

Neoliberal public policy continues to emphasize targets, marketization and the ‘choice and voice’ of enterprising individuals (Justesen, 2002; Miliband, 2006). The limitations of the idea of choice in relation to areas like education and health have been well debated (e.g. Ball, 2003; Hodkinson, 1999; Power et al., 2003; Shwartz, 2004), and probably the most common criticism of ‘choice’ as it is framed in policy, is that it rests on an overly rational view of decision-making in which all parties are presumed to start from the same basic position, with access to the same sufficient information. There is however a further sense in which ‘choice’ represents an oversimplification when it comes to the primary-to-secondary school transitions like those in our study. Sayer argues that when we use terms like interest, capital and calculation, a la Bourdieu, the metaphors ‘invite us to interpret investment as egotistical, instrumental, involving competitive, reward-seeking behaviour’ (Sayer, 2005: 39). Sayer goes on to demonstrate that this can be unhelpful. There is an important, if fuzzy, distinction between preferences and commitments, which is not just about the strength of attachment. The former refers to choices among viable alternatives, so that we might choose one thing, such as a product or service, when something else would also serve, or nearly serve, as well. By contrast, the term
commitment refers to matters that are constitutive of us as people, and which cannot be given up so easily. Partly as a deliberate reminder of other parts of Bourdieu’s thinking, Sayer argues that identities and commitments are invested in consciously and normatively, over time, as well as being the result of ‘habitation’ and embodiment in a more direct and automatic sense. The main point for our argument is as follows. Neoliberal policy creates a ‘market’ in which there is competition between schools, and the most significant indicator of market position is the percentage of higher-level examination passes at the end of compulsory schooling. No doubt some ‘consumers’ take this at face-value, reading off impressions of educational quality or even using the information to make some estimate of the chances of their own children achieving certain academic credentials. Others may however realize that the picture is too simplistic, that a very complex engagement which calls upon their commitments is being positioned as if it was all about mere preferences. This may even strike them as a welcome and convenient situation, if it helps them avoid a school which conflicts with deep-seated commitments without having to enter into any difficult or embarrassing negotiations. In the case of the counter-intuitive choosers in our study, we discerned a relative confidence that their own children were likely to do well, coupled with the widespread rejection of league tables as indicating anything useful about the quality of a school. These and other aspects of an intricate rationale bear witness to commitments more than preferences. This situation is inherently more complex than the neoliberal image of choice, reflected in policy, allows.

That a policy emphasis on school choice should give advantages to middle-class people is no surprise, and it has been argued that it is the middle classes who provide the ideal individual for neoliberal times, the person for whom life is a conscious, reflexive project of the self and to whom it may seem plausible that, barring accidents, the individual is primarily the author of what befalls them. As Levitas put it, capitalism continuously undermines equality, and those with relative advantage – with more capital (of any kind) – are always in the best position to gain (Levitas, 2005). There can be little doubt that the processes of selecting and applying to schools ‘favors middle class families’ (Hursh, 2005: 8).

Given this situation, and perhaps a little naively, we started out wondering if counterintuitive school choices might be explained at the level of families as a political project, as a form of opposition to the well-embedded neoliberal assumptions underpinning an individualized subject as consumer of education. We wondered if there were community orientations that put the interests of the collective on a par with those of the individual. Similarly, we wondered if there were attempts at a personal level to try to reverse the shift noted by Hursh (2005) away from shared interests
in respect of schooling in the US and England. However, while there were instances of all these things, and in 12 percent of families there were strong community orientations, these were overshadowed by a clear *investment orientation*, in which the dominant theme is *calculated risk*. On the whole, the actions of these families did not represent a rediscovery of community or ‘a concept of shared responsibility’ such as that outlined by Tony Blair in 1994 (quoted in Hursh, 2005: 12).

Furthermore, the quote from Elaine Booth cited earlier, expressed quite a common sentiment among the parents interviewed. That is, while most were trying to act ethically, or in accordance with certain beliefs and values with a political meaning, they nevertheless sometimes presented a distinction between ‘politics’ and ‘what’s right for your children’. This is interesting and important. In this view, ‘politics’ is positioned as a surface phenomenon and ‘what’s right for your children’ is seen as a more authentic expression of interest or concern. Arguably, the distinction is a luxury possessed by those whose interests are so well catered for that they can abandon ‘political’ positions if the need should arise.

**The Mutual Dependency between Schools and Middle-class Families**

Our analysis strongly suggests that the set of circumstances generated by neoliberal educational policy gives *direct advantages* to those middle-class families who *appear* to go against the grain by making counterintuitive school choices. Actual experiences of schooling, while not always comfortable, bore out the parental expectation that certain valued forms of capital could be acquired or developed by their children (and, incidentally, the children did well in GCSEs, A levels and university entry, with a remarkable 15 percent of those old enough having gone to one of the two most prestigious English universities).

Our data suggest that one of the reasons for this is that in a climate of performativity, schools stand to gain from the presence of the relatively ‘motivated’ middle-class student (see also Apple, 2001; Ball et al., 1996). We have examples of schools going to great lengths to attract middle-class children, for example through putting extra time and energy into visits to children and parents at key primary schools. Robertson noted that ‘Much of the choice/markets agenda has been shaped by the criticism of schools as inefficient bureaucracies that are unresponsive either to community or individual interests’ (Robertson, 2000: 174). This may well be the case in general, and there is certainly evidence that some working-class parents feel they struggle to be heard (see e.g. Gewirtz et al., 2005; Vincent and Martin, 2002). However, the schools attended by the children in our study were highly responsive to the interventions of parents, both through official
channels and informally, via personal and professional contacts between parents and heads or teachers. Indeed, we would go so far as to suggest that there are clear pressures on any contemporary head of an ordinary state secondary school in England to attract (and then by any means possible, hold on to) white middle-class children. The children we studied were usually in top sets, and nearly all were in receipt of the extra resources that come with being identified as ‘Gifted and Talented’. In one school attended by several of the young people in our study, a decision was taken to keep open an Advanced Level drama course for one student in order to dissuade him from moving to another school, and there were other similar cases in other schools.

Some writers have explored the actions of schools in mediating the neoliberal discourses that impact upon young people (e.g. O’Flynn and Peterson, 2007; Youdell, 2004) or how schools are implicated in the way that social behaviour is reconceptualized along economic lines (Rose, 1999). As suggested earlier, the ever-increasing emphasis on skills and on direct vocational relevance of the curriculum has a global as well as a national and local dynamic and significance. These are important considerations, though our data lead us to place even more emphasis on other themes in neoliberalism, such as the reflexive work that some writers have said characterizes life in neoliberal (or perhaps postmodern) times. Large parts of our data reminded us of studies of middle-class childrearing (e.g. Lareau, 2003; Walker and Lucey, 1989), leading us to suggest there was a form of parental managerialism within the families studied (James and Beedell, 2010).

Like its workplace equivalent, parental managerialism refers to the idea that ‘all aspects of organizational life can and should be controlled. In other words, that ambiguity can and should be radically reduced or eliminated’ (Wallace and Hoyle, 2005: 9). This is not to suggest that the parents were actually in control, but it is to say that they often perceived themselves in this way, and it is also to suggest that there are real and important differences in parental agency. The relationships that these parents had with schools was similar to those of the ‘high involvement’ group in Vincent and Martin’s study of parental voice. Vincent and Martin showed how, while there were many similarities across all parents’ experiences of ‘voice’ in relation to the school, there were also important differences:

The social spaces parents occupy, their habitus and their resources of capital all made a significant difference as to how often, how easily and over what range of issues they approached the school. . . . the largely professional parent group who maintained a high level of intervention with the schools operated from within an entirely different disposition towards education. Their habitus in relation to education, their sense of what ‘people like us do’ emphasized home school interaction and communication and a parental responsibility to monitor children’s achievement and the school provision. (Vincent and Martin, 2002: 125)
Furthermore, the actions of both schools and parents, and their interactions, also suggest that a ‘sociological’ appreciation of the class–education relationship was widespread and operated as a ‘double hermeneutic’ (see Giddens, 1987). This group of highly educated parents were aware that they were relatively well placed, that the various capitals in the middle-class child’s background tended to convert well into academic success: this gave them a form of long-term confidence alongside the more short-lived, sometimes intense, anxieties of making and living with their choices. At the same time, schools, under enormous pressure to raise the proportion of students gaining five or more A* to C grades at GCSE, knew that other things being equal, middle-class students were a good ‘investment’ for them. These ‘knowledges’ appeared to be acting back on the situation they were devised to explain.

The Implications for (In)equality

In their overview of some of the contradictions in recent education policy, Harris and Ranson (2005) remind us of the ambition to ameliorate class disadvantage that was built into the introduction of comprehensive education in the 1960s, and of its contrast to the market principles that were embodied in the 1988 Education Reform Act, which some believed could deliver more opportunity. They do this in order to point out that subsequently, certain ‘presuppositions’ that had been acknowledged in these periods quickly became taboo in the ‘third way’ polity: first, the idea that life chances might continue to be dominated by class structures, and second, the idea that structural reform of the school system was a necessary response to this fact in order that some ground might be made towards equality of educational opportunity. This is in keeping with Levitas’s analysis of the major discourses of social exclusion that were discernable in New Labour thinking and the slippage between them in the process of establishing a ‘new political language about social cohesion, stakeholding, community, social exclusion and inclusion [which] was central to the creation of the “centre-left consensus” on which New Labour’s electoral success was presumed to depend’ (Levitas, 2005: 2). The net result of this aspect of ‘third way’ politics was to individualize the problem, in this instance, at the level of the school. A focus on ‘standards’ and ‘accountability’ promoted the belief that all schools could improve, and that most could ‘succeed against the odds’ if they had sufficiently high aspirations, were well led and well managed. But Harris and Ranson go on to suggest that the 2004 Five Year Strategy for Children and Learners (DfES, 2004) represented a policy that once more confronted the class–education link in a more direct sense:
The Strategy develops a dual approach to customizing an outmoded education system to fit the needs of the individual. One dimension is to introduce choice for pupils and to personalize learning to meet their needs. This is gauged to respond in particular to the needs of disenchanted and underachieving young people, especially amongst the disadvantaged. The second dimension is to customize provision for parents by further developing choice in the structure of schooling. This is gauged to respond to the fragile confidence of middle class parents in the quality of secondary school. In July 2004 the Secretary of State for Education expressed concern about the drift of middle-class parents from the state sector, which has risen to 20 percent in some urban areas and higher in London. ‘There is a significant chunk of them who go private because they feel despairing about the quality of education. They are the people we are after.’ (Harris and Ranson, 2005: 577)

For Harris and Ranson, this adds up to two very different reform agendas – a ‘customizing’ one and a ‘corporatizing’ one – which for all their self-presentation as a radical reform agenda, were unlikely to provide the tools to address educational inequalities. The latter one includes ‘a massive programme of sustained and rising investment in the secondary sector to secure quality of resources, buildings and facilities’ (Harris and Ranson, 2005: 579) and a guarantee of greater access to ‘successful’ schools, which like successful businesses, will be allowed to expand. It also includes an increase in the number of Academy schools, and a widening of ‘real choices’. This amounts to ‘The state . . . establishing a parallel independent sector for the middle classes’ (Harris and Ranson, 2005: 579), and one that incorporates increasing private capital interests at the same time as the role of elected local authorities is reduced.

It is tempting to see the ‘counterintuitive choosers’ in our study as a vanguard for the middle-class parents that the Strategy aimed to attract back into the state secondary schools. However, most of the changes that the Strategy set in train began to have an effect after the period of our field-work, and well after the time in which the primary to secondary transition actually happened. Moreover, the parents we interviewed did not usually ‘buy in’ to the sort of diagnosis that the Strategy presents: while often subtle and complex, their knowledge of secondary schools did not centre on disappointment with standards, and nor were they preoccupied with notions of school improvement or a market of the sort reflected in the policy. What our data and analysis actually suggest is that in a stratified system, middle-class families are in a position to make choices that the market holds up as much less favourable, and that they can do so without apparent detriment to their acquisition of educational credentials, opportunities and progression. This in turn suggests that neoliberal assumptions about markets, choice and quality are simply too crude to cope with the subtlety of the relationship between social class and education.
Harris and Ranson also draw attention to a number of contradictions that are internal to the Strategy, to do with increasing diversity and personalization, and independence and public accountability. Of most relevance to the present discussion is that the document celebrates choice, but conflates quite distinct notions of choice (i.e. choice for learners during a learning experience, and choice of a school) which are:

. . . mutually contradictory. Enabling parental choices in an educational market will reinforce the competitive advantage of middle-class parents, reinforcing, as the research illustrates (Ball, 2003), an emergent hierarchy and segmentation of schooling. Such stratification will systematically reduce the capacity of many schools to provide the range of opportunities to respond to the complexity of personal learning and ‘personalization’ envisaged in the Strategy. (Harris and Ranson, 2005: 582)

This view aligns with the analysis provided in Gillborn and Youdell’s (2000) study, which showed how open enrolment and its accompanying funding regime provided disincentives to the reduction of inequality. As Hursh put it, ‘Those schools with high test scores are likely to admit high-scoring students to their few openings, while those schools with low scores are desperate to retain their few “high flyers” ’ (Hursh, 2005: 12). Furthermore, Gillborn and Youdell demonstrated how marketization could exacerbate inequalities within schools as well as between them. There are clear incentives for schools to concentrate resources and effort on those students whom they see as likely to make the greatest contribution to the main market measure, and if anything, our data suggest this effect is more marked where white middle-class students are in a small minority.

This brings us to the most difficult question of all, which is whether middle-class counterintuitive school choice does anything to advantage or disadvantage schools and other learners. As we have noted, if middle-class young people tend to get more GCSEs, A levels and university entry, this may appear to some to benefit the school. However, the issue is not this simple. Brantlinger shares with Bourdieu a wish to point out that because educational processes result in positional goods, and must therefore be understood relationally, one cannot really view anything in splendid isolation:

Unfortunately, the reality is that as high-income mothers intervene with school personnel in decisions made regarding their own children, they affect other people’s children as well. As high tracks are created to accommodate the preferences of affluent parents, low-income children are relegated to low tracks . . . the middle class determines the nature of public education for their children and, simultaneously, even if inadvertently, for children of other classes. (Brantlinger, 2003: 59)

Our evidence shows that such processes operate in state secondary schools attended by the children of the white middle-class families in our study.
Conclusion

We began this discussion with Apple’s view that increasingly powerful neoliberal discourses had to be understood at the level of who benefits from the various manifestations of them in institutions and in the social world. The correlations between social class and educational outcomes are well known, and it is highly likely that the various capitals that middle-class families bring to education and other public services put them in an advantaged position. There is also little doubt that neoliberal thinking, with a clear global dynamic, promotes the conditions for such advantages to continue and, quite probably, increase, with a consequent impact on inequalities. What the study discussed here suggests is that, at least in the case of secondary schooling, these conditions also favour white middle-class parents when they make choices that go against the market norm (i.e. the ‘bad choices’ of a classic economic individualist view). To put this a different way, one of the effects of neoliberalism is to create the illusion that the varied and complex processes of schooling are somehow summed up by a single dominant market index which tells of its quality. This avoids the uncomfortable and inconvenient truth that schools respond (indeed, are compelled to respond) differently to different students and families in their quest to maintain or improve their market position.

Notes

We are very grateful to the two anonymous referees for their constructive comments.

1. General Certificate in Secondary Education (GCSE) examinations are normally taken by 14- to 16-year-olds, and constitute the main qualifications at the end of compulsory secondary schooling. The proportion of students gaining five passes at higher grades is widely used as a performance indicator, especially at school and local authority level. See for example: www.direct.gov.uk/en/EducationAndLearning/QualificationsExplained/DG_10039024 (accessed June 2008).

2. Described on the Department for Children, Schools and Families Standards website thus: ‘Gifted and talented children are those who have one or more abilities developed to a level significantly ahead of their year group (or with the potential to develop these abilities). In England the term “gifted” refers to those pupils who are capable of excelling in academic subjects such as English or History. “Talented” refers to those pupils who may excel in areas requiring visio-spatial skills or practical abilities, such as in games and PE, drama, or art.’ See www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/giftedandtalented/identification/gandt/ (accessed February 2008).

3. Incidentally, middle-class parents who choose ordinary state secondary schools for their children report they are sometimes accused by other parents of sacrificing their children’s chances in the name of a political principle.
However there is a degree of irony here in that our data and analysis suggest that community-oriented motivations were scarce among our participants, and that a more self-interested instrumentalism was much more prevalent.

4. See note 2 above.

5. Advanced Level (A level) GCSE examinations are academic qualifications, usually taken by 16- to 18-year-olds in two-year programmes after the end of compulsory schooling. Their origins are in university entrance examinations and this continues to be a dominant function. See for example www.direct.gov.uk/en/EducationAndLearning/QualificationsExplained/DG_10039018 (accessed June 2008).

References


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