SOCIAL SEGREGATION IN BRITISH SCHOOLS

John Coldron

Schools are socially segregated in many education systems. But how does this process work, and why does it matter?

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The outcome of the schools admissions process in England tends to be that children are segregated in a variety of ways. Crucially, children from more affluent families with more highly educated parents in higher-status occupations tend to be educated separately from those whose parents are less affluent, less well educated and have lower-status jobs.

One obvious manifestation of this social division is between state and private schooling. In England as a whole, approximately 7% of parents pay for private education and in London the figure is approximately 20%. But a great deal of social segregation is evident between schools in the much larger state-maintained sector.

In voluntary aided (faith) schools in 2006, the average proportion of pupils on free school meals was 5.6% compared with 14.6% for the surrounding areas (Sutton Trust 2006). In secondary modern schools 12% of pupils are on free school meals, but in grammar schools only 2%. Community and foundation comprehensive schools, which together make up the great majority, do not select by ability or faith, but differ markedly in their intake both in terms of attainment and social background (Gibbons and Telhaj 2007).

Why does social segregation matter?

Middle-class children disproportionately attend high-performing schools and working-class children attend worse-performing schools. Because of the inhibiting effect of peers and the greater challenges for teachers, concentrating pupils from economically poor families in a school depresses the attainment of all pupils, while concentrating the affluent actually enhances overall attainment (Thrupp 1999).

Signposts

We are all aware that schools in Britain do not share the same profile of pupils – either by social class or ethnicity. These disparities in intake are often linked to different outcomes in performance. Here, John Coldron takes a detailed look at how and why British schools are segregated. He concludes that it is not simply 'market forces' or the greater skills of middle-class parents that result in many middle-class children being educated in 'better' schools, but that working-class parents also contribute to educational inequalities, albeit for understandable reasons. Given that the government is in the process of changing the selection criteria for school admissions, this article is extremely important in its examination of the social forces at work in the distribution of children among differently-performing schools. A good grasp of the content of this article will enable you to display the skills of analysis and evaluation when answering questions on class differences in education.

If children from advantaged social groups are gaining access to better educational provision this is unjust. This conclusion is uncomfortable for governing elites because it calls into question meritocracy and the inequalities of wealth and status justified by educational credentials. Social cohesion may also be threatened by segregated schooling that mirrors and sustains ethnic and religious divisions.

What drives the social segregation today?

Historically, schools in England have always served different groups of society, but parental choice of school introduced in the 1980s has accentuated this situation. Gewirtz et al. (1995) argued that segregation is both created and made worse in an education market because working-class parents are not as skilled at, or engaged with, school choice as those from the middle classes. This means they tend not to gain access to high-performing schools. If they do engage they are more likely to choose schools not on their performance but on their convenience.

Gewirtz et al. (1995) identified three types of parents — skilled choosers, semi-skilled choosers and disconnected choosers. In this view, working-class parents contribute to segregation because they are insufficiently engaged in the choice process. They make less conscientious choices or they lack competence at managing the complex information about admission arrangements. Middle-class parents contribute to segregation because they think ahead, plan strategically and are capable of managing the process better.

Another factor is that schools are largely judged by their exam performance and so it is in the interests of schools to attract children who are more likely to perform well. Schools also know that it matters to parents who their child's peers will be. These factors amount to a strong incentive for schools to select on the basis of social class and there is some evidence that some schools are covertly selecting in this way (West and Hind 2003).

Added to this, in areas of high competition some parents use false addresses by temporarily renting accommodation near their preferred school, or become newly active in church communities. Middle-class parents (overwhelmingly mothers) have more time and money to engage in these methods.

Market advantage?

However, these arguments, which explain segregation as a market dysfunction, with providers and consumers blamed for trying to gain market advantage, need to be treated with some caution. First, direct evidence of covert selection by schools is difficult to come by. While there is no doubt that it happens, we have little evidence to gauge its extent. Second, schools' ability to (illegally) manipulate their intakes has become more limited because of increasingly stringent Codes of Practice.

More evident is the use of legal admission arrangements. For example, some schools that select by attainment also select by aptitude. Others combine legal oversubscription criteria such as priority for siblings and catchment or feeder schools, to gain the most advantaged intake.

No studies suggest that fraudulent parents are more than a minority, even in London. The idea that most middle-class parents are 'fiddling the system' is a caricature that diverts from the more significant fact that, for the majority of those with multiple advantages — social, financial, educational, residential — the work of getting into high-performing schools is often already done. Advantaged schools and advantaged parents do not usually need to resort to dubious means to ensure a segregated intake.

Neither does it seem that working-class parents are not getting what they say they want. The latest nationally representative surveys of parents (Coldron et al. 2008) found that there was no association between parental background and success in gaining their most preferred school, and that most parents of all backgrounds are 'satisfied' with their child's secondary school.

Social class separation

This means that explanations that 'blame' working-class or middle-class parents or cynical schools are too simplistic. More significant is the fact that parents from very different backgrounds make equally conscientious but *different* choices. An active assessment of the costs and benefits, made in different circumstances, combines with different values and dispositions to generate different preferences.

The roots of socially segregated schooling, therefore, are to be found in the reasons why the great majority of both middle-class and working-class parents choose to *separate* themselves from each other. Going to different schools and living in different communities are both ways of maintaining this social separation.

But why would socially distant groups opt to maintain segregation? Part of the answer is to be found in the benefits of solidarity with one's community and the social costs of leaving it. First, it must be emphasised that material wealth and social connections largely determine where we live, where we go to school and the people we meet. Wealth and connections are dependent on occupation, education and family social networks. These constrain individual decisions and all parents find themselves in a particular community.

But theoretically they can stay or choose to leave. Staying is accompanied by a natural wish to maintain and enhance the social group of which they feel a member. Membership brings an implicit obligation to show some group solidarity and group members are likely to reward those who do show it and punish those who do not.

The social cost of leaving

Choosing a school is one of the ways in which social solidarity is exhibited. So is driving the right kind of car, listening to the right kind of music, dressing and carrying oneself in the right kind of way. Enhancing the distinctness of the group is often justified by deeply felt negative stereotypes of other social groups. The greater the inequalities of wealth and status on show the greater the motivation towards social distance and segregation.

Those who choose to leave communities or who stand out by not displaying local solidarity can incur social costs. These can range from mild but pointed questioning in shops and at dinner parties to real physical threat. For example, one working-class parent interviewed about choice of school reported that: 'If you live in a deprived area, to then say, "I'm good enough to get into grammar school", is going to get you bullied.'

While we all theoretically have the option to stay or to leave, such 'choice' is not simply a rational decision. Where we have come from, our established ways of doing things and the necessity to 'fit in' mean that

What drives social segregation in our schools and why does it matter?

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we are deeply imbued with certain ways of thinking and behaving. The French social theorist Pierre Bourdieu called this our *habitus*.

Consequently, we feel at home in some environments and deeply uncomfortable in others. This also works powerfully to determine parents' and children's choice of schools. Parents may recognise that some schools are not 'right' for their children. It is a continuing debate in sociology how far people are constrained in their choices by their background and how far they are free to choose. Let us look now at some examples of how social segregation takes place in particular types of school.

Segregation and types of school

Local catchment areas

About two-thirds of all schools prioritise applications from children who live nearest to the school. Schools that are in advantaged areas have a predominantly advantaged intake and are therefore likely to have relatively good average attainment, making them popular with socially-advantaged parents. Affluent parents are more able to buy into the area while less affluent parents cannot.

Parents who do not identify with the catchment community are unlikely to apply. Less affluent but aspiring parents living outside the catchment area of schools serving a relatively advantaged community cannot easily gain entry to these popular comprehensives because of the catchment criterion. The cost of transport together with poorer parents' attachment to their local community and ways of living also play a part.

Residential segregation is accompanied by, and reinforces, social pressure to conform. This often leads to parents opting for the local school simply because it *is* local. As Bourdieu points out, this is partly 'choosing' what they cannot avoid. But, there is also a realistic assessment here of what is possible and what they assess is in their children's interests, given what they see as the financial, social and emotional costs and benefits of doing something different.

Grammar schools

There are currently 164 grammar schools in England. The cause of segregation here is the greater education and wealth of middle-class parents combined with a greater motivation arising from the fear of downward mobility and maintenance of 'face' within social groups. These lead to a disproportionate number of better-off children applying for a grammar school place and doing better in the tests.

Better-off parents can also more easily pay for private primary schooling, or private tutors, and are likely to provide a family environment conducive to doing well in the selection tests. In addition, their children's peers reinforce the need for high educational performance. Where grammar schools exist they tend to be at the top of the local hierarchy of schools and of middle-class parents' strategies to gain admission.

Less affluent parents make different judgements. For them the grammar school may have some attractions, but there are also social and financial costs to consider. It often means choosing to leave a neighbourhood over local solidarity, and child and parents might have to endure community reaction to their choice. The entry tests often involve expense of both time and money and success brings extra financial costs for uniform and travel.

Faith schools

There are around 500 secondary faith schools in England, making up 17% of all maintained secondary schools. Almost all are Christian and of these 64% are Roman Catholic, 21% Church of England and 2.5% Mixed Christian (for example, part Roman Catholic and part Church of England). Only a tiny proportion is non-Christian. Like the grammar schools they draw their intake from a large area and residential segregation is not the main driver of selection. The main criterion for entry is evidence of religious commitment.

The intakes of these schools are more advantaged. Unlike grammar or neighbourhood comprehensives it is not easy to identify an obvious cause. While the social class make-up of the church-going population in general and that of the Church of England in particular is predominantly drawn from the wealthy and highly educated professional and managerial classes, the social profiles for Roman Catholic congregations is different, with greater participation from less affluent and less well-educated families.

It is likely that a number of factors operate together. There is circumstantial evidence that church schools may more often select covertly by social background. In addition the criterion of religious commitment verified by reference from a priest is likely to favour parents who have more time and resources to demonstrate that commitment. Finally, if in particular contexts a faith school is already known to have a highly privileged intake, less affluent parents will be less likely to apply.

Conclusion

Segregated schooling is not simply a result of flaws in the way the market works and therefore will not be solved by actions to regulate or to redress perceived or real inequalities in terms of information or engagement. Even if the tight regime currently in place in England achieved perfect compliance with the regulations, it would not eliminate socially segregated admissions to schools.

Ultimately, the driver of segregated schooling is the desire of individuals and families to optimise their social position given the resources at their disposal. While this desire is shared by parents of *all* backgrounds, existing inequalities in social position and wealth largely determine different approaches to the question of choice of school.

The great social distance between the most advantaged and the least advantaged, the benefits of community solidarity, and the effects of what we might call 'social policing' together lead the majority of both groups — the affluent and the less affluent — to opt for segregated schooling.

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