

0075

Choice Advice Services in England – Making School Admissions Fair?

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Background

Provision of local authority Choice Advice services in England since 2006 can be considered part of broader attempts by a Labour government over the last decade to regulate secondary school choice and make it 'fair' for all. While many such measures have focused on the regulation of educational supply – for example controls over school admissions practices (West et al, 2009) and attempts to reduce hierarchies between schools by assigning them unique 'selling points' (e.g. badges of Specialist or Academy status) – Choice Advisers in England represent an attempt to regulate educational demand, correcting for market failures by giving parents lacking in system knowhow a stake in school choice procedures, cultivating their consumer identities and arguably giving them a greater hope of finding the best possible school for their child. Advisers are drawn from the state, private and voluntary sectors in order to provide expert information and consultancy on school choice for parents. The service is targeted specifically towards disadvantaged families who are perceived as having the greatest need for advice (see DCSF, 2009; Stiell et al, 2008) within a competitive and unequal education system.

Research Questions

From a critical perspective concerned with social justice, the role of Choice Adviser is an important job. Dominant discourses suggest that Choice Advice as a policy represents consumer empowerment and a long-awaited road towards equity within a growing global context of markets, choice and personalised public services. However, it also gives rise to problematic theoretical questions about: individual parental rights to choose versus wider citizenship responsibilities to community and society; the subjective nature of 'expert knowledge' in this area; and what might count as a promotion of 'fairness' or indeed Rawlsian 'legitimate partiality' for parents (Swift, 2003; Brighouse and Swift, 2009) in terms of school choice. Political values and conceptions of justice held and passed authoritatively on to parents by those contracted as Choice Advisers can be considered important because they are likely to influence parental attitudes, behaviours and expectations.

Methods

Who are the agents making up the English market in choice advice provision? What are their backgrounds and career histories? What vocational training equips them for the job they do? How far are they interconnected within a multi-sector provision network and how far do they constitute a 'broad church' in terms of the discursive assumptions underpinning their work? Beyond such background information, what are the discourses spoken by Advisers? What values do these discourses promote and how far might they advance or hinder working class empowerment, realising different conceptions of social justice and potentially reducing or exacerbating social division inside the English secondary schooling system?

Frame

This paper will report on early fieldwork findings (with fieldwork currently underway) from a qualitative policy sociology study of discourses flowing through complex cross-sector networks of Choice Advice policy and provision in England. It will draw on documentary analysis plus data from semi-structured interviews and ethnographic observations of state, private and voluntary sector actors involved in the delivery of choice advice, from national policy makers through to 'frontline' Advisers operating at local authority level. It will examine values, training, background, conceptions of fairness and views on what constitutes social justice with respect to school choice and admissions among these actors.

Research findings

The paper constitutes a key contribution to knowledge on recent school admissions reform because it reports on the discursive assumptions and possible impact of a new government initiative from an interdisciplinary perspective, bringing together critical educational policy sociology with political philosophy considerations of fairness. It will conclude by considering futures for measures such as Choice Advice and the broader regulation of school choice in England in an attempt to make it 'fair' for all, particularly as the Labour era of Third Way public services across Britain enters a potential twilight.