

Millennium Cohort Study Briefing 5

Parental choice of primary school

Based on Chapter 11 of *Children of the 21st century (Volume 2): The first five years*

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About these briefings

This Briefing is one of 14 that distil the key findings of the first three surveys of the Millennium Cohort Study, as collected in *Children of the 21st century (Volume 2): The first five years*.

The study has been tracking the Millennium children through their early childhood and plans to follow them into adulthood. It covers such diverse topics as parenting; childcare; school choice; child behaviour and cognitive development; child and parental health; parents' employment and education; income; housing; and neighbourhood.

It is the first of the nationwide cohort studies to over-sample areas with high densities of ethnic minorities and large numbers of disadvantaged families.

For the first survey, in 2001–2, interviewers visited the families of nearly 19,000 children aged 9 months throughout the United Kingdom. It established the circumstances of pregnancy and birth, as well as the families' social background. The second survey recorded how nearly 16,000 cohort children were developing at age 3. The third survey, when they were age 5, involved almost 15,500 children and provided a uniquely

detailed account of their physical, cognitive and social development in the year they entered school.

The study is housed at the Centre for Longitudinal Studies at the Institute of Education, University of London. It was commissioned by the Economic and Social Research Council, whose funding has been supplemented by a consortium of government departments.

Children of the 21st century (Volume 2): The first five years, edited by Kirstine Hansen, Heather Joshi and Shirley Dex, The Policy Press, 2010, can be ordered via www.policypress.co.uk

Briefing 5: Parental choice of primary school

Introduction

The 1988 Education Reform Act for England and Wales strengthened parents' rights to choose their child's school.² Over the past 20 years, however, there has been relatively little research into the factors uppermost in parents' minds when choosing their children's primary school. This Briefing provides new information from the Millennium Cohort Study (MCS) that enables us to examine the extent to which parents actually choose primary schools rather than simply opting for local schools. It also explores the reasons for their choices.

Some commentators argue that many parents, particularly those in rural areas, have little choice but to send their child to the local school. Choice in the state sector may therefore be largely an issue for parents in specific urban areas, such as London, where several local schools of variable quality may be available. Allen and Vignoles (2007) suggested that only around one in five children in England and Wales is benefiting from parental school choice. Burgess et al. (2006) estimated that about 50 per cent of children do not attend their nearest school. However, this does not necessarily mean that half of all parents are exercising school choice. Many children are turned away by their nearest school because it is oversubscribed.

So, it appears that whilst there is some real choice in the system, quantifying its extent is problematic. It would be useful to know which schools parents want their child to go to, the reasons for this choice and the extent to which parents are securing their first

choice. For such information, it is helpful to turn to the MCS.

The evidence on school choice

The initial motivation behind the parental choice policy was to raise standards in schools. It is argued that if parents can choose, they will select the most effective schools. It is also reasoned that academic standards rise when schools have to compete for pupils.

The evidence on the association between parental choice and higher standards is, however, contradictory and some research using pupil-level data has found very little impact from competition. There are also concerns that the policy can lead to social segregation or 'sorting' (Lavy 2006). It is said that the more socially advantaged pupils benefit, as their parents secure places for them in better schools. Oversubscribed schools may also be able to select the more academically or socially advantaged pupils. It is therefore important to identify which types of parents can exercise school choice and the criteria on which different parents choose schools.

A few qualitative studies have investigated why parents choose schools. Different groups of parents seem to use different choice criteria (Hastings et al. 2005). However, again the evidence is inconclusive and may not reflect parents' actual decisions. To understand this issue better it is necessary to have data that combine information on actual school choice and the reasons behind it. This Briefing responds to that need by analysing data for each UK

country provided by the age 5 sweep of the MCS.

State versus fee-paying schools

One of the first educational choices that parents may make is whether to educate their child in a fee-paying or state school. Around 5 per cent of MCS children in England went to fee-paying schools at age 5. In Northern Ireland it was around 3 per cent, and in Wales and Scotland only 2 per cent. These cross-country variations can be attributed to many factors, including wealth and cultural differences. However, country averages mask some regional and relatively local variations. For instance, in Inner London nearly one in five MCS children (18.4 per cent) was attending a fee-paying school at age 5, compared with 6.6 per cent in Outer London.

The data clearly show that private schools are largely the preserve of children with better-educated mothers (Table 1). In England, about one in eleven MCS children (8.7%), whose mother has a degree, attended a fee-paying school at age 5. By contrast, only 1.4 per cent of children whose mothers have only GCSE-level qualifications were in such schools. Significantly, a child whose mother has a degree is twice as likely to attend a fee-paying school in England, than in Wales, Northern Ireland or Scotland.

In Scotland and Northern Ireland, only children of professionals or managers attend a fee-paying school. In England, however, a small proportion of MCS parents from small employer and lower-level occupational backgrounds use private education (the

Table 1
Percentage of children attending fee-paying schools at age 5 by country and mother's education

	Mother's highest qualification				Total
	Fewer than 5 GCSEs grade A–C	5 or more GCSEs grade A–C	A-levels	Degree +	
England	–	1.4	1.7	8.7	4.8
Wales	–	–	1.1	3.5	1.7
Northern Ireland	–	2.0	–	4.1	3.1
Scotland	–	–	0.5	3.4	1.9

Percentages in the Briefing are weighted to adjust for disproportionate sampling within each country.

– too few observations.

Base: Children with valid data on school choice.

parents of some private school pupils in Wales were also small employers). This implies that some inter-country differences in opt-out rates from the state system are not attributable to income differences between England and the rest of the UK.

Applying for a state school place

Most parents are perhaps happy to enrol their child in their local school. However, if school choice is to have any impact on school competition and standards, a significant minority of parents needs to express a preference, and then secure a place in the chosen school.

Applying for a state-school place generally involves filling in a form that is sent to the local education authority (LEA) in England and Wales or the education library board (ELB) in Northern Ireland. Parents can name one or more schools on these forms. Children in Scotland are allocated a place in their local school but parents can ask their LEA for another school. In Scotland, therefore, it is clearer that parents making such a request are expressing a preference.

The age 5 MCS sweep showed that 89 per cent of parents in Northern Ireland and 75 per cent in England applied for a place via an ELB or LEA form. This implies that most parents in these countries were willing to express a preference. However, some state primaries in England and Wales – particularly voluntary-aided schools – have historically required a separate application form to be sent direct to them. Equally, some parents may not fill in LEA forms and simply accept the allocated place. In Wales,

fewer parents (58%) applied for a place via their LEA, while in Scotland only 38 per cent requested a particular school.

As Table 2 shows, a relatively high proportion of parents who send their children to fee-paying schools also applied to a state school. This may be because they failed to secure a place in their chosen state school. It could also be that parents seeking places in oversubscribed private schools are put on a waiting list and apply to state primaries in the meantime. The MCS data also suggest that a substantial proportion of parents gained a state school place without applying for one: 21 per cent in England, 41 per cent in Wales, 10 per cent in Northern Ireland and a massive 62 per cent in Scotland.

Of course, the local school may be the only practicable option for many families. This may help to explain the low proportion of parents expressing a preference in more sparsely populated areas. Secondly, if school quality is more similar in some UK countries than others, parents may accept their local school, simply because one school is like any another. Also, it may be that parents are more likely to express a preference if information about schools' performance is readily available. Currently, only England produces performance tables.

The MCS data also contain information on the number of schools that parents applied to. In Scotland, the majority (89%) of parents who request a particular school choose only one. The corresponding figures for the other countries are: Wales (70%), Northern Ireland (52%), and England (46%). In England, it is more common for

parents to rank three possible schools in order of preference.

Reasons for school choice

The MCS also asked parents why they chose particular schools. Among fee-paying parents in England, about a quarter cited school performance as the crucial factor. Friends or siblings at the school are also important for one in five of these parents. Amongst state school pupils whose parents did express a preference, 23.4 per cent cited proximity as most important, compared to just 4.3 per cent in the private sector. Nineteen per cent of state school parents who expressed a preference said school performance was important – well behind those mentioning friends or sibling attending the school (29.1%). Interestingly, the motivating factors for state school parents who did not express a preference were very similar to those of parents who did. The pattern was also similar across countries. However, in Scotland, those who did not request a particular school were far more likely to cite proximity as most important.

Realising school choice

Ninety-four per cent of MCS children in England attended a state primary that was their parents' first choice. In Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland the figure was even higher (98%). If these remarkable percentages are taken at face value, school choice appears to be working.

Of course, one explanation for these high success rates is that most parents selected a school that was likely to admit their child. MCS parents who had secured their

Table 2
School applications and fee-paying status (% in each Country)

	England	Wales	Northern Ireland	Scotland
Applied for place on LEA/ELB form and goes to state school	73.9	57.3	87.2	36.6
Applied for place on LEA/ELB form and goes to fee-paying school	1.0	0.5	1.6	1.6
Not applied and goes to fee-paying school	3.8	1.2	1.5	0.3
Not applied and goes to state school	21.3	41.0	9.7	61.5
Total observations	9,699	2,134	1,532	1,689

See note to Table 1.

Key statistics

18.4 per cent of Millennium cohort children in Inner London were attending private schools at age 5.

94 per cent of MCS children in England went to a state primary that was said to be their parents' first choice. In Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland the figure was even higher (98%).

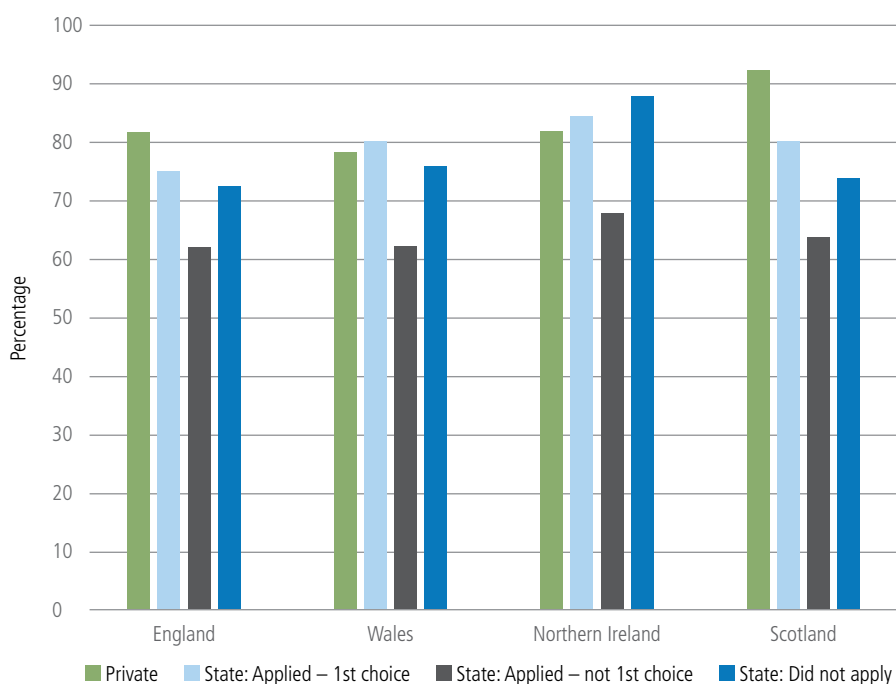
7 per cent of parents in Scotland who ostensibly gained a place in their first-choice school said that they would have preferred a different school. In England and Wales the figure was 6 per cent and in Northern Ireland 4 per cent.

first-choice school were also asked whether they would have liked to apply to a different school but did not. Between 4 and 7 per cent of these parents said that they had preferred a different school. If we exclude these figures this reduces the percentage of parents with children attending their real first-choice school from 94 to 88 per cent in England; from 98 to 92 per cent in Wales; from 98 to 95 per cent in Northern Ireland; and from 98 to 91 per cent in Scotland.

The MCS data were also used to establish whether some parents are more likely

to secure their first-choice school. In England, mothers with at least a degree are marginally less likely to achieve their first choice (87.2%) than mothers with fewer than five higher-grade GCSEs (93.7%). This could, of course, reflect the fact that university-educated parents are more likely to choose a higher-performing, oversubscribed school. Unsurprisingly, MCS parents who applied for a school but did not get their first choice were less likely than other parents to report full satisfaction with the school (see Figure 1).

Figure 1
Parental satisfaction with school



1 Kirstine Hansen and Anna Vignoles, Institute of Education, University of London. This text has been adapted and shortened to suit the format of these Briefings. Responsibility for any errors therefore rests with the Centre for Longitudinal Studies rather than the chapter authors.

2 Similar legislation was applied in Northern Ireland.

Conclusion

This Briefing has presented new information about parents' primary school choices. The extent to which they exercise at least some level of choice varies across countries. Further investigation of the data does, however, reveal that a small minority of parents did not express their true preference on their application forms. Instead, they presumably opted for a school that was more likely to admit their child. Therefore, the extent of genuine school choice is being slightly overstated. This is evidently a complex area. Nevertheless, some issues should become clearer as the MCS children pass through primary and secondary school. For example, when the MCS data are linked to children's later achievements it will be possible to examine the consequences of school choice. This Briefing represents a first chapter. There is much to come.

References

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