



LITERATURE REVIEW

Review of international literature on admissions

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1 Introduction

“ Whether this choice is a chimera for all, only available to some, or indeed, not valuable at all, lies at the heart of discussion about admissions. ”

We are entering a third wave in the socio-historical development of British education which is neither part of a final drive towards the 'meritocracy' or the result of a socialist victory for educational reform... The third wave can be characterised in terms of the rise of the ideology of parentocracy. This involves a major programme of educational reform under the slogans of parental choice, educational standards and the free market. (Brown, 1990)

Brown goes on to argue that while the state in the UK has increasingly controlled the organisation and content (curriculum) of the education system, it has decreased its control of selection and outcomes. Selection is now determined by market forces and so inequalities can no longer be attributed to the state but, rather, are the result of 'consumer sovereignty', parental preference and the pursuit of diversity. At the time of writing (1990), shortly after the Education Reform Act 1988, Brown was aware that the direction of change and developments was contingent rather than inevitable. However, his articulation of the situation has remained valid and the 'parentocracy' has been strengthened rather than diminished in the subsequent years.

The issue of admissions has to be seen against this background. The reason that the issue has come onto the agenda and, indeed, captured the attention of the media, is that it represents a far more critical debate. This debate operates at several levels. First, there is the level of the economy. The concern here is to ensure that the schools to which pupils can be admitted produce the outputs that meet economic needs. Hence, for example, the growth of city technology colleges and specialist schools, which themselves create further 'choice' (though only in accordance with economic needs as identified by the Government) and thus complexity in the admissions system. Second, there is the related but distinct socio-political level, where the concerns relate to equity and equality of access to things that are valued. Very obviously, there may be a tension between what 'consumers' value and what is promoted as valuable by the Government. And third,

in this particular case, there is the personal level. England's diverse population is similarly affected by the issue of school choice insofar as all have to engage in the admissions process unless they opt out for the private sector or home education. There is cogent evidence that reasons and motivations regarding the nature of the school attended at the personal level may be completely different from reasons and motivations at the national level on account of the intricate interactions of local policy, local provision and individual preference – and the latter may itself be culturally determined. Thus, state and/or professional assumptions about the criteria parents should be applying with regard to school choice may be turned upside down by the concerns and desires of ordinary families in the midst of lives led according to a range of values and preferences. And binding all together may be each agency's faith in the fact that it is giving or receiving a valuable 'choice'.

Whether this choice is a chimera for all, only available to some, or indeed, not valuable at all, lies at the heart of discussion about admissions. The following report, which attempts to bring together some of the literature on the issue in an international context, raises questions about whether any admissions process is independent of wider socio-economic factors and whether, in order to attain equality of access to an education that will lay the foundations for each individual to flourish in life, a far more radical solution is required.

In particular, the literature explored in this paper raises questions about:

- the way in which any system privileges one group over another;
- the capacity of different elements of 'the system' to engage in strategic behaviour that introduces inequalities not envisaged by other levels of the system, or the parent system;
- the difference in approaches to choice depending on the overall quality of education and lack of disparity in its distribution;

- the flexibility of resourcing to ensure that resources are not confined to specific locations;
- the degree to which choice needs to be circumscribed if equality of access to an education offering the opportunity for equal success is to be available.

Referring to the literature on admissions in other countries sharpens the articulation of the position in England. When one is familiar with the processes, procedures and legislative position, it is easy to lose sight of the core issues. Reference to contexts in which these processes, procedures and legislation are different yet where the challenges and outcomes rear their heads makes it easier to identify what really makes a difference. However, there are difficulties in undertaking an international review. Lack of familiarity with the context in another country, the literature emerging from that context and the source of that literature renders the reader dependent on the professional tools of reviewing (i.e. technical

searching of databases), and removes the softer yet valuable tools emerging from that professional judgement, which give an awareness of the balance and quality of the literature – for example, whether certain issues are discussed orally but not within articles, or whether the articles are from those with a vested interest. In addition, an international review is dependent on material presented in English; this criterion may capture academic pieces but not those written by practitioners or ‘consumers’ closer to the everyday issues, as it were. For this paper, the core research team at the NFER tried to address these difficulties by asking colleagues in their respective countries to comment on the text generated by the literature available through searches in the UK. The text was amended accordingly as necessary. However, it still has to be borne in mind that these colleagues had their own perspectives and may themselves have identified imbalance or approved the sentiments expressed accordingly.

2 Aims and methodology

“ *The principal aim of this review was to put the situation in England into the international context by examining options and identifying assumptions challenged by admissions systems in three other countries.* ”

The issue of school admissions policy and practice in England is currently undergoing considerable scrutiny. This is prompted by identified weaknesses in the system and by the perceived failure of the system to bring about reform and change in school profiles and in profiles of achievement seen as desirable from differing perspectives.

The principal aim of this review was to put the situation in England into the international context by examining options and identifying assumptions challenged by admissions systems in three other countries. In order to do this, it was necessary to describe situations regarding admissions in England as well as in the three selected countries. The literature was reviewed to identify the issues surrounding admissions in the various countries and to relate the findings to the situation in England, and identify, where possible, situations which policy-makers in England might like to explore in more depth.

The study was conducted between March 2006 and May 2006. The review involved two consecutive phases:

- Phase 1: Scoping;
- Phase 2: Reviewing and relating literature to the English policy context.

2.1 Phase 1: Scoping

A range of education databases was searched. Search strategies for all databases were developed by using terms from the relevant thesauri (where these were available), in combination with free-text searching. The keywords used in the database searches, together with a brief description of each of the databases searched, are outlined in appendix 1. All searches date from 1996 onwards. The literature that was sought related to compulsory education (i.e. early years, post-16 and higher education were *not* included). The focus was on literature or documentation relevant to pupil admissions in mainstream schools. Only literature written in English was obtained. It should be noted that the review only considered the immediate outcomes

of admission processes at the time of the process (i.e. the placement outcomes). It did not consider outcomes from the ‘end’ of the system (e.g. relative value added of schools in the countries concerned or pupil performance consequent on placement decisions).

The database searches were supplemented by scanning the reference lists of relevant articles, thus identifying further studies. The team also searched relevant websites and downloaded documents and publications lists: this ‘snowballing’ technique proved to be effective in identifying further relevant material.

2.2 Phase 2: Reviewing

All retrieved texts were subjected to a preliminary review in order to establish whether the admissions issues were relatable to those currently of interest in England. The quality and quantity of texts from other countries were also considered, so that the research team could make an informed choice of the three countries of focus. The three selected countries were the Netherlands, New Zealand and Sweden, which each had different school systems. One of the interests of the review was the way in which different systems generated different admissions issues or the same issues emerged in different systems. Literature relating to the US and Australia was retrieved but these countries were rejected for the study on the grounds that they have federal systems, with different states having different admissions criteria. Thus admissions issues might be applicable only to a single state rather than across the country as a whole and the literature related to the situation in this state would be relatively restricted.

Relevant material was collected and reviewed using a standard framework that contained the following fields:

- authorship, dates and full source details;
- purpose of the article and the admissions issues covered;
- country or countries it covered;

- overview of the findings and issues arising;
- reviewers' comments.

Country documentation (e.g. ministry websites) relating to the circumstances discussed in the literature was also collected electronically, where available. A content analysis of the documentation was undertaken to support the literature studied. It is important to note that given the time limitations, the methodology did not intend to review the literature in a systematic way.

Other limitations, referred to in the introduction, were framed by the fact that materials were

restricted to those written in English, and that the NFER team was unfamiliar with the way the relevant policy and practice were commonly interpreted and perceived in the selected countries and were dependent on articulation in the literature, which may have presented a selective view. An attempt to address this problem was made by asking colleagues in the countries concerned to check the text for accuracy. However, as these colleagues themselves may have read the text from a particular perspective, some bias may have remained. A higher level of rigour would have involved more substantial resources than were available for this review.

3 Outline of the current school admissions system in England

“ *The situation becomes slightly more complex when considering the arrangements within faith schools.* ”

The School Standards and Framework Act 1998 (GB, Statutes, 1998) introduced and set out the framework for school admissions legislation in England. This included the duty on the Secretary of State to issue a Code of Practice on school admissions arrangements and admission appeals (DfEE, 1999, 2000). Some of the sections of the School Standards and Framework Act have since been replaced by new regulations or legislation. A number of changes, such as Admission Forums becoming mandatory, were brought about through the Education Act 2002 (England and Wales, Statutes, 2002) and the associated amended and new regulations (ACE, 2003). In 2003, a revised *School Admissions Code of Practice* statutory guidance was issued to take account of these changes (DfES, 2003a). The guidance applied to primary and secondary school admissions from September 2004, with further changes applying to school intakes from September 2005. A separate Code was also issued for admission appeals (DfES, 2003b).

3.1 School Admissions Code of Practice

The *School Admissions Code of Practice* (DfES, 2003a) sets out the aims and objectives of the current admissions arrangements:

School admission arrangements should work for the benefit of all parents and children in an area. The arrangements should be as simple as possible for parents to use, and help them to take the best decisions about the preferred school for their children.

(p. 8)

It also states that schools' admissions criteria should be clear and fair and the admissions arrangements should facilitate this process. The Code outlines the role of the admissions authorities (i.e. the local authority for community and voluntary controlled schools and the governing body for foundation, voluntary aided schools and academies) within an area to consult each other annually

on the admissions arrangements for their schools.

The Code states that admissions authorities must consider preferences expressed by parents and comply with those preferences 'unless certain reliefs apply' (p. 2). For example, where schools receive a greater number of applicants than there are available places, then oversubscription criteria must be applied. The oversubscription criteria, which have to be clear and fair and published as part of the admissions policies, should specify which particular groups of children will be given priority. For example, preference may be given to children with a sibling already attending the school. The Code recommends that admissions authorities give top priority to looked-after children in their oversubscription criteria because of the multiple disruptions many of these children face through changes of care placement. This 'recommendation' has more recently become statutory (see below for further details). The Code also emphasised that:

It would not be good practice for admissions authorities to set or seek to apply oversubscription criteria that had the effect of disadvantaging certain social groups in the local community, including disabled pupils. Examples would be explicit or implicit discrimination on the basis of parental occupation, employment, income range, standard of living or home facilities.

(DfES, 2003a, p. 12)

The situation becomes slightly more complex when considering the arrangements within faith schools. Schools that are designated as having a particular religious character are able to give preference to families of that faith, but there are a number of caveats that attempt to ensure that such admission arrangements do not lead to the discrimination of particular groups, such as ensuring that the admission arrangements do not conflict with other legislation, including the Race Relations Act (DfES, 2003a).

The Code of Practice also sets out the process for dealing with objections where the wider aspects of school organisation or admissions policies cannot be agreed locally. Objections are referred to an independent Schools Adjudicator. This process differs from that for appeals from parents against individual placements. (There is further description of the admission appeals process in section 3.2 below.) During the 2004/05 academic year, the Office of the Schools Adjudicator dealt with a total of 227 cases, which included 140 admission objections and 58 in-year admission variations (Office of the Schools Adjudicator, 2005). It has been suggested, since the publication of the Code, that the Adjudicator should take a more proactive role in ensuring that admissions systems are adhered to (West and Hind, 2003).

As already mentioned, Admission Forums became mandatory following the Education Act 2002 (England and Wales. Statutes, 2002). The Code outlines the requirements of the Admission Forums:

Admission Forums provide a vehicle for admission authorities and other key interested parties to get together to discuss the effectiveness of local admission arrangements, seek arrangements on how to deal with difficult admission issues and advise admission authorities on ways in which their arrangements can be improved.

(DfES, 2003a, p. 24)

Membership of the Admission Forums should include representatives nominated from the local authority, from schools of all types within the area (community, voluntary controlled, foundation, voluntary aided, city technology colleges, academies), as well as representatives from the Church of England diocesan and Roman Catholic diocesan, parent governors and the local community itself. The Code of Practice states that local authorities should also consider membership from other faith groups or ethnic minority groups, particularly in areas where such groups make up a significant proportion of the population.

The Admission Forums have a role in considering the extent to which both current and proposed admission arrangements support the interests of local families and supporting

the placements of vulnerable and 'hard-to-place' children, such as those who have been excluded from school and are seeking placements mid-year (the 'casual admissions'). Admission Forums should be consulted on coordinated admission arrangements and advise the local authority on the effectiveness of the particular arrangements.

The year 2005 was the first one in which authorities were required to coordinate admission arrangements between schools. The purpose of coordinating arrangements is to ensure that each child receives only one offer of a school place and that this is received on a specified day – 1 March – thus making the process less stressful for parents. The 2003 Code of Practice set out the plans for coordinating admissions both for schools within a local authority and for schools across a number of local authorities, although statutory regulations for full coordination across local authorities have not been issued (DfES, 2003a). Until full coordination is implemented, it is still possible for parents to receive multiple offers of a school place, each from a different local authority.

3.2 School Admission Appeals Code of Practice

The *School Admission Appeals Code of Practice* (DfES, 2003b) was issued alongside the main school admissions Code. It covers two types of admission appeals:

- appeals from parents regarding a decision of a school placement for their child;
- appeals from governing bodies of schools, where the local authority is the admission authority, to admit to their school a child who has been permanently excluded from two or more schools in the past.

It is the responsibility of admission authorities to establish independent appeal panels for dealing with admission appeals. Members of the panel are appointed by, but must be independent of, the admission authority. Membership must include at least one person without personal experience of the provision of education or school management, and one person with experience of education or a parent of a school-age child.

The Code states that appeal arrangements must be clear and easy for parents to understand.

Where a child has been refused entry to a school, parents should receive, in writing, full reasons why the application was unsuccessful, in light of the published admissions criteria for the school. The letter to parents must inform them of their right of appeal, including details of how to make an appeal

(DfES, 2003b, p. 19)

The number of admissions appeals increased between academic years 1995/96 and 2000/01 (Coldron *et al.*, 2002). There has since been a decrease in numbers of appeals lodged (Shaw, 2004).

3.3 Changes to school admissions since the 2003 Codes

The Education and Skills Select Committee report *Secondary Education: School Admissions* (GB. Parliament. HoC. Education and Skills Committee, 2004), which focused on the process of school admissions and the impact of the admissions and admission appeals Codes of Practice, recommended that there should be revised regulations or legislation to support and strengthen these Codes of Practice. However, during 2004 the Government responded to the Select Committee's recommendations and noted that current admissions guidance provided the necessary power and that new legislation was not required. Instead, the intention was to amend the existing Codes and to clarify the guidance, particularly in relation to 'hard-to-place' children (The Education Network, 2004).

During July to October 2005 the DfES held a consultation on the proposed revised Codes of Practice 2005. The proposals included further guidance on what was considered good practice and bad practice in relation to oversubscription criteria and strengthened regulations that admissions authorities should give priority to looked-after children in their oversubscription criteria. It also included guidance on using the 'first preference first' scheme, further guidance on fair banding, revised guidance on coordinated admission

arrangements and infant class size appeals, and a new section on protocols for 'hard-to-place' pupils. However, in December 2005, following the consultations, the DfES announced that the decision had been made not to issue the revised Codes of Practice and that the existing Codes from 2003 would remain in force. The only changes were that new *Education (Looked After Children) Regulations*, regarding the prioritisation of looked-after children in admissions arrangements, and new *Education (Aptitude for Particular Subjects) Regulations*, regarding fair banding, would be issued (The Education Network, 2005). The Education Act 2005 (England and Wales. Statutes, 2005) included a section on the school admissions of looked-after children, making it mandatory for maintained schools in England to give preference to these children.

The White Paper *Higher Standards, Better Schools for All* (GB. Parliament. HoC, 2005) included many proposals affecting school admissions, and the current Education and Inspections Bill 2006 (GB. Parliament. HoC, 2006), which takes account of these proposals among others, is expected to be passed through parliament in the coming months. The main areas of discussion have been around the proposals for trust schools, which will have greater autonomy over their admissions arrangements than existing community schools. Trust schools will be similar to existing foundation schools and will be required to set out their admissions arrangements within the guidelines of the *School Admissions Code of Practice* (DfES, 2003a). Given the greater autonomy of such schools, concerns have been raised that there will be greater social segregation and selection by ability. These issues are discussed further in section 4.

Through the Education and Inspections Bill (GB. Parliament. HoC, 2006), Admissions Forums will take on an extended role, have a wider membership and their decision-making processes will be strengthened. Furthermore:

Admissions Forums will have the power to produce an annual report on local admission arrangements, and on how the arrangements affect fair access and particular groups. It is envisaged that the

Schools Commissioner would draw upon those reports and other data to provide a national review of fair access.

(Gillie, 2006, p. 50)

The 2005 White Paper also emphasised the importance of fair admissions, through banning interviews as part of the admissions process and reaffirming the ban on new selection by ability. It dealt with the use of banding and parental choice and access issues. Again, the issues surrounding fair admissions and parental choice are described in more detail in section 4.

A key aspect of the Bill in relation to school admission arrangements is the strengthening of the existing Code of Practice to ensure that all relevant parties 'act in accordance with' it, rather than merely 'have regard to' it (GB. Parliament. HoC, 2006, p. 26).

This section has outlined the current school admissions system in England, and through some of the changes that have been brought about by legislation and associated guidance, it is possible to build a picture of the main issues that are currently under debate in this country with regard to school admissions. The next section outlines these issues in more detail.

4 Overview of current admissions issues in England

“ When schools are oversubscribed ... there is scope for schools to select pupils in ways that may disadvantage some applicants. ”

4.1 Admissions: issues of fair access

As shown in section 3, ‘fairness’ in the admissions process was a key aspect of the *School Admissions Code of Practice* (DfEE, 1999), strengthened further in the revised guidance issued in 2003 (DfES, 2003a). But equity and fairness in admissions systems have continued to be controversial issues, discussed by researchers, policy-makers and the media for a number of years, not least because there is national policy but no nationally applied practice. Different criteria are used in different schools in different parts of the country.

there has never been a single system of school admissions that has operated in every school, or even across an individual region or LEA. Instead the history of school admissions in England... can be characterised as a complex mosaic of practice and local interpretation

(Taylor and Gorard, 2003, p. 7)

Responsibility for setting admissions criteria lies with the local authorities (for community and voluntary controlled schools) or the individual schools’ governing bodies (for foundation and voluntary aided schools), within the guidelines set in the Code of Practice. When schools are oversubscribed, with more applications for places than there are places available, there is scope for schools to select pupils in ways that may disadvantage some applicants. This has been the focus of a series of studies by West and colleagues (e.g. West and Pennell, 1998; West and Hind, 2003; West *et al.*, 2004; West, 2006).

West and Hind (2003) examined individual secondary schools’ admissions criteria and found that although the majority of schools had clear, fair and objective criteria, there was ‘a significant minority’ using criteria that selected certain groups of children, and consequently excluded others. Furthermore, it was the schools that were their own admissions authority that were found to lack equity in their admissions criteria. The research showed that where these schools

were oversubscribed, they were in a position to ‘cream skim’ – selecting the pupils most likely to have a positive impact on their academic performance tables and not selecting those who were likely to have an adverse effect (West *et al.*, 2004). In 2004, it was noted that since the late 1980s there had been an increase in the number of schools that were responsible for their own admissions, and since 2004 the number of schools within this category is likely to have increased further following the promotion of academy schools and the new trust schools, which, as stated in section 3, will be responsible for setting their own admissions criteria (West *et al.*, 2004). West *et al.* concluded by stating that:

a thorough investigation [should] be conducted to consider whether the admissions problems that have been examined... would be better addressed by removing the rights of schools to act as their own admission authority

(p. 362).

However, O’Shaughnessy and Leslie (2005), reviewing the proposals in the White Paper *Higher Standards, Better Schools for All* (GB. Parliament. HoC, 2005), regarded the new trust schools as a positive step ‘in giving schools more say in their own destiny’ and criticised the trust school proposals for not giving such schools much more autonomy than currently accorded to other schools. O’Shaughnessy and Leslie suggested radical and wide-ranging reforms to the current school system to ensure more ‘good school places’, making admissions fairer for all pupils. They did not, however, address the issue of what the profile of these ‘good school places’ would look like. They suggested abolishing the current academies programme and using the money to provide additional funding, referred to in the study as an ‘advantage premium’, which would be attached to individual pupils in ‘failed schools’. They argued that the funding should be attached to the pupils who are being failed by the current system, rather than to the schools that are failing them. This highlights the fact that admissions policies, *per se*, are related to

more fundamental issues about equality of opportunity and access to education.

Research examining the equity of admissions criteria in England has also focused on the use of ability or aptitude selection and 'banding'. The study by West *et al.* (2004) examined school-level admissions criteria by collecting information on admissions from 2862 non-selective secondary schools in England. They examined the schools that selected a proportion of their pupils by ability or aptitude in particular subjects. The situation was found to be complex because:

- there was a range of definitions of 'ability' or 'aptitude' across schools and across curriculum areas;
- there were variations in the number and type of subjects used for ability or aptitude selection;
- partial selection was permitted in particular cases but not in others (due to changes in legislation).

As with other selection mechanisms, the majority of schools found to select a proportion of pupils based on their ability or aptitude were those that were their own admissions authority, i.e. the foundation and voluntary aided schools.

With regard to banding – selecting pupils based on their ability in order to achieve a 'balanced' intake across the ability range – West *et al.* (2004) concluded that school-level banding (in schools that were their own admissions authority) was more inequitable than banding at local authority level (which applied to community and voluntary controlled schools). Some schools that were their own admission authority applied the banding criteria by admitting a lower proportion of pupils from the lower ability bands compared to the higher ability bands. The process as a whole was fairer when applied across an area rather than to one school within an area. So again, research has shown that where schools applied their own admissions criteria, even when based on the Code of Practice guidance, it led to a lack of equity in admissions.

Admissions to schools in London has presented challenges additional to those identified above, because London is such a highly populated urban area with a large choice of schools and a range of transport options. Taylor and Gorard (2003) questioned whether the current admissions system was 'failing' and whether London's problems were unique to the area or applicable across England. Their suggested changes to the admissions system in London included:

- support for parents in understanding the relationship between school choice and educational attainment, and in understanding the admission arrangements in all types of schools;
- allowing popular schools to expand, thus decreasing the need for oversubscription criteria to be applied;
- returning to the use of catchment areas within admissions criteria.

Since the research was published in 2003, a number of changes have taken place which go some way towards these suggestions. For example, there is now coordinated admissions across the 33 London boroughs and some of the neighbouring authorities, so that parents receive only one offer of a school place on one date. Furthermore, the current Education and Inspections Bill (GB. Parliament. HoC, 2006) includes proposals to encourage 'popular' schools to expand. However, Taylor and Gorard acknowledged that their suggested changes 'may only shift the failings of wider social and geographical inequalities to other LEAs, schools and parents' (2003, p. 27).

4.2 School choice: parental preferences and social segregation

The issues surrounding school choice have been researched by educationalists and economists, and changes to legislation have aimed to address some of the issues in this area. But it continues to be an issue of much debate and this section highlights some of the main issues covered by research and policy developments in England. It does not attempt to discuss all of the issues in detail, but it gives an outline of some of the current issues within this vast research area.

4.2.1 Parental preferences

There has been ongoing debate about school admissions and parental choice, particularly since the 1980s, with the introduction of preferred placements, increased parental choice, and the fact that schools have had to market themselves much more strongly in order to compete for pupil numbers, on which their budget depends (Herbert, 2000). Taylor and Gorard (2003) summarised the situation:

The dominant principle for admission into secondary schools is currently that of open enrolment and school choice. This allows parents to choose which school they would like their child to attend.

(p. 2)

And Gillie (2006) noted that:

Government policy since 1997 has been to seek to extend parental choice through promoting greater diversity in the school system.

(p. 39)

Having interviewed headteachers, Herbert (2000) discussed how the local environment and its social profile affects school choice, and argued that 'there is a strong social class influence on school choice that maintains inequalities' (p. 96), explaining that 'alert' parents were better able to make choices than families from socially disadvantaged backgrounds. Other studies concur: Sinnott (2004), responding to the Government's *Five Year Strategy* (DfES, 2004), claimed that:

Only some parents can fight their way through an admissions system that allows individual schools to set their own criteria. That is not choice: that is a test of parents' ability to fight their way through a morass of admissions schemes and is a recipe for selection by schools

(p. 1).

Flatley *et al.* (2001) commented that better educated mothers were more likely to understand the technicalities of the admissions allocation process than those less well educated. They found that the better educated mothers were more likely to use formal sources of information when making

choices of schools and to take account of oversubscription criteria. The accessibility to parents of clear information on the admissions process was explored by West and Hind (2003), who found that:

Secondary school brochures produced by local education authorities varied enormously in terms of the information they contained and the clarity of information provided. Some LEAs did not provide information on schools that are their own admission authorities. For these schools parents had to contact schools directly for the information needed. This made the secondary school transfer process complicated – in particular, for parents who are not as well-educated or informed as others, for those who are not fluent speakers of English and new arrivals to the country

(p. 17).

This raises some important issues – first, that in some cases parents had to access a number of sources in order to obtain admissions information on all local schools, and second, that lack of clear information was likely to have an adverse effect on parents who were less well educated and those whose first language was not English, exacerbating the social segregation issue. Herbert (2000) argued that headteachers were the key players in the process of school choice, as they acted as the gatekeepers of information in this marketing environment. There have been recent moves to improve access to information for parents, such as the changes proposed in the recent White Paper (GB. Parliament. HoC, 2005) (described further at the end of this section).

Research into parental choice in admissions includes that on the factors that influence parents in making school choices for their children. Herbert (2000) distinguished between 'catchment effects', or the incentives to attend the nearest school, and 'parental choice effects'. This study found that parental choice had the biggest effect at the transfer from primary to secondary school. The parental choice effects at the secondary admissions stage were found to be siblings at the school, league table positions, having a sixth form,

and the perceived quality of the school. Bagley *et al.* (2001) identified parents' reasons for *not* choosing particular schools: transport and distance, pupils at the school, the ethnic composition, the school environment, staff at the school, the headteacher, the school reputation, and bullying issues. Bagley *et al.* suggested that the chief considerations of parents when choosing a school for their child were geography and transport links. Academic performance tables were not necessarily the predominant determinant but the perceived quality of a school was important. Parents tended to select the school according to the social type it represented and whether they felt their child would best fit in. Thus, parents were no longer simply rejecting a school because of poor academic results, but rather on account of their perceptions of the quality of the school.

This accords with Reay and Lucey's (2000) recognition of the importance of looking at school choice from a pupil's point of view. They explored the extent to which children's experiences of choosing a secondary school were affected by their social differences and found that children tended to choose a school guided by a 'sense of one's place' (Bourdieu, 1993), which was influenced by social class, race and gender. So, like their parents (Bagley *et al.*, 2001), children were choosing schools based on the schools' overall characteristics.

The research described above demonstrates that the issues of school choice and, particularly, parental preferences is a complex area which involves many interrelated factors. Recent changes to the admissions system in England have attempted to address some of these issues.

As stated in section 3, as well as aiming to make the admissions system fairer, the revised Code of Practice guidance for school admissions (DfES, 2003a) aimed to make the process *easier* for parents and children. The system allowed parents to state all of their school preferences on one form and specified a national day (1 March) on which all offers for school places would be made. The guidance stated that for secondary school admissions, parents must be able to express at least three preferences, give the reasons for choosing them and be able to rank them.

The Code of Practice also stated that in order for parents to make informed decisions about admissions, they needed to have access to relevant information and clear guidance. Local authorities have a duty to publish information about admission arrangements, including the oversubscription criteria, for all the maintained mainstream schools in the area. If a child is refused a place, parents have a right to be told the reasons for this and they have the right to appeal to an independent panel (see section 3 above).

More recently, the issue of parental choice and admissions has received further attention as it was included in the schools White Paper *Higher Standards, Better Schools for All* (GB. Parliament. HoC, 2005). The White Paper set out the Government's aim to ensure improved school choice within an increasingly specialist system. The Government intends to achieve this by:

- providing better and more consistent levels of information for all parents and developing networks of 'dedicated choice advisers' to help targeted parents make informed choices;
- providing free transport to children from socially deprived families to one of their three nearest secondary schools within a six-mile radius (when the schools are outside walking distance);
- supporting schools in introducing banding within their admissions policies, in order to reserve a number of places for children outside traditional catchment areas (as some specialist schools and academies already do).

4.2.2 School choice and social segregation

A contested issue is whether increased school choice has led to increased social segregation. The uneven distribution of pupils of different backgrounds has been noted (Taylor, 2003). For example, Waterman (2006) presented data to suggest that voluntary aided primary schools tended to admit a lower proportion of pupils eligible for free school meals (FSM) than the proportion of such children living within the local communities. The community schools were found to admit a slightly higher

proportion of these pupils, but at the time of publication the report was criticised by the Catholic Education Service, among others, for not recognising that its schools were likely to serve a much wider geographical area than that used by the study. The quantitative analysis by Gorard *et al.* (2002) of data from every state-funded school over a 12-year period found that overall segregation had declined between 1989 and 2001. It had risen after 1997 but in 2001 segregation remained below the 1989 level. They attributed this to three factors: the local social geography, the school organisation at a local level, and the individual school admissions system (Glatter, 2004).

Gorard *et al.* (2002) concluded that the admissions system had not created the social segregation that people feared though there were higher levels of segregation in local authorities using systems based on catchment area and where there were several schools responsible for their own admissions systems (i.e. voluntary aided and foundation schools). Commenting in the *Times Educational Supplement* on the proposals suggested by the Social Market Foundation (SMF) a couple of years later, Slater (2004) wrote:

many of the 1,060 foundation and voluntary-aided (faith) secondaries who are their own admission authorities use their freedom to cherry-pick middle-class pupils

(p. 18)

The SMF proposals suggested that parental choice should be the first principle in school admissions, and where parents' choice could not be met because of a lack of capacity, a national ballot should be used to ensure that parents from socially deprived backgrounds were not disadvantaged (Haddad, 2004).

Other literature has suggested that school admissions and the apparent increase in choice for middle-class parents is leading to increased segregation (Lucey and Reay, 2002; Reay and Lucey, 2004) and that marketisation had 'deepened social and class divisions' (Thrupp, 1999). This has been largely due to the fears of middle-class families about providing the best education for their children; they have engaged in strategic behaviour by buying property in the catchment area and

entering their children for selective school examinations (Lucey and Reay, 2002; Reay and Lucey, 2004).

Similarly, Fitz *et al.* (2002) and Taylor (2003) explained that the most significant factor that causes segregation is the fact that parents are most likely to choose their local school and the majority of oversubscribed school places are allocated on the basis of catchment areas. Thus segregation is reinforced by the housing market and by particular schools (e.g. grammar, specialist, faith) overtly and covertly selecting the more academically able, or operating 'unfair' admissions criteria (see section 3.1 above) (Fitz *et al.*, 2002; Taylor, 2003). Fitz *et al.* (2002) also found from examining local authority admissions policies that these schools were less likely to admit pupils from working-class and ethnic minority families. Taylor (2003) suggested that to reduce segregation, parents should be provided with better information when choosing a school, and that free transport should be provided to enable parents to choose schools outside their residential areas. Both suggestions later appeared in the proposals in the White Paper *Higher Standards, Better Schools for All* (GB. Parliament. HoC, 2005) (see section 4.2.1 above).

Glatter (2004) discussed whether the introduction of more specialist schools and faith schools had increased school choice. From the limited empirical evidence that was available (Woods *et al.*, 1998), it was suggested that apart from the small proportion of parents who have a preference for sending their child to a faith school or a single-sex school, there was no widespread demand for school diversity. Parents seemed to favour a school that could deliver 'the standard product' well, rather than one with a specialism. Thus Glatter (2004) found it puzzling that policy-makers continued to show an interest in school choice and increased specialisms. Glatter raised the point of whether an increase in the number of schools with a specialism would be perceived by parents as more of a choice than a smaller number of more homogeneous schools. This is something that may be considered further, in light of the fact that there are already more than 2300 specialist schools

in England, and within the next two years, developments will effect 'a fully specialist school system', enabling all schools that meet the requirements to have at least one specialist subject (GB. Parliament. HoC, 2005, p. 43). Indeed, Glatter (2004) argued that more attention should be paid to the way in which policy and practice over school admissions contribute to the wider goal of enhancing satisfaction among parents and pupils over school allocations.

4.3 Overview

This section has described some of the prominent issues that have been raised about the current school admissions system in England, many of which are generated by the range of admissions criteria across

schools. Different criteria can lead to inequities in admissions, particularly where schools have responsibility for their own admissions, and make it challenging for parents to fully understand the system and their choices. Attention is drawn to the fact that socio-economic status can affect not only the capacity of parents and children to make informed choice but also shape what they regard as 'valuable' and worth choosing. Combined with other factors, the result is an uneven distribution of pupils of different characteristics across schools.

The following sections of this report outline the admissions systems in three different countries and discusses the issues they face in relation to school admissions.

5 Educational provision in Sweden¹

“All-through schools are non-selective, full-time and coeducational.”

5.1 Compulsory education

There are three phases in the Swedish educational structure (age 3–19):

- pre-compulsory (in the *förskola*) for ages 0–7;
- the compulsory phase, comprising primary and lower secondary schooling (in all-through schools – the *grundskola*) for ages 7–16;
- upper secondary (in the *gymnasieskola*) for ages 16–19.

Education is compulsory for nine years, usually between the ages of seven and 16. However, if places are available, all children wishing to start school at age six are able to do so. Exceptionally, some children may be allowed to start school at age eight. In such cases, children complete compulsory education either a year earlier or later than usual.

All-through schools are non-selective, full-time and coeducational. Normally, students progress through the system automatically. However, after consulting a student’s parents, in exceptional circumstances, the headteacher may decide not to move a student up to the next class. The headteacher may also decide, part of the way through an academic year, to transfer a student to a higher class if the student is able to cope and the parents give their consent.

See appendix 2 for an overview diagram of the education system in Sweden.

5.2 Control and organisation

Overall responsibility for the education system lies with the Ministry of Education, Research and Culture. There are also two independent national agencies for education which are funded by the Government. The National Agency for Education is primarily responsible for the inspection, evaluation and monitoring of the public school system, but also has responsibility for curriculum frameworks such as syllabuses and grading criteria. The

National Agency for School Improvement supports municipalities and schools in achieving national goals for education.

At local level, municipalities are responsible for school organisation, staffing and resource management, in accordance with national ministry guidelines.

5.3 Public sector and private sector education

The term ‘independent school’ (*fristående skola*) in Sweden is used to refer to non-fee paying, non-municipal schools (Phillips *et al.*, 2004) offering nine years of full-time compulsory education to pupils aged from six or seven to 15 or 16. Independent schools receive public funding comparable to that of municipal schools provided that they do not charge students an additional tuition fee and do not refuse to accept low-ability students (Sandström and Bergström, 2002) but instead admit students on a first-come first-served basis. There is a range of school types: they can be run by individuals, education companies, cooperatives, community agencies or societies or for-profit corporations, and the range includes religious schools and those adopting a special approach (e.g. Montessori or Waldorf) (Raham, 2002; Sandström and Bergström, 2002). The education provided in independent schools generally has to correspond with that offered in municipal schools, meet specific academic standards (the Government has the authority to inspect and monitor these schools – Phillips *et al.*, 2004), follow the national curriculum (Green and Cackett, 2005) and allow students to work towards the general goals of compulsory education.

5.4. Admission criteria for primary and lower secondary education

Primary and lower secondary education is provided in all-through schools – *grundskola* – as a single phase. This section therefore

¹ All references for this section are taken from O’Donnell *et al.* (2006) unless otherwise stated.

describes admissions to primary and lower secondary.

The great majority of schools in Sweden are municipal and students are normally placed in the municipal school nearest to their home. Parents do, however, have the right to opt for another school run by their municipality or to place their child in a Government-approved independent school, provided that there is space and that their choice does not create major economic or organisational problems for the municipality. Where a school is oversubscribed, priority is given to students living closest.

A student's home municipality is obliged to pay for his or her education even if the student chooses to attend a school in another municipality. There are no regulations on inter-municipality repayment. If a student chooses to attend an independent school approved for the provision of compulsory schooling the student's home municipality is obliged to pay for the schooling. However, should parents choose to send their child to a school that is not one referred to by the municipality, they forfeit their rights to free school transport.

Pupils can be put on the list for a *Fristående skola* at birth (Hockley and Nieto, 2004). Raham (2002) cites an explanation given in an interview with the Executive Director of the Swedish Independent Schools Association:

Schools in Sweden may not use grades as means for admitting pupils before Grade 10 [age 16/17], as open access is required by the School Act. This applies to non-municipal schools as well. Certain magnet programs, however, are permitted under the School Act to screen for aptitude (i.e., music, sports, etc). Non-municipal schools generally admit students by queue, in the order applications are received. The schools may offer diagnostic tests and counsel prospective parents regarding the likelihood of their child's success in the school program and/or encourage special tutoring as a condition of enrolment. They may not refuse to enroll a student, however, except in cases where there are great costs for special needs programs

and a municipality has not attached these costs to the student transfer funds.

(p. 22)

5.5 Admission criteria for upper secondary education

Since 1 July 1992, the Education Act has obliged municipalities to provide upper secondary schooling (for students usually aged 16 plus) free of charge for all young people to the end of the first six months of the year of their 20th birthday. Nearly all students continue to upper secondary school, and in 2003 97.7 per cent of all pupils finishing compulsory school during the spring started an upper secondary education in the autumn of the same year.

Students must have completed compulsory school (*grundskola*), been awarded the leaving certificate (*grundskolabetyg*), and received pass grades in Swedish, English and mathematics for access to the national and specialist programmes available at upper secondary level. Students choose which programme they wish to follow. However, if the number of applicants is higher than the number of places available, selection is based on the student's final school reports from the *grundskola*, with precedence being given to those with the highest 'merit rating'. Proficiency tests or certificates attesting special skills, for example in music, and evidence of knowledge or skills of importance to a particular course, may also be taken into consideration and may enhance the student's merit rating by a maximum of 10 points.

A limited number of places at upper secondary school are set aside for pupils who owing to special circumstances should be given preferential access or who come from schools where grades usually cannot be compared with those obtained from the compulsory school.

In 2005, an average of 60 per cent of students beginning an upper secondary programme were accepted on their preferred programme. As is the case in compulsory schools (*grundskole*), most upper secondary schools in Sweden are municipal and most students attend school in the municipality where they live. However, students may opt to attend

schools in another municipality, for example if the programme of their choice is not available in their own municipality. In such cases the local municipality usually pays for a student's schooling in another area. However, in October 2004 the Swedish parliament approved the governmental bill *Knowledge and Quality – eleven steps for improving upper secondary education* (Eurydice Unit Sweden, 2006). This included the proposal that students should be able to apply for a programme in other municipalities even if the same programme

is available in their home municipality. Students are to be accepted where there are places still available after applicants from the municipality in which the programme takes place have been given precedence. The student's home municipality pays a maximum of what the programme costs in their own municipality. The principle behind the changes is that unrestricted application may stimulate municipal cooperation on upper secondary education, which may in turn lead to stronger educational supply in a region.

6 Commentary on current admissions issues in Sweden

“Over the past 15 years a number of rapid and sweeping reforms have brought about a restructuring of the Swedish education system. Two themes have dominated educational policy and politics in Sweden:”

6.1 Admissions criteria

‘Equity’ is ‘one of the cornerstones of the Swedish education system’, and an important feature of the Swedish education system is its ‘homogeneity’. The Ministry states that all children and young people should be provided with access to ‘the same education, regardless of sex, place of residence, social and financial circumstances’, and that although there are a number of different types of school, ‘each type of school must offer equivalent education irrespective of where it is provided’ (The Swedish Ministry of Education and Science (MES), 2004, p. 7) – ‘all schools must be good schools. No one should need to de-select the pre-school or school that is closest to their home because it is of a poor quality’ (p. 15).

Over the past 15 years a number of rapid and sweeping reforms have brought about a restructuring of the Swedish education system. Two themes have dominated educational policy and politics in Sweden: decentralisation and choice. The reforms ‘affected all levels of the education system’ (Miron, 1996, p. 33), and as a consequence, some people believe that Sweden has become ‘one of the most permissive countries in the Western World with regard to allowing parents to choose schools freely’ (Bergström and Sandström, 2002, p. 1).

The system of school choice was introduced by the Government in 1991 as a consequence of the United Nations declaration (article 26) on the right of all parents to choose the manner of their children’s schooling (www.un.org/Overview/rights.html). The new legislation created a voucher programme that enabled families to send their children to any school within the municipality of residence, government-run or independent, without paying fees. The policy stimulated a rapid growth in independent schools (*fristående skola*) and encouraged municipal (state-run) schools to respond to parental concerns. School choice has also united politicians, nearly all of whom now support vouchers (Hepburn 1999, p. 28). According

to Green and Cackett (2005), Sweden is the only European country operating a universal voucher scheme, although there is some debate over the definition of the term ‘voucher’. Raham (2002), for example, pointed out that funding goes directly to the school of enrolment rather than to the family.

6.2 Impact of school choice in Sweden

At its inception, there was a certain amount of resistance to the new approach to school choice. A former Swedish Minister for Education, Tham, wrote that ‘[t]here is inevitably a conflict between freedom of choice and a good school for everybody’ (cited in Bergström and Sandström, 2002, p. 9), yet Phillips *et al.* (2004) reported that there is now a steadily growing desire among Swedish parents to choose a school more actively. In 1997, 70 per cent of parents surveyed expressed a strong interest in choosing their child’s school; by 2003 the NAE reported that an overwhelming majority of parents (more than 90 per cent) agreed that parents and children should be able to choose which school their children were to attend (Söderberg and Wirén, 2003, p. 45).

6.2.1 Impact of schools choosing pupils

Most *Fristående skola* concur with the government regulation forbidding them from selecting pupils, and ‘would have done so even without the School Act’ (Hepburn, 1999, p. 28). However, Hepburn goes on to point out that the condition makes it difficult for a school to establish a particular ‘learning environment’ and therefore ‘does nothing to guarantee the equal access it was set up to ensure’ (*ibid.*). Hepburn gives the example of Svangren, the principal of Botkyrka Friskola, a progressive elementary school in Norsborg, south-east Sweden:

[Svangren] hoped his school would become a challenging, multicultural environment for immigrant families poorly served by the local municipal school but, as its reputation grew, Swedish families in neighbourhoods with better schools began applying early. The school had to take the students who

applied first, so it was forced to reject those whom its leaders believed would not only benefit most but also contribute most to the school's unique environment. As a result, a fundamental aspect of the school's mandate was compromised
(*ibid.*)

New *fristående skola* are more likely to be established in areas where there are underperforming state schools serving disadvantaged children (Green and Cackett, 2005, p. 1). However, Sandström and Bergström (2002) reported that as most of the *fristående skola* do not aim at any special group of students, such as any religious group, the socio-economic composition of students attending them is not radically different from those attending public schools.

6.2.2 Impact of school choice

Miron (1996) suggested that parents with university training and parents living in urban areas were better informed about school choice than other parents and that segregation was occurring 'by ethnic grouping, by social class and by ability level' (p. 43). Miron also suggested that in urban areas with high concentrations of immigrants – and with choice also possible between municipal schools – 'ethnic sorting is being intensified by school choice' (*ibid.*). Miron's view was confirmed by MES research in 2003 which found:

school choice reforms are exploited by the highly educated, which affects homogeneity at school level... [and] has had segregating effects, particularly in the matter of ethnic composition

(Söderberg and Wirén, 2003, p. 46)

Hockley and Nieto (2004) disagreed, arguing that as school choice is linked to non-selective enrolment in Sweden, it appears to:

counteract the current widespread tendency towards segregation on socio-economic grounds: selection is by parents alone, matching schools to their aspirations and needs for their children

(p. 12)

They did not address the point that different types of parents have different aspirations and different capacities for choice. Thus the very

act of giving freedom to choose can reinforce structural inequalities in society.

6.2.3 Impact on standards

Disparity between academic standards in state and independent school sectors can be an issue in school choice. In Sweden, there is evidence that *fristående skola* reinforce quality in state schools, provided that all schools have the necessary freedom of operation (Hockley and Nieto, 2004) and that *fristående skola* significantly improved test results, grades and graduation results in both *fristående skola* and municipal schools (Bergström and Sandström, 2002). However, the point at which comparisons are made is significant: different schools may have differential effects as regards transition and progression. Phillips *et al.* (2004, pp. 53–54) point out that *fristående skola* have a higher rate of graduation to senior secondary schools and higher scores on Grade 9 national exams, and are over-represented in Sweden's top senior secondary schools.

6.3 Summary

Sweden has moved from a system with virtually no parental influence over school choice and an almost complete dominance of public schools, to one with a wider application of public funds to finance independent schools than any other country (with the possible exception of the Netherlands) (Sandström and Bergström, 2002). Evidence suggests that in Sweden, choice has improved opportunities and outcomes for students, satisfied parental and societal expectations, and stimulated responsiveness, innovations and efficiencies across the system (Raham, 2002, p. 51). Interestingly, there is evidence that proximity to school remains a strong factor in where children are placed. In the light of evidence from England about parental choice in relation to difficulties and cost of transport, and the disparity of standards among schools in the locality (where there is more than one school within a postcode district, for example), further investigation would need to be undertaken to ascertain whether Swedish parents are content with the nearest school because they have confidence that schools are equally successful academically or because 'real' choice is limited by logistic difficulties and, for example, the loss of free transport to a school outside their own municipality.

7 Educational provision in the Netherlands²

“ Children... have the option of choosing three types of secondary education, designated according to the final qualification awarded: ”

7.1 Compulsory education

Full-time education is compulsory from the first school day of the month following a child's fifth birthday (although nearly all pupils start at age four), until the end of the school year in which he or she reaches age 16, or has completed 12 full years of schooling. From age 16, students must receive at least part-time education until age 18.

Most pupils start school at age four, despite the compulsory age being five. Children leave primary school when they are approximately 12 years old (i.e. after eight years of schooling), and have the option of choosing three types of secondary education, designated according to the final qualification awarded:

- VMBO – a four-year course for students aged 12 to 16, preparing them for the pre-vocational education certificate (as a basis for further vocational training/study);
- HAVO – a five-year course for students aged 12 to 17, which leads to the general upper secondary education certificate, and prepares students for higher professional education. A HAVO certificate also allows students to go on to pre-university education (see below);
- VWO – a six-year course, for students aged 12 to 18, leading to the pre-university certificate, which is designed to prepare students for university. There are two main types of VWO school – the *gymnasium* and the *athenaeum*. The gymnasium is similar to the athenaeum except that students learn Latin and Greek in the lower years and Latin and/or Greek in the upper years. Latin is sometimes offered as an optional subject at the athenaeum.

See appendix 2 for an overview diagram of the education system in the Netherlands.

Ministerial policy, supported via funding, is for 'combined' secondary, embracing a number of different types of secondary education within

the one institution. By 1996, mergers had reduced the number of secondary schools from 1009 to around 700, about a third of which were broad-based combined schools. Students are placed in the education 'type' (or track) that best suits their needs, although transfer between the types is possible.

7.2 Control and organisation

The Netherlands has a unified education system, regulated by central laws, with decentralised administration and management of schools. The Ministry of Education, Culture and Science governs aspects such as teachers' qualifications, funding, school leaving examinations and inspection. There is a constitutional freedom to establish private-sector schools that reflect a denominational, ideological or specific educational interest.

7.3 Public sector and private sector education

In the Netherlands, public and private schools are, by statute, equal: government expenditure on public education must be matched by spending on private education, provided that the latter meets certain conditions set out in laws and regulations.

Public schools:

- are open to all children regardless of religion or outlook;
- are generally subject to public law;
- are governed by the municipal council or by a public legal entity or foundation set up by the council;
- provide education on behalf of the state;
- may base their teaching on specific educational ideas, such as the Montessori, Jena Plan or Dalton method.

Privately run schools:

- are subject to private law and are state-funded although not established by the state;

² All references for this section are taken from O'Donnell *et al.* (2006) unless otherwise stated.

- are governed by the board of the association or foundation that established them;
- may base their teaching on religious or ideological beliefs (examples include Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, Muslim and Hindustani schools) or specific educational ideas (for example Montessori, Steiner, Jena Plan or Dalton method);
- can refuse to admit pupils whose parents do not subscribe to the belief or ideology on which the school's teaching is based (Dutch Eurydice Unit, 2005, p. 16).

All schools, both public and private, have a legally recognised competent authority (also known as a school board) which is responsible for managing the school, including the admissions of pupils. No child may be refused admission to a public school (Dutch Eurydice Unit, 2005).

In the 2001/02 school year, the profile of school types was as follows.

Table 7.1 Primary education in the Netherlands

Type of school	Percentage
Other private	7
Public	33
Protestant	30
Catholic	30

(Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, 2003)

Table 7.2 Secondary education in the Netherlands

Type of school	Percentage
Public	28
Private non-denominational	11
Protestant	23
Catholic	28
Interdenominational	10

(Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, 2003)

7.4 Admission criteria for primary education

Parents are free to send their children to the school of their choice. The Ministry of Education, Culture and Science produces an annual national guide to primary education

(Dutch Eurydice Unit, 2005). Regional guides, with information on individual schools, are also produced by the Education Inspectorate (Teelken, 2004). Schools themselves have to provide an annual prospectus (O'Donnell *et al.*, 2006); this can highlight unique features but the degree to which schools can advertise is limited.

Public schools

Public authority primary schools are open to all children, although some municipalities are divided into catchment areas (Dutch Eurydice Unit, 2005). Pupils normally attend a school in the catchment area designated by the local authority (usually that in which the child lives), although there are exceptions.

Private schools

Private schools may set admission criteria appropriate to their ideological basis (Dutch Eurydice Unit, 2005).

7.5 Admission criteria for secondary education

Pupils are admitted to secondary school after leaving primary (mainstream or special), usually at age 12. Parents select and enrol their child in a public or private-sector secondary school before the start of the summer holidays preceding admission. In general, pupils can attend the school of their choice, provided that they meet certain criteria (see below).

Decisions on admissions to VMBO, HAVO and VWO courses or schools are made by the competent authority (the school board). In some cases, there may be a separate admissions board comprising the headteacher and one or more teachers from the secondary school, and possibly the headteacher and teachers from primary schools (Dutch Eurydice Unit, 2005). Pupils are assessed for their suitability to VMBO, HAVO and VWO courses or schools. In 2004, over 90 per cent of Dutch primary schools made use of primary school leaving examinations or similar tests, devised by the National Institute for Educational Measurement (CITO), to complement teacher assessments when evaluating children's performance at the end of primary education. The tests are designed to assess pupils' level of knowledge and understanding (Dutch

“ All primary schools provide written advice for parents regarding the form of secondary education or type of secondary course they feel best suits a given child. ”

Eurydice Unit, 2005). However, it is not an official certified government assessment and many schools, particularly those in the cities with high numbers of ethnic minority pupils, do not use it (van Dongen, 2006, unpublished), particularly as it only measures cognitive knowledge.

All primary schools provide written advice for parents regarding the form of secondary

education or type of secondary course they feel best suits a given child. Students are not generally allowed to enrol on courses against the advice of their primary school. Secondary schools usually accept a primary school's advice. School boards can refuse to admit a child, and in such cases parents have a right to appeal.

8 Commentary on current admissions issues in the Netherlands

“ *Private schools in the Netherlands are allowed to select on an ideological or religious basis and thus can turn away pupils who do not hold particular religious and ideological beliefs...* ”

In the Netherlands, there have always been formal opportunities for school choice as both public and private education are equally a matter of responsibility for the Government (Teelken, 1999). Parents can choose any public or private school, a feature of the system regarded as positive (Patrinos, 2002). The system of school choice is supported by state funding, which provides compensating budgets to schools in recognition of inequality and disadvantage (Ritzen *et al.*, 1997a; Patrinos, 2002; Hockley and Nieto, 2004). A weighted funding formula is applied and additional funding is provided for schools with socio-economically disadvantaged and minority ethnic pupils so that these schools may maintain quality.

Issues surrounding school admissions have arisen because of the types of schools that are available (i.e. public schools which are largely non-denominational and private schools which are largely denominational). Within both types of schools, pupils are largely selected on academic ability but also on a first-come first-served basis; catchment area is not a particular criterion. An interesting point about the situation in the Netherlands is that 'elite' schools have not emerged (Karsten and Teelken, 1996). This has been explained by the equal state funding of public and private schools (Dronkers, 2004) and the fact that different denominational schools have always admitted pupils of all social classes (with the exception of the private non-denominational schools). However, there may be other socio-cultural explanations.

Since schools in the Netherlands use a streaming model (i.e. students are selected on their suitability for a certain stream), the entrance criteria in public schools are less rigid than those in England and Scotland, and thus the system appears to be closest to the pure 'free market' model (Teelken, 1999). The literature obtained did not discuss the issue of streaming; further investigation would be needed to establish whether this

was a function of the search terms used (i.e. streaming was not the focus of the searching) or whether it is not currently controversial in the Netherlands.

8.1 Changing influences on school choice

An increase in individualisation, 'the growing need of individuals to shape their own lives' (Karsten and Teelken, 1996, p. 26) has led to an increase in school autonomy and market choice. Indeed, regional guides are produced by the Education Inspectorate and contain information about each of the primary schools for the assistance of parents and children.

Private schools in the Netherlands are allowed to select on an ideological or religious basis and thus can turn away pupils who do not hold particular religious and ideological beliefs (Teelken, 1999). However, implications for the admissions system have arisen from the increase in secularisation: Catholic schools, in particular, have broadened their identities and the religious criteria for admissions have become less strict (Karsten and Teelken, 1996), with some parents choosing denominational schools for non-religious reasons (Dijkstra *et al.*, 1997). As a result, the number of denominational schools has remained stable. There has been regrouping of particular religious denominations – for example, Catholic and Protestant schools have formed a single association. There has been a slight rise in the number of 'interfaith' or 'interdenominational' schools which the authors pointed out may have risen with the increase in the number of schools merging (Karsten and Teelken, 1996) although only 50 out of 8000 primary schools are interdenominational (p. 26).

Alongside secularisation has come a change in the profile of the population, with an influx in 'immigrants from former colonies, migrant workers and refugees' (Karsten and Teelken, 1996). Concomitantly, there has been a slight increase in the number of religious schools, mainly Muslim and Hindu, a process referred

to as 'external differentiation' and welcomed by these groups (Karsten and Teelken, 1996, p. 29). An empirical study of more than 10 000 parents found that Muslim parents were particularly likely to say that religion was an influencing factor when choosing a school for their child (Denessen et al., 2005), although these parents were often found to choose non-Islamic schools because of the limited availability of Islamic schools and the consequent geographic inaccessibility.

There is the question of whether the changes noted above have led to an increase in social segregation. With the increase in religious schools in the Netherlands, some (e.g. local authorities) fear that separate schools will lead to further isolation of ethnic minorities within the education system (Denessen et al., 2005, Karsten and Teelken, 1996). Indeed Karsten (1999) states, 'since then [the late 1980s] the segregation of pupils into White and Black schools has not only increased in number but also complexity' (p. 313).

8.3 School choice and ethnic segregation

As early as 1989, the Advisory Council on Government Policy (WRR) noted that the geographical distribution of ethnic minorities was uneven (Karsten, 1994). Unsurprisingly, schools with the highest percentage of ethnic minority pupils were found to be situated in the four major cities: Amsterdam, Rotterdam, Den Haag and Utrecht (Karsten, 1994; Karsten and Teelken, 1996). The distribution of these pupils was uneven between and within districts, suggesting that some schools can be more selective in their admissions than others. In general, higher numbers of ethnic minority pupils were situated within public schools than non-denominational private schools (Karsten and Teelken, 1996). This raises the issue that there appears to be more freedom of choice for parents in urban areas due to the greater availability of schools and, concomitantly, greater opportunity for social segregation.

Karsten (1994) examined the implications of the uneven distribution of minority ethnic pupils and the system of choice on ethnic segregation at a local and school level. An analysis based on 27 municipalities (serving 23 per cent of the total number of primary

school pupils) demonstrated that ethnic segregation was apparent in the Netherlands, and he argued that 'a radical reorganisation is required in the Dutch system of choice in order to address the challenges of ethnic segregation' (Karsten, 1994, p. 211).

Karsten and Teelken (1996) cited a study by Dors *et al.* (1991) which found that there was a relationship between ethnicity and social background: pupils from minority ethnic and/or lower socio-economic backgrounds were found in 'concentration schools'. Thus, it appeared that private schools (especially non-religious) had become a 'safe haven' for White pupils. There appeared to be a conflict between freedom of choice and a commitment to equal opportunities for pupils (Karsten and Teelken, 1996). Current legislation reduced 'any possibility... of regulating pupil admissions to achieve a more balanced distribution' (p. 28). One of the study's policy recommendations – to implement some kind of controlled choice – was rejected by the Ministry of Education because it would have involved a major change to the long-standing education legislation. More recent research by Karsten *et al.* (2003) reported that 'the ethnic composition of schools plays an important role in the school choice of parents' (p. 1).

8.4 Admissions and parental choice

Another factor which could be seen to be leading to this inequality is that analysts have explained that parents are acting more like consumers in their approach to school selection (Ritzen *et al.*, 1997b). It has been suggested that parents might use religion as a proxy for other attributes. For example, Christian schools have good reputations for order and discipline (Ritzen *et al.*, 1997b). Karsten (1999) explained that parents were choosing 'confessional' schools because these schools have better outcomes in terms of pupil performance scores. The author remarked that it tended to be the more highly educated parents who were choosing these schools, which may 'provide a breeding ground for a new type of inequality' (p. 313).

Assessing the European evidence on whether public and private religious schools differed, Dronkers (2004) explained that Dutch

“ *With the changes, many believe that parents are becoming more like consumers in their approach to school selection and this may be leading to social segregation.* ”

research ‘contains significant evidence of the positive effects of Catholic and Protestant schooling on academic achievement’ (p. 303). He pointed out that there are a number of exceptions to the general advantage of religious schools which complicate the picture. Nevertheless, these differences have come about recently and he explained that they ‘could become the basis for new forms of inequality’ as parents would rather send their child to a school where academic achievement is high. One of the points he went on to make was that ‘differences between parents in their knowledge of school effectiveness, which correlate with their own educational level, could certainly contribute to new inequalities’ (p. 304).

8.5 Summary

In the Netherlands, the educational system has traditionally allowed formal opportunities for school choice. The main criterion for selecting pupils is based on streaming by aptitude and ability, which does not seem to be controversial. Issues surrounding school choice have largely arisen because of a move towards individualisation, a shift towards secularisation and a change in the profile of the population through immigration. With the changes, many believe that parents are becoming more like consumers in their approach to school selection and this may be leading to social segregation. Issues have begun to arise in the literature of whether some parents (i.e. middle-class parents) have more opportunities than others.

9 Educational provision in New Zealand³

“*In principle, compulsory education is provided free of charge; however, many schools seek or request voluntary contributions from parents to augment their income.*”

9.1 Compulsory education

Education is compulsory for all children between their sixth and 16th birthdays though children may receive a free education at any state school from their fifth birthday until the 1 January following their 19th birthday.

In general, primary schools provide the first level of compulsory schooling. They cater for children from age five to age 10/11 (Standard 4). Children aged 11/12 and 12/13 (Forms 1 and 2) may either be in a separate intermediate or middle school, or in a primary, secondary, or composite school (all-through school, sometimes also known as an ‘area school’). Secondary schools usually provide for students aged 13/14 (Form 3) to age 17/18 (Form 7).

See appendix 2 for an overview diagram of the education system in New Zealand.

9.2 Control and organisation

The Government determines the educational structure, with some variation from the basic structure allowed under specified circumstances with permission from the Minister of Education. The Ministry of Education provides policy advice to the Government and helps to implement education policy. It is also responsible for developing specifications for the curriculum (curriculum statements), allocating resources and monitoring effectiveness. Local government has no role in educational matters.

All state primary and secondary schools are governed by boards of trustees, which include elected parent and community volunteers, the school principal and a staff representative. Secondary school boards of trustees must also have a student representative. Boards of trustees have considerable autonomy and work to develop in each school a written charter of aims, purposes and objectives, validated by the Minister of Education.

9.3 Public sector and private sector education

Compulsory education (and post-compulsory upper secondary education for 16- to 18-year-olds) is funded by the Government to varying degrees, depending on the type of school (state school, integrated school or private school) and on the year levels of the students. However, local communities often support local schools financially. In principle, compulsory education is provided free of charge; however, many schools seek or request voluntary contributions from parents to augment their income. Private schools charge fees, but also receive some funding from the Government. They are governed by their own independent boards, but are required to meet certain standards in order to be registered.

In the early 1980s, many private schools, particularly denominational schools, began to be integrated with the state system. Such integrated schools retained their individual character, generally grounded in an ideology or religion, and incorporated this into the school programme while adhering to state curriculum requirements. Integrated schools receive the same government per-pupil unit funding as state schools, but the buildings and land are privately owned. In 1997, integrated schools represented almost 11 per cent of all New Zealand schools. The majority (78 per cent) were Roman Catholic schools. An initial decrease in the number of private schools seems to have levelled off. The tables below show the profile of public and private schools in New Zealand in July 2004.

³ All references for this section are taken from O'Donnell *et al.* (2006) unless otherwise stated.

Table 9.1 Primary education

School type and authority		Total number of schools
Full Primary	State	1139
	Private	42
Contributing	State	816
	Private	0
Intermediate	State	125
	Private	2
Special	State	47
Total		2171

(Education Counts, 2004)

Table 9.2 Secondary education

School type and authority		Total number of schools
Secondary Year 7–15	State	90
	Private	5
Secondary Year 9–15	State	242
	Private	15
Composite	State	97
	Private	50
Correspondence school	State	1
Total		500

(Education Counts, 2004)

9.4 Admission criteria for primary education

Most children attend the school closest to where they live. However, any child may enrol in any school unless the parent-elected school board (board of trustees) has successfully applied to the Ministry of Education to be allowed to limit numbers due to a risk of overcrowding. At present, overcrowding is judged largely in relation to available building space compared to enrolment numbers. This is a relatively new way of organising admissions; the principle of 'zoning' was abolished only in the early 1990s.

Once permission has been given for an enrolment scheme to be established, the school's board of trustees is responsible for developing the scheme. In accordance with the Education Amendment Act 2000, home zones are determined by boards of trustees in consultation with their communities and other boards in the area. The Ministry of Education approves all zones, ensuring that they comply with the principles and specific requirements in the legislation. Schools are required to provide information to students and parents about the operation of the school's enrolment scheme, and their rights and obligations when applying to enrol. All information related to a school's enrolment scheme, including the ballot and establishment of a waiting list, is made publicly available.

9.5 Admission criteria for secondary education

As with primary education, in New Zealand any child may enrol in any secondary school unless the parent-elected school board (board of trustees) has successfully applied to the Ministry of Education to be allowed to limit numbers due to a risk of overcrowding. Generally, New Zealand operates a programme of social promotion, that is to say students pass from one phase to the next without restriction or selection until they reach post-compulsory upper secondary education (senior secondary school).

At the level of post-compulsory upper secondary education (senior secondary school) it appears that there are no formal criteria for admission. Each school determines which students progress and, in most cases, a policy of open access to senior secondary (sixth form) studies is operated (termed 'social advancement').

10 Commentary on current admissions issues in New Zealand

“ *Schools with enrolment schemes have a home zone defined by geographic boundaries;* ”

10.1 Admissions criteria

The admissions system in New Zealand has undergone a number of radical changes over the past 15 years, leading the era to be dubbed by some commentators as ‘the New Zealand experiment’ (Kelsey, 1995). Legislation governing enrolment in New Zealand schools was amended in 1989, 1991, 1998 and 2000, as demonstrated in Table 10.1 below (the 2000 amendments largely render the previous legislation provision out of date).

These reforms were known as ‘Tomorrow’s Schools’.

Tomorrow’s Schools decentralized school management. The ‘wholesale’ market-driven changes were ‘more swift and pronounced in New Zealand than in any other country at the time’ (Mutch, 2004, p. 554) and ‘virtually overnight, one of the world’s most tightly controlled public education systems became one of the most decentralized’ (Fiske and Ladd, 2000, p. 3).

Table 10.1 Legislation governing enrolment in New Zealand schools

	Schools with enrolment schemes	Schools without schemes
1989	Geographic home zone defined Out-of-zone places filled by ballot	Open entry ↓
1991	No rules specified for filling places Criteria for enrolment to conform to various Acts	↓
1998	Three key concepts: consideration of network of schools, ‘reasonable convenience’ and community consultation	↓
2000	Home zone defined Out-of-zone places filled by ballot Sibling, staff children and special place priority	

(Pearce and Gordon, 2005, p. 152)

10.1.1 Enrolment schemes

The New Zealand Ministry of Education state admissions criteria should be based on ‘reasonable convenience’. Schools with enrolment schemes have a home zone defined by geographic boundaries; all eligible children living within this zone are entitled to attend this school. However, it should be noted that most schools do not operate enrolment schemes and therefore the vast majority of eligible students are entitled to attend the school of their choice.

An enrolment scheme is used to limit the roll to prevent overcrowding, and enabling the Ministry of Education to make best use of the current accommodation and available placements at schools in the surrounding area. The Ministry has to agree that an enrolment scheme is necessary and has to approve the content of the scheme. Each year school

boards must place a notice in a newspaper circulating in the area, stating how many out-of-zone places are likely to be available, the date by which applications for out-of-zone places must be received and the dates of any ballots for out-of-zone places. Schemes should:

- as far as possible exclude no more students than necessary to avoid overcrowding;
- enable the Ministry to make best use of the existing networks of state schools;
- ensure that the selection of applicants for enrolment at the school is carried out in a fair and transparent manner;
- enable students to attend a reasonably convenient school;
- as far as possible, not exclude local students. (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2006)

Out-of-zone students who apply for enrolment at the school must be accepted in the following order of priority:

- 1 any applicant who is accepted for enrolment in a special programme run by the school;
- 2 any applicant who is the sibling of a current student of the school;
- 3 any applicant who is the sibling of a former student of the school;
- 4 any applicant who is a child of an employee of the board of the school;
- 5 all other applicants, selected by a ballot 'conducted in accordance with instructions issued by the Secretary of State.

(New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2006)

When ballots occur, they must:

- include all applications received by the pre-enrolment deadline;

- be supervised by a Justice of the Peace, a practising lawyer, a sworn member of the Police, or a local government returning officer;
- record names drawn in the ballot in the order in which they are drawn, up to the limit of the number of places available. Beyond that point, names must be recorded on a waiting list in the order in which they are drawn in the ballot. A waiting list will remain current until the next ballot.

(New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2005)

According to Wylie (2006), the spread of schools with enrolment zones is 'one of the most striking aspects of the changes in the New Zealand school landscape since 1989 (p. 10), as Table 10.2 below demonstrates (although it should be noted that New Zealand has also had over this time a large increase in student numbers).

Table 10.2 Growth of enrolment schemes in New Zealand

	1190	1999	2002	2004
Number of secondary schools with enrolment schemes	31/349	48/320	62/319	79/320
Percentage of secondary schools with enrolment schemes	9	15	19	24.7
Number of primary schools with enrolment schemes		161/2055	246/1971	344/1916
Percentage of primary schools with enrolment schemes	0	7.8	12.5	18
Percentage of state students in schools with enrolment schemes		20.3	28.6	36.1
Percentage of major city schools		15	21.6	28.6
Percentage of provincial city schools		8.4	14	17
Percentage of small town schools		2.1	4.1	6.1
Percentage of rural schools		1.9	4.1	7.1

10.1.2 Integrated schools

Regulations are different for integrated schools. Most integrated schools are religious foundations, mostly Roman Catholic; they are allowed to restrict enrolments to students who subscribe to the faith base, and thus about 90–95 per cent of their roll are students from families belonging to the faith community. If an integrated school is oversubscribed (and in this case this means approaching its regulated maximum roll, not necessarily its capacity) it too needs an enrolment scheme which sets out in a transparent way how it will manage oversubscriptions.

10.2 Impact of school choice in New Zealand

Most students in New Zealand attend their first choice school (Wylie, 2006, p. 4). Yet the rules that govern school enrolments are thought to be contentious: ‘they raise the temperature and stir the emotions like almost nothing else in education and, when discussed, words and phrases such as “school choice”, “parent choice”, “elitism”, “creaming”, “equity”, “market model”, “protect standards” often arise’ (Breakwell, 1999, pp. 1–2). The main focus of research on admissions over the past decade has been the area of parental choice, which has been ‘deeply and richly explored in the literature’ (Pearce and Gordon, 2005, p. 149). However, research into the impact of enrolment schemes is burgeoning.

10.2.1 Impact of enrolment schemes

There is still a lack of clarity about whether enrolment schemes in schools reflect existing social stratification patterns, or increase them in relation to narrowing educational opportunities (Wylie, 2006, p. 12). McClay and Harrison (2003) found that enrolment schemes influenced the local housing markets:

The allure of guaranteed acceptance of their children at their preferred school is believed to have altered the housing decisions of many parents, with real estate agents reporting an increase in the number of buyers specifically seeking properties within the desired school zone. Furthermore, advertisement of a school zone location is a common practice by real estate agents.

(p. 2)

There is also evidence of ‘strategic zone-setting’ to exclude students from low-income areas from schools situated in high-income areas (Wylie, 2006, p. 12). However, there are no national figures available on the number of students who apply ‘out-of-zone’, so the true impact of school schemes is not yet clear.

10.2.2 Impact of parental choice

In a critical review of the changes to the New Zealand education system, Fiske and Ladd (2000a) conceded that ‘parental choice has become an integral part of compulsory education in New Zealand and is now widely accepted as appropriate’ (p. 8). They found that parents, especially those who were well educated and upwardly mobile, including Maori and Pacific Islanders, have not hesitated to make use of their extended right to choose among schools, and the choices they have made have had a large impact on enrolment patterns, especially in urban areas (*ibid.*).

In a paper exploring the case for school choice in four countries (the US, New Zealand, Denmark, and Sweden) Hepburn (1999) concluded that schools in New Zealand have become ‘more innovative, focused, energetic, and responsive to the needs of students’ (p. 18). She reported that teachers and principals believe that the impact of the reforms on teaching content, teaching style, and children’s learning has been ‘overwhelmingly positive’ (*ibid.*), and that ‘thanks to the new system, teachers, principals, parents, and communities have each gained a new sense of responsibility for children’s schooling’.

However, in a similar international review on school choice, Phillips *et al.* (2004) were unconvinced by current evidence and concluded that:

lacking an objective comparative evaluation of school performance across the system, the effects of school choice on student achievement in New Zealand cannot be reported with any certainty

(p. 53)

Much of the literature on choice in the New Zealand admissions system pointed to socio-economic and ethnic segregation as a result of the admissions regulations. The Quality

Public Education Coalition (QPEC), a voluntary coalition of parents and educators concerned to promote high quality within each sector of public education, reported that:

analysis of the New Zealand choice reforms over a number of years has demonstrated that the system of school choice increases inequalities between schools (Gordon, 2003; Lauder et al., 1994; Pearce and Gordon, 2004) and tilts the playing field towards some groups, usually the educationally advantaged, and away from others (Fiske and Ladd, 2000a; Gordon and Whitty, 1997; Ladd and Fiske, 2003)

(QPEC, n.d., p. 3)

However, Jenkins *et al.* (2006) report that New Zealand has one of the lowest levels of social segregation in secondary schools among the 27 rich industrialised countries (pp. 25–26). Still, there are concerns that many parents, especially those with low incomes, are not in a position to exercise choice because no alternative option exists (Fiske and Ladd, 2000a). Unlike those with higher incomes, the less affluent cannot choose from a wide range of housing or communities, and therefore often cannot make choices to gain access to desirable public schools (Boyd, 2002).

During the committee stage of the New Zealand Education Amendment Bill, concern

was expressed that the situation is self-perpetuating, leading to a spiral of decline in schools in less affluent areas which is to some extent driven by the selectivity of schools responsible for their own admissions. A committee member commented:

principals came along and, almost in an unconscious fashion, proved that they were selecting students who would be advantageous to the school. Some of the comments they made were interesting, such as: 'We select the children who will get most benefit from our type of schooling', or 'we select the ones who are most desirous of schooling at our school, and that is done by an essay competition'

(New Zealand Hansard, 2000)

10.3 Summary

The 'New Zealand experiment' has provided evidence as regards school admissions. Theoretically, families of school-aged children can select any state school they wish, and when schools reach their maximum capacity there is a clear and transparent system for selecting which students to admit. However, there is evidence that the system can be manipulated, particularly for those with social and financial capital.

11 Conclusions

“ *In all countries reviewed, the importance of parental choice was acknowledged.* ”

This report has presented findings from a scrutiny of the literature and documentation relating to admissions in Sweden, the Netherlands and New Zealand in an attempt to gain greater understanding of and gather further options with regard to admissions policy and practice in England. The current policy context in England, together with a discussion of its attendant tensions and concerns, was presented at the beginning of the report.

11.1 Common characteristics

Documentation in all countries in the review expressed the respective government's broad aim that all the nation's children should have equal access to high quality education. This is unsurprising given that all were 'developed', OECD countries; that there is competition between education systems, as illustrated by transnational surveys of achievement such as PISA and TIMSS, and that there are clear economic arguments for a well-qualified work force (www.pisa.oecd.org; www.iea.nl/timss2007.html; www.europa.eu.int/comm/employment_social/employment_strategy/national_en.htm).

There were other common characteristics. In none of the countries was it possible to influence admission by additional payment. Thus, while there was financial incentive for schools to attract pupils (in that the admission of an additional pupil would mean an additional unit of resource for that school), there was no financial incentive to admit 'particularly desirable' pupils or, for example, pupils with parents prepared to contribute an additional sum of money for their education. Where there was some sort of voucher system, this was more a means of funding schools run by organisations independent from the state and was generally aimed at increasing the range of providers. Parents could choose these schools and still gain a free education for their child. In none of the systems reviewed were parents given a sum of money with which to purchase an education that either cost the same as, or more than, that sum.

11.2 Incentives to admit 'less favourable' pupils

There were, however, measures to give an incentive to schools to admit less favourably perceived pupils, although these payments represent attempts to create 'more level playing fields' at the pupil input or admissions stage. They acknowledged that meeting these pupils' needs, so that they might access the curriculum, might have resource implications: they did not reward the school in any way merely for admitting the pupil. Arguably, such measures are intended to reduce concerns that other pupils' education will be jeopardised (by an imbalance in resource allocation) rather than to manipulate the constitution of school rolls.

11.3 Parental choice

In all countries reviewed, the importance of parental choice was acknowledged: entry or transfer to a particular school was not imposed or decided by the state, either at local or at national level, even if teachers or schools might make recommendations based on an assessment of the child. 'Marketisation' had affected school admissions in all the countries and a range of options as regards school placement was available to parents. However, there were different approaches to the competitive element. For example, the fact that in the Netherlands the advertising of schools was limited and that neighbouring schools produced a collective brochure suggests that the options were conceived more as a community response to community preferences. Marketisation was justified in the countries in terms of the greater accountability it engendered and the belief that competition between schools raised standards of achievement in all schools. However, difference in achievement outcomes (that is, whether standards were raised more in some types of schools than in others) was not known where the country did not have national testing (New Zealand). Where there was national testing, and thus data for comparative purposes, although the aim was for equal access to good education offered by a range of providers, output indicators suggested that

some school types were more effective than others or had a higher potential input, having attracted pupils with higher levels of attainment than others. This is important in that admission to one school may influence progression to subsequent schools at transition points, and privilege may creep into a system despite it offering fair access to broad placements at any one point. Once this happens, parents begin to choose certain schools for the privileges they offer, and in turn, certain types of parents may be more capable than others of this strategic behaviour.

11.4 Reproduction of inequalities in society

There was evidence across the countries that not only were there different structures and policies at the admission stages to realise the aim of quality education for all pupils, but also that none of these seemed sufficiently potent to counter the inequalities existing in society at the point of access to education. It should be noted that the review only considered the outcomes of the admissions processes at the time of the process; it did not consider outcomes from the 'end' of the system – that is, it did not look at relative value added for schools in the countries concerned, nor whether, once placed, children had equal chances of succeeding in their placement, except where this was mentioned within articles focused on systems. The very fact that admissions policies are contested and debated itself suggests that there are considerable assumptions (politically, personally, nationally, locally and institutionally) that outcomes are not comparable: admissions are 'an issue' in each of the countries for which literature was reviewed, and thus there is awareness that different schools do make a difference to children's life chances. The evidence suggested that none of the countries scrutinised had managed to develop systems that ensured that all children were equally advantaged in terms of placement choice at entry points.

11.5 Strategies' discriminatory power

Data suggested that some strategies were in themselves neutral, and it was their usage that decided their effect on a school's roll. For example, scrutiny of pupils' abilities and

aptitudes could be used explicitly to exert either selection of 'the best' (most desirable) or positive discrimination to advantage the less favoured or create a heterogeneous cohort. Other strategies had implicit discrimination, usually related to parents' capacity to make choices or advantage their child in the system, depending on parental knowledge, skills, confidence and socio-economic status.

11.6 Ability to make choices

All countries acknowledged that parents' 'social capital', as represented by their level of education or socio-economic status, affected their ability to make informed choices and identify schools that would advantage their child. And it was not only that some parents were better able to judge 'quality education': those who were at a higher base line by being more economically successful and having more social capital were less constrained by non-educational considerations such as proximity to the home. For example, they could cope with transport costs so did not have to rely on the child walking to school, and moreover, had the confidence to move 'out of area', fear of which is associated with more vulnerable groups. Equally, those who were more familiar with the national system were more able to assess that system and make choices within it than those newly arrived in a country.

Ostensibly, a first-come first-served admissions policy is 'fair' in that theoretically, all have an equal opportunity to respond quickly. However, a rapid response not only requires assimilation of information (usually in print form and possibly in the national language – factors which may themselves be discriminatory), it also requires confidence in domestic stability and that in the time scale the family will still be in the same locality. Given the relationship between mobility and low socio-economic status, it can be seen that some families are in a stronger position than others to make a quick response. The policy is particularly disadvantageous to those vulnerable groups characterised by mobility (for example, young people in public care or with refugee status). The obverse of a first-come first-served policy is that whereby all placements are offered on the same day, thus

reducing opportunities to play the system by keeping a number of options open at the same time – again, a strategy that tends to be engaged in by more politically aware and confident parents.

11.7 Faith schools

Where faith communities were among educational providers, they were allowed to state explicit criteria which favoured families sharing that faith (though not all would necessarily exercise this right). Arguably, adherence to a faith cuts across all socio-economic backgrounds and abilities. However, the fact that it was reported that secularisation had meant that more faith school places were available than families actively practising that faith meant that more politically aware parents were able to use the opportunity for strategic behaviour; in such a situation, choice is exercised with regard to faith schools on the grounds of the non-faith-related outcomes of those schools – that is, their performance in higher-stakes areas such as pupil achievement. This does, perhaps, carry warnings about the way that market forces can affect any specialist school.

11.8 Catchment zones

Research suggested that the allocation of places by ballot might be the fairest means of allocation. Provided that this was done over a sufficiently large population to yield a representative sample of the community in each school, this might reduce the differences caused by parents' ability to make informed choices. However, it would raise issues about catchment areas. Admitting pupils to a school by means of proximity to the school – catchment zones – is a traditional policy and ensures that children are educated within their own communities. In rural areas, where schools serve wider, more sparsely populated areas in which there is likely to be a social mix and a greater range within a postcode area, catchment zoning may be an effective means of ensuring equity in admissions. However, the literature in all the countries referred to the different position in densely populated urban areas where there tends to be greater segregation and 'zoning' of housing so a school could well serve an area with a limited socio-economic range. Catchment areas can

reinforce postcode characteristics and these, in turn, may limit the power of education to offer pupils options and give opportunities for social mobility. Furthermore, it is in these very urban areas where there is a concentration of schools and, thus, the greater visibility of 'options', that 'choice' becomes increasingly important to parents.

11.9 Assessment of ability or potential at admission

Determining admissions on the grounds of assessment at the point of entry puts power in the hands of the state and/or the school. If it is employed across a region to select a broad range of ability it ensures that schools have similar inputs in terms of pupil roll, which in turn means that value-added measures can be used for comparisons. (Presently, schools with higher-achieving intakes cannot demonstrate as high a degree of value added as those with a lower-achieving intake, as the maximum score acts as a ceiling.) However, the strategy is incompatible with 'parental choice' and with school freedom to adopt specific characteristics (which might relate to ability or social background), which itself plays in the parental choice lobby. Whether or not it is possible to allow schools to select pupils according to the school's particular characteristics but not to allow particular groups to be discriminated against as a result of this selection is unproven but seems unlikely. This selection but no discrimination approach is UK policy but was not discussed in the literature or documentation in other countries, so was either not policy or not controversial. Further opportunities for strategic behaviour are offered if ability bands are sufficiently broad: schools can select pupils at the 'top' of each band – for example, the 'better' (potentially higher-achieving) pupils with special educational needs. The greater sophistication in the analysis of pupil level data is allowing this sort of behaviour to be monitored.

11.10 The level at which policies should be determined

It might be concluded that national policies are ostensibly 'fair'. First, they give a national (political) statement about equity. Second, they remove power from schools, which are most likely to act in their own interests if the stakes

are high and they are accountable for pupil output measures. However, national policies may in fact be unfair insofar as different admissions policies – controlling the input, which in turn affects the output – favour or are appropriate for local contexts. Very obviously, densely populated urban regions are different from sparsely populated rural ones. While such factors as poverty indicators may be similar, practical considerations such as ease and availability of transport, the profile of the population, the nature of communities and the availability of options are very different. There was evidence that fairness may only be achieved by an analysis of the profile of a particular area – for example, background characteristics of the local population, availability and nature of school places and other educational provision – and then the design of admissions policies which yield the greatest equality in terms of access, bearing in mind these profiles. Were this done, it might reduce the inexorable link between low educational achievement and poverty (generally represented by families with limited skills, levels of education and employment, and belonging to some minority ethnic groups) which a series of educational initiatives over several decades have failed to do.

11.11 Issues for consideration

The review of the literature regarding admissions in Sweden, the Netherlands and New Zealand suggested that the difficulties

identified within the English literature are found in other educational systems. All strategies and approaches resulted in winners and losers. Decisions about admissions are thus dependent on answers to questions such as the following.

- What are the purposes of education in a particular country at a particular time?
- Which groups of pupils, of parents or educational institutions need to ‘win’ more from the education system at a particular time?
- What provision is currently available? For example, is there a range of providers? Is provision determined by the age at which specialisation occurs?
- What outcomes of education are particularly valued by different stakeholder groups (e.g. the Government, employers, parents or pupils themselves)?
- What is the profile of the population? For example, what is the degree of social segregation or economic disparity?

In all cases, the answers need to be challenged with: Is this included in the vision for the future? The review of the literature and documentation suggests that admissions policies are important but not all-important. They are the servant of wider considerations which are at the core of national identity.

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Appendices

Appendix 1

Description of databases searched

Throughout, ‘*’ has been used to indicate truncation of terms, ‘(ft)’ to denote free-text search terms, and ‘adj’ to identify phrases that were searched for as adjacent occurrences of the two specified words.

British Education Index (BEI)

BEI provides bibliographic references to 350 British and selected European English-language periodicals in the field of education and training, plus developing coverage of national report and conference literature.

- #1 Education Vouchers
- #2 Parent Choice
- #3 Admission Criteria
- #4 Selective Admission
- #5 school adj placement (ft)
- #6 admission\$ adj polic\$ (ft)

British Education Internet Resource Catalogue (BEIRC)

BEIRC is an Internet-based database of information about professionally evaluated and described Internet sites that support educational research, policy and practice.

- #1 Parent Choice
- #2 Admission Criteria
- #3 Selective Admission
- #4 Pupil Placement

Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC)

ERIC is the largest education database in the world, with records from 1966 with over 1 million abstracts on educational research and practice. ERIC indexes over 775 journals, mostly US-based, and provides good coverage of fugitive and grey literature, such as conference proceedings, speeches, theses and technical reports.

- #1 Educational Vouchers
- #2 Admission – School
- #3 Admission Criteria
- #4 School Choice
- #5 Selective Admission

Australian Education Index (AEI)

AEI indexes materials dating from 1978 onwards at all levels of education and related fields. Source documents include journal articles, monographs, research reports, theses,

conference papers, legislation, parliamentary debates and newspaper articles.

- #1 Educational Vouchers
- #2 Admission – School
- #3 Admission Criteria
- #4 School Choice
- #5 Selective Admission

CBCA Fulltext Education

CBCA covers monographs and journal articles from over 200 Canadian education journals, many in full text, from 1976 onwards. It also includes Canadian federal and provincial government research reports, monographs from Canadian educational research communities, provisional curriculum guides, graduate dissertations and theses in education.

- #1 Charter Schools
- #2 Educational Vouchers
- #3 School Choice

Current Educational Research in the United Kingdom (CERUK)

CERUK is a database sponsored by NFER and the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) and with support from the Evidence for Policy and Practice Information and Co-ordinating Centre (EPPI-Centre). It aims to provide a complete record of current or ongoing research in education and related disciplines. It covers a wide range of studies including commissioned research and PhD theses across all phases of education from early years to adults.

- #1 Admission Criteria
- #2 Education Vouchers
- #3 Parent Choice
- #4 Selective Admission

ChildData

ChildData is produced by the National Children’s Bureau. It encompasses four information databases: bibliographic information on books, reports and journal articles (including some full text access); directory information on more than 3000 UK and international organisations concerned with children; Children in the News, an index to press coverage of children’s issues since early 1996; and an indexed guide to conferences and events.

- #1 Admissions Policies
- #2 Selective Education

Appendix 2

The education systems in the selected countries

Diagram 1 The education system in Sweden

Phase of education				Year/grade key	Typical age	
Adult education [4] and, from age 18 onwards, advanced vocational training	Higher education – universities and university colleges					
	University diploma, 2 to 5.5 years	Professional degrees Master's degrees 4 years	Bachelors degree 3 years	Diploma 2 years	Single course	
	Upper secondary education					19+
	Compulsory education – <i>Grundskola</i>				12	18–19
					11	17–18
					10	16–17
					9	15–16
					8	14–15
					7	13–14
					6	12–13
					5	11–12
					4	10–11
					3	9–10
2	8–9					
1	7–8 [1]					
Pre-school class (<i>Förskoleklass</i>) in the <i>Grundskola</i> [2]					6–7	
Pre-primary education – <i>Forskola</i> [2]					5–6	
					4–5	
					3–4	
					2–3	
					1–2	
					0–1	

Bold = compulsory phase education

[1] Compulsory education normally begins at age seven. However, since 1991, six-year-olds have also been able to enrol in Year 1 of compulsory education in the *grundskola* if places are available. Since 1998 it has also been possible to postpone a child's entry to the *grundskola* until the child is eight. Despite both of these changes, most children still commence school in the autumn of the same year as their seventh birthday.

[2] Since 1 July 1997, it has been a statutory requirement for all municipalities to provide publicly-funded education, either in a pre-school class in the *grundskola*, where possible, or in pre-school or childcare institutions otherwise for all six-year-olds who wish to attend. In addition, since 1 January 2003, all four- and five-year-olds have been entitled to a free place in pre-school for a minimum of 525 hours each year.

[3] After-school childcare centres are available for children aged six to 12 who are in need of care outside school hours. These are usually located on school premises, and childcare centre staff collaborate closely in teams with teachers and pre-school teachers. Some municipalities also offer family day nurseries for this age group.

[4] Adult education provides opportunities for those who have not completed compulsory or post-compulsory school to finish their education. Municipalities must offer such provision, which also offers opportunities for broadening qualifications and education and lifelong learning.

Diagram 2 The education system in the Netherlands

				Year/grade key	Typical age
WO (university education)	HBO (higher professional education) [1]	SBO (secondary vocational education) [2]	Apprenticeship system [3]		18+
WO (university education)	HAVO (general upper secondary education)	VMBO (pre-vocational secondary education)		14	17–18
				13	16–17
				12	15–16
Basisvorming	Basisvorming [1]	Basisvorming		11	14–15
				10	13–14
				9	12–13
Primary education [5]				8	11–12
				7	
				6	
				5	
				4	
				3	
				2	
1					
Pre-compulsory education [6]					

Bold = compulsory

[1] Higher professional education (HBO) lasts four years and provides theoretical and practical training for a range of occupations. Students are usually aged 18 to 22.

[2] SBO began to be introduced in August 1999. It is secondary vocational education for students completing the VMBO course, which was also introduced in August 1999.

[3] Apprenticeship training lasts two to three years and advanced apprenticeship one to three years.

[4] All three types of secondary education usually start with a three-year period of basic secondary education (basisvorming) during which all students study the same broad range of core subjects.

[5] Primary education lasts from age four to age 12. It is compulsory from age five.

[6] Although there is universal state-funded education provision for four-year-olds (within primary education), none is specifically provided for children younger than four. Care for such children is provided by, among others, playgroups, day nurseries, and company childcare schemes.

Diagram 3 The education system in the Netherlands

Phase of education								Year class known as:	Grade	Typical age
	National Certificate of Educational Achievement, NCEA Level 3 (from 2004) [1]									
Secondary education	Form 3–7 schools with attached intermediates	Form 1–7 schools	Form 3–7 schools	Composite schools (includes area schools) [2]	Special schools	Correspondence schools [3]		Form 7	13	17–18
	National Certificate of Educational Achievement, NCEA Level 2 (from 2003)									
								Form 6	12	16–17
	National Certificate of Educational Achievement, NCEA Level 1 (from 2002)									
Intermediate schooling			Intermediate schools					Form 5	11	15–16
								Form 4	10	14–15
Primary schooling	Contributing schools			Full primary schools				Form 3	9	13–14
								Form 2	8	12–13
								Form 1	7	11–12
								Standard 4	6	10–11
								Standard 3	5	9–10
								Standard 2	4	8–9
								Standard 1	3	7–8
Pre-compulsory education	Play-centres	Kindergartens	Childcare	Childcare (home-based)	Te Kohanga Reo [5]	ECD-funded Pacific Islands Language groups [6]	Te Kohanga Reo [5]	Juniors	2	6–7
								Juniors/new entrants	1	5–6 [4]
										4–5
										3–4
										2–3
										1–2
										0–1

Bold = compulsory

[1] National Certificates of Educational Achievement will fully replace the School Certificate Examinations, the Sixth Form Certificate and the University Bursary by 2004. The levels and age ranges are a guide, however, as it is intended that students can gain NCEA credits at different levels during the same year and that they should be able to aim at NCEA levels that suit their abilities.

[2] *Composite schools* are all-through schools catering for students throughout their schooling. They usually provide for students

aged 5+ to 18+ years (including the ten years of compulsory education, ages six to 16). An example of a composite school is an 'area school' providing for all ages of school students living in a remote rural area.

[3] Correspondence schools are the state-funded distance education service, which provides off-campus learning for students unable to attend a regular or mainstream school, usually because of distance from their nearest school or for medical or other special reasons. It caters for all ages, from pre-school to adults.

[4] Although education is compulsory from age six, almost all children start school at age five.

[6] ECD: early childhood development unit.

[5] Te Kohanga Reo translates as Maori 'language nests' and are Maori language early childhood centres.



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