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Is Choice of School Just a Mirage?[1]

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ABSTRACT This article points out that, in the United Kingdom, parents have a right to state a preference for a particular school which is not the same as a right to choose.

How do we manage to get ourselves into such an emotional tangle over *school admissions*? Each year the cries of disappointment grow louder. The new focus on a common day for school allocations, the so-called A-day, has heightened political and media attention.

It could be different. Some years ago I experienced school admissions in the USA. It was so much more straightforward. We were moving temporarily to a university town in Michigan. The nearest schools to our new home were highly recommended and popular.

Some months ahead, I phoned to ask what chance I had of getting my two daughters into these schools. As we were not yet even yet residents, and foreigners to boot, I hardly expected good news. 'Oh, that's no problem,' was the response. I could hardly believe it. What if the school is full? But, no, I was reassured: 'Just turn up on the first day of term.'

So that's what we did. As did several other unexpected pupils. All were found places. So how did they do it? Well, when extra pupils turn up at the start of the school year, the local school district simply sends along the requisite number of extra teachers.

Now, of course, this sort of simplicity can happen only under certain conditions. First, schools have to be managed collectively by some form of local authority. Second, admissions must operate on a catchment area system, so the school you get depends on the street you live in.

Third, you cannot have a diversity of school types, each with their own selection criteria. In short, you need traditional neighbourhood comprehensives.

All these conditions used to apply in England. But things changed: schools were granted autonomy from local education authorities, catchment areas were dislocated by individual schools' admissions policies, and the variety of schools types proliferated.

As a result, school admissions became complex and varied. We encountered this when, some time after returning to England, my younger daughter approached secondary school transfer. In our area of outer London, there was certainly diversity of choice: fully selective grammar schools, partially selective schools, single-sex secondary moderns, co-educational comprehensives, and faith-based schools.

The popular schools were heavily oversubscribed, not just by pupils living in the local authority area but also by those who travelled from neighbouring council areas. The school on our doorstep was a highly selective grammar school, which was not the right school for my daughter. Even if it had been an option, proximity counted for nothing, as places were offered solely on scores in the competitive admissions test.

The only school that guaranteed a place was a comprehensive in the neighbouring authority. Although it had been good (and I believe is so again), it was then slipping towards 'special measures'.

So we applied to a very good girls-only secondary modern. It was the nearest non-selective school in our local authority. But there was no place for my daughter. We lived a few hundred metres too far away; she was placed 88th on the waiting list.

To cut the tangled story short, she was eventually offered a place, but not until late in the summer term, long after her friends knew where they were going.

Choice and diversity, and consumer-friendly information from Ofsted reports and league tables have been delivered in the name of parents. They may well have some advantages. But parents are rarely reminded there is another side of the coin: more competition, more complexity in admissions, and more disappointment when choice proves to be a mirage.

Greater honesty from politicians would help. They should be clear that there is no right to choose, only a right to state a preference. Greater diversity may be good in many ways, but inevitably it means school hierarchies and disappointed parents.

Note

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