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PRIVATE SCHOOLS, CHOICE AND THE ETHICAL ENVIRONMENT

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ABSTRACT: In this paper, we consider the relationship between the existence of private schools and public attitudes towards questions about educational provision. Data from the 2010 British Social Attitudes survey suggest that parents who choose to send children to private schools may become more entrenched in their support for more extensive forms of parental partiality, with potential ramifications for the future supporting of progressive education policy. We suggest that addressing questions about the existence of certain forms of education and school choice policies requires consideration of the broader ethical environment.

Keywords: private schools, school choice, ethical environment, social attitudes

1. INTRODUCTION

Within a broad framework of complex decisions parents must make about their child's education and upbringing, the decision to 'go private' and send one's child to an independent, fee-paying school is one that is highly politically contentious. While many argue for the importance of parents' freedom to raise their children in any way they see fit, exercising varying degrees of 'partiality' (Nagel, 1991) in order to secure the 'best', others argue that private schools are a source of injustice within society, where socially advantaged pupils receive social and educational benefits but others are excluded, largely on the basis of social class and an inability to pay.

Popular and academic arguments in favour of private schools tend to rely on two overarching claims. The first of these, rooted in liberal political theory, relates to what is argued to be an intrinsic right on the part of parents to determine their child's upbringing and to control the type of education they receive – although some argue that this right is trumped by the child's 'right to an open future' (see Feinberg, 1981) which the (liberal) state then has a duty to protect. Debates about parental rights to determine their children's schooling clearly extend beyond state/private dilemmas into questions about aspects of education such as religion and pedagogy. However, beliefs about the right to 'go private' are arguably particularly contentious because they tap into deeply held (although often unarticulated) beliefs about a right to invest in one's children and to transfer social

advantage between generations. Second, proponents of private schools also argue that, beyond the *intrinsic* value of parents' rights to determine their children's education, the existence of private schools within society also has an *instrumental* value, because competition from high-performing private schools is argued to force all schools – including those within the state sector – to improve (West and Woessmann, 2010). Hence, it is believed that positive benefits of private schooling will be felt by all, even the more disadvantaged.

However, liberal egalitarian theory highlights tensions between parents' freedom to choose private schools and equality of opportunity. Work by Swift (2003) has highlighted problems for Rawlsian social justice where not everyone can afford the 'partial' choice of paying for their child's education, but doing so confers advantage to some (even if 'trickle down' benefits do exist for those in the state sector). Increased resources per pupil and positive peer effects – with fewer disadvantaged pupils diverting teachers' attention – mean that private school graduates benefit from future advantages at university and in the labour market. Meanwhile, others are left behind in schools that cannot be described as 'comprehensive' because the most advantaged pupils – with all the positive peer effects and cultural capital that they and their parents bring to a school – have been creamed off to the private sector (Sahlberg, 2011).

Parents who buy their children an education that gives them competitive advantage are worsening the prospects of other people's children, using their money in a way that gives those others a less than fair start in life. (Swift, 2003, p. 14)

Of course, the bounded nature of *school* effects relative to extensive *home background* effects on pupil achievement should always be noted, and caution should therefore be exercised in assuming private schools' 'causal impact' (Walford, 2009). Nevertheless evidence does suggest that peer effects in schools do matter (Coe, 2009; Dumay and Dupriez, 2008; Sullivan and Heath, 2003).

According to Brighouse, allowing parents 'freedom to choose' in abstract terms is 'not necessarily inimical to greater equality of educational opportunity' (2002, p. 3). In other words, all other things being equal, it is not choice as such that is the problem for liberal egalitarians. With this in mind we might envisage a situation whereby choosing a private school became a possibility for *all* parents. Fees and transport costs would be paid by government so that disadvantaged pupils could attend any school of choice, while schools would be prevented from 'selecting in' or 'selecting out' students on any basis – wealth, 'ability' or even the basis of living in a surrounding leafy suburb.

However, within an already unequal society, equality of educational opportunity is likely to be compromised when school choice policies are implemented, due to the phenomenon – well-documented in qualitative research on school choice – whereby parents within stratified social groups tend towards choosing schools not on the basis of characteristics of schools themselves, but on the basis of pupils attending those schools. Ultimately, parents want their children to be educated around others 'like them' (Ball, 2003) and so patterns of choice feed into patterns of segregation between schools.

Critics of choice and markets in education (see, for example, Bridges and Jonathan, 2003; Jonathan, 1997) further argue that markets, by definition, ‘require differentiated products’ (Bridges and Jonathan, 2003, p. 135), and that the dynamics of market conditions ‘create first differences of quality (and not just of character) and then unequal access to the best’ (2003, p. 135). Within a classed and competitive education system involving unequal access to opportunities, exercising parental choice and freedom for one’s own children inevitably converts into an exercising of *partiality*, whereby parents seek to guarantee for their children the kinds of positional educational advantages ‘that can only be achieved by one child at another’s expense’ (Bridges and Jonathan, 2003, p. 131). Furthermore, for multiple structural reasons relating to the distribution of capital (Bourdieu, 1986), consumers operating in markets have unequal power and are unequally able to secure ‘the best’. Thus marketising educational provision and distorting its public good benefits – turning it into a commodity whereby families compete for positional advantages – can further entrench already existing inequalities. Not only do parents have different schooling options available to them, but they are also differentially able to access networks and reliable information about schools and they have different priorities and mechanisms for choosing schools (Ben-Porath, 2010; Gewirtz *et al.*, 1995):

Choice is a new social device through which social class differences are rendered into educational inequality. (Reay and Ball, 1997, p. 89)

Given the presence of social stratification in Britain, unless governments were to remove (rather than promote) most diversity between schools, ensuring all were equally funded with fair social mixes of pupils (currently, private schools are extremely generously funded and educate almost entirely an elite intake, so this would probably entail banning them or altering them beyond recognition), certain schools will always be more popular, prestigious and difficult to access. Although choice may still be of value in a hypothetical world where education systems did not reflect socio-economic differences, in an unequal society where divisions do exist, policies permitting and encouraging parental choice always risk exacerbating such divisions, for the reasons indicated above.

2. CHOICE, PARENTAL PARTIALITY AND THE ETHICAL ENVIRONMENT

Answering Johnson and Strike who are ‘struck by the extent to which the debate about choice often occurs in a fact-free environment’ (2010, p. 571), in this paper we build on debates that bring empirical data to bear on normative arguments about the value of government policies promoting extensive parental choice or partiality regarding children’s schooling. Although we do refer to the question of selective schooling, we focus particularly on private schooling. However, instead of looking at admittedly important questions such as how far this decision impacts on system-wide educational inequalities or school improvement, we look instead at the impact of parents choosing private schools on *social attitudes*. In particular, we are concerned with how far government policies allowing and promoting

private schools may independently impact on what Blackburn (2001), and Haydon (2006), developing Blackburn's notion in an educational context, refer to as the 'ethical environment' – the 'surrounding climate of ideas about how to live' (Blackburn, 2001, p. 1).

In rooting for particular policies on school choice or the existence of certain forms of schooling within an educational marketplace, we need to be aware that we are playing a role in the reinforcement or otherwise of various elements in our ethical environment; the environment in which people operate and develop as social and moral agents. Schools of different types, by virtue of their existence, to some extent evidently reproduce socially and culturally prominent values, thus inevitably contributing to, albeit also possibly changing, the ethical environment (Haydon, 2006, p. 118). If we are to assess fully, then, the merits or otherwise of parents choosing specific school types such as private schools, we need to ask: what effects do parental choices such as the decision to 'go private' have on reinforcing and sustaining parts of our ethical environment?

Of particular concern here may be how the existence of private schools might impact on values regarding educational provision and how it should be organised. We take it as given in the first instance that attitudes towards state education are intertwined with basic social characteristics (such as social class) and with people's underlying moral and political values. Beyond this, however, does the very existence of private schools and people's ability to choose them further impact on how far they prioritise social justice or equal opportunities in education? Might policies allowing extensive parental partiality 'feed back' (Jordan, 2010; Svallfors, 2011) into more entrenched views for some about the importance of parental partiality, or indeed a diminished sense of collective responsibility for the equitable education of those who are socially disadvantaged?

Recently we were involved, with colleagues from the National Centre for Social Research, in a research project entitled 'Morality and School Choice: An Exploration of British Social Attitudes'. This project involved designing a module of 30 survey questions on the 'rights' and 'wrongs' of school choice, testing beliefs about how far 'freedom' and 'equality' ought to be balanced in the organising of education systems. A total of 2216 adults in Britain were asked their views as part of the 2010 British Social Attitudes survey. Overall, our aim was to test attitudes – of both parents and non-parents – towards what constitutes 'legitimate parental partiality' (Brighouse and Swift, 2009) and towards extensive parental freedoms in education. Questions included the following:

- Whether parents ought to be able to pay for a better education.
- Whether parents ought to put their own child first in choosing schools, without considering the needs and interests of others.
- Whether it is acceptable to avoid sending children to the nearest school on grounds of the social backgrounds of pupils who go there.

- Whether it is acceptable for parents to move house in order to be nearer better schools (hence using financial capital to gain positional advantage for their children).
- Whether people have a duty to choose the ‘best’ for their child, even in a context where other schools (and so pupils in those schools) will suffer.

Questions were also asked about the extent to which parents ought to be able to engage in less honest measures in order to gain advantage for their children, such as:

- Feigning religious interest in order to access high-performing faith schools.
- Acting fraudulently by renting a second home (without living there) or using a relative’s address in order to access high-performing state schools.

In asking these questions, we hoped to compare the views of different groups within society, exploring how far social characteristics, wider beliefs and attitudes may impact on answers, but also how far *individual decisions to ‘go private’* may impact on answers. Such an approach adds to debates about the value of allowing parents to choose extensive forms of partiality such as private schools because it is an empirically informed consideration of the implications of such policies. In assessing government policies that shape the landscape of educational provision, it is important to take into account not just the performance of individual schools, national standards of educational achievement, or objective measures of socio-economic inequality and the extent to which these are exacerbated,¹ but also the kinds of attitudes that prevail in society and thus the ethical environment in which people operate and further policy is made. Promotion of and support for socially just, inclusive and progressive government policies can only succeed where there is a wider public commitment to moral values on which these policies are based, and a culture of political discourse, indeed an ethical environment, which allows such values to be articulated and defended.

Here, then, we contribute to what Cribb and Ball (2005) have stressed as being an important ‘ethical audit’ of trends towards privatisation in education. Our study suggests, tentatively, correlations between the availability of choice, private schools and the salience of certain moral and political attitudes, particularly as they relate to education. Work evaluating the implications of allowing parents to make choices such as paying for their children’s education must not simply hail those choices as being either good or bad – it must also look at the underlying evaluative commitments that permitting those choices promotes. Our study shows in the first instance that attitudes towards the desirability of different sorts of parental partiality in education do exist within a matrix of social characteristics and of wider moral and political values. However, it then shows additionally that decisions parents make about their own children’s schooling in turn impact further on their views about education.

3. PUTTING ONE'S CHILD FIRST?

Looking first at overarching attitudes towards parental partiality debates, [Table 1](#) suggests that within Britain there is a significant tempering of commitments towards unbridled parental freedom in education with commitments to ideas of fairness and equal opportunities. Considering decisions to 'go private', 61% believe the quality of education 'should be the same for all children'. Fewer than 4 in 10 agree that parents who can afford it should be able to pay for better education. In line with this, [Table 1](#) also shows that while most agree that parents should 'put their own child first' when it comes to choosing schools, a majority also believe that parents ought to 'consider the needs and interests of other children'. Indeed, 3 in 10 actually believe parents ought not to put their own children first when making educational choices, but instead should 'consider all children's needs and interests equally'.

TABLE 1: Attitudes towards differing forms of parental partiality, 2010

Should the quality of education be the same for all children, or should parents who can afford it be able to pay for better education?	
Same for everyone	61%
Able to pay for better	38%
Some think it is important to put your child first when choosing a secondary school whilst others think it is also important to consider all children's needs equally, including your own child's. Which statement comes closest to your view?	
Put your child first and leave other parents to do the same	37%
Put your own child first but also consider other children's needs and interests	32%
Consider all children's needs and interests equally, including your own child's	29%
How much do you agree or disagree that in Britain today, parents have a duty to choose the best school for their child, even if this means schools in the local area might suffer?	
Agree strongly/agree	50%
Neither agree nor disagree	25%
Disagree/disagree strongly	21%
How acceptable do you think it is not to send a child to their nearest state secondary school because it has many pupils from backgrounds different to the child's own background?	
Always/usually acceptable	27%
Sometimes acceptable	27%
Rarely/never acceptable	43%
When selecting pupils, schools take account of different factors such as the pupil's ability, their religion or where they live. There are sometimes things parents can do to improve their child's chances of gaining a place at a particular school. How much do you approve or disapprove of parents moving house to be nearer a higher performing secondary school?	
Strong approve/approve	36%
Neither	30%
Disapprove/strongly disapprove	32%
Base (n)	2216

However, commitments to individual freedom remain. Presented with a notion of choosing ‘the best’, many agree that ‘parents have a duty to choose the best school for their child, even if this means schools in the local area might suffer’. Support for such a notion to some degree contradicts support for the idea that parents should consider more than simply the needs of their own children when making decisions about schools. However, support for choosing the ‘best’ at the possible expense of others does not extend to widespread support for practices such as avoiding local schools on the basis of pupils who go there. [Table 1](#) shows significant opposition to such an idea – while 27% found it acceptable, 43% found it ‘rarely’ or ‘never’ acceptable. Opposition was less marked, with roughly equal proportions approving and disapproving, to the idea that parents could use their financial capital to move house and thus live nearer higher performing secondary schools. Less marked opposition might reflect answering differently to a question that does not cite directly ‘social’ factors – making positive reference to ‘higher performing’ schools rather than moving away from certain pupils. However, greater support might also reflect public approval of the wider idea that families ought to be free to live wherever they choose (even if such choices are driven by a desire for educational advantage). Still, it is also important to note that only a minority (36%) approve of parents moving house to be nearer ‘better’ schools. More significant support for the idea of ‘choosing the best’ even where other schools may suffer, is also the view of only one-half of respondents. Given how far policy in Britain asserts the importance of parental freedom to choose ‘at all costs’, these findings are notable. Earlier work from the project has shown that most people in Britain believe parents should simply send their children to the nearest state school (Exley, 2011).

Considering less honest actions that parents might undertake in order to secure advantage for their children ([Table 2](#)), only very low levels of approval can be seen among the British public. While 16% approve of parents becoming involved in local religious activities in order to access high-performing faith schools (61% disapprove), just 6% approve of parents using relatives’ addresses or renting second homes (but not living there) in order to access to high-performing secondary schools. More than 8 in 10 disapprove of these actions.

TABLE 2: Attitudes towards less honest or fraudulent actions parents may undertake in order to secure ‘better’ for their children

How much do you approve or disapprove of parents doing the following things:	
strongly approve/approve of parents . . .	
Starting to get involved in local religious activities to help get their children into a high-performing faith school	16%
Using a relative’s address in order to be nearer a higher performing secondary school	6%
Renting a second home in order to be nearer a higher performing secondary school but not generally living there	6%
Base (n)	2216

4. HOW DO ATTITUDES VARY?

Tables 3–8 present findings from regression analyses examining characteristics that predict attitudes towards parental partiality. Tables 3–7 present analyses of attitudes towards each of the five questions in Table 1. Table 8 presents findings from analysis carried out on a newly created attitude scale (Cronbach's alpha = 0.99) examining public *disapproval* of 'less honest or fraudulent actions' that parents undertake to gain advantage for their children. Items included in this scale are those in Table 2, and the scale's validity has been confirmed

TABLE 3: Logistic regression examining belief that parents who can afford it should be able to pay for better education for their children

Category	Coefficient	Standard error	Odds ratio	<i>p</i> value
Baseline odds	-2.71**	0.57	0.07	0.000
Sex (male)				
Female	-0.38**	0.11	0.69	0.001
Political party (no party)				
Conservative	0.43**	0.16	1.54	0.006
Labour	-0.56**	0.16	0.57	0.000
Region (North East)				
Inner London	0.72*	0.36	2.05	0.050
Outer London	0.84*	0.30	2.31	0.011
South West	0.65*	0.33	1.91	0.049
Social class (semi-routine/routine)				
Small employer/own account worker	0.64**	0.20	1.90	0.002
Lower supervisory/technical	0.49*	0.19	1.63	0.010
Sent child to private school	0.47*	0.22	1.60	0.032
Income (<£1000 per month)				
£2201–3700 per month	0.39*	0.16	1.48	0.013
Left–right attitudes	0.25**	0.08	1.29	0.001

n = 1774. Nagelkerke R^2 = 0.14. *Significant at 95% level. **Significant at 99% level.

TABLE 4: Logistic regression examining belief in 'putting your child first and leaving others to do the same'

Category	Coefficient	Standard error	Odds ratio	<i>p</i> value
Baseline odds	-1.71**	0.54	0.18	0.002
Age	-0.01*	0.01	0.99	0.032
Political party (no party)				
Labour	-0.35*	0.15	0.70	0.021
Liberal Democrat	-0.40*	0.19	0.67	0.036
Other party	0.60*	0.25	1.82	0.015
Parents went to private school	-0.65*	0.27	0.52	0.017
Sent child to private school	0.63**	0.22	1.87	0.004
Left–right attitudes	0.19*	0.08	1.21	0.013

n = 1770. Nagelkerke R^2 = 0.09. *Significant at 95% level. **Significant at 99% level.

TABLE 5: Logistic regression examining belief that it is acceptable not to send a child to their nearest state secondary school because it has many pupils from backgrounds different to the child's own background

Category	Coefficient	Standard error	Odds ratio	p value
Baseline odds	-1.66**	0.49	0.19	0.001
Sex (male)				
Female	-0.24*	0.12	0.79	0.045
Children (no children)				
Children aged over 16	0.47*	0.20	1.60	0.021
Political party (no party)				
Labour	-0.40*	0.16	0.67	0.015
Liberal Democrat	-0.45*	0.21	0.64	0.030
Region (North East)				
Inner London	1.02*	0.44	2.78	0.020
Eastern	0.81*	0.35	2.24	0.022
Wales	0.91**	0.49	0.19	0.001
Type of area (rural)				
Suburbs/outskirts of a big city	0.47**	0.18	1.60	0.001
Income (<£1000 per month)				
£2201-3700 per month	0.39*	0.16	1.47	0.018
Religion (no religion)				
Church of England	0.31*	0.15	1.37	0.042
Sent child to private school	0.47*	0.22	1.59	0.038
Parent(s) went to private school	-0.90**	0.33	0.41	0.007

n = 1769. Nagelkerke R² = 0.08. *Significant at 95% level. **Significant at 99% level.

TABLE 6: Logistic regression examining approval of moving house in order to be nearer a higher performing secondary school

Category	Coefficient	Standard error	Odds ratio	p value
Baseline odds	-2.28**	0.56	0.10	0.000
Age	-0.01**	0.01	0.99	0.004
Political party (no party)				
Conservative	0.27*	0.13	1.31	0.041
Region (North East)				
Outer London	0.66*	0.31	1.93	0.031
Social class (semi-routine/routine)				
Managerial/professional	0.61**	0.16	1.84	0.000
Intermediate	0.44*	0.19	1.55	0.022
Left-right attitudes	0.16*	0.08	1.18	0.034
Libertarian-authoritarian attitudes	0.28**	0.09	1.33	0.003
Sent child to private school	0.68**	0.21	1.97	0.002
Sibling went to private school	-0.57*	0.27	0.56	0.034

n = 1783. Nagelkerke R² = 0.10. *Significant at 95% level. **Significant at 99% level.

using factor analysis. Models controlled for a range of independent variables, including respondents' age, gender, social class, income, educational qualifications, religion, region, whether they lived in an urban area and whether they

TABLE 7: Logistic regression examining agreement that 'parents have a duty to choose the best possible school for their child, even if this means schools in the local area might suffer'

Category	Coefficient	Standard error	Odds ratio	<i>p</i> value
Baseline odds	-1.11*	0.56	0.33	0.046
Age	-0.01*	0.01	0.99	0.012
Parents went to selective school	-0.41*	0.17	0.66	0.013
Respondent went to selective school	0.35*	0.16	1.41	0.027
Sibling went to selective school	-0.44*	0.18	0.64	0.012
Sent child to private school	0.65**	0.23	1.91	0.004
Children (no children)				
Children under 16 living at home	0.42**	0.16	1.52	0.007
Region (North East)				
North West	0.61*	0.28	1.84	0.031
Inner London	1.41**	0.41	4.11	0.001
Religion (no religion)				
Other non-Christian	0.53*	0.26	1.71	0.041
Income (<£1000 per month)				
£1001-2200 per month	-0.39**	0.14	0.67	0.004
Libertarian-authoritarian attitudes	0.36**	0.09	1.43	0.000

$n = 1775$. Nagelkerke $R^2 = 0.13$. *Significant at 95% level. **Significant at 99% level.

TABLE 8: Ordinary least squares regression examining 'disapproving of less honest and fraudulent activities'^a

Individual characteristics (comparison group in brackets)	Standardised beta coefficient	Standard error	<i>p</i> value
Age	0.23**	0.00	0.000
Region (North East)			
Inner London	-0.20**	0.25	0.000
Outer London	-0.08**	0.20	0.006
Newspaper readership (no paper)			
Tabloid	-0.06*	0.12	0.018
Political party (no party)			
Conservative	0.07*	0.14	0.029
Other party	0.05*	0.23	0.040
Religion (no religion)			
Other non-Christian	-0.09**	0.23	0.001
Income (<£1000 per month)			
£3701 or more per month	-0.06*	0.15	0.024
Child went to private school	-0.07**	0.20	0.004
Left-right attitudes	-0.07**	0.07	0.005
Libertarian-authoritarian attitudes	-0.09**	0.09	0.001

^aA positive coefficient indicates greater disapproval of these actions. $n = 1812$. $R^2 = 0.14$. *Significant at 95% level. **Significant at 99% level.

were parents. In order to examine the impact of wider attitudes, models included newspaper readership and political party identification in addition to standard attitude scales included each year on the British Social Attitudes survey measuring

'left-right', 'libertarian-authoritarian' and 'pro or anti welfare' attitudes. Finally, in order to consider direct family experiences, variables were included to identify where respondents, their parents or siblings had attended any kind of private or academically selective school, and also importantly *where parents had sent one or more children to private or academically selective schools*. Family experiences of selective education in addition to private education were considered because it has been argued by many (for example, Swift, 2003) that the sending of children to selective schools constitutes a similar form of partiality to 'going private'. Academic ability is known to correlate heavily with characteristics such as family income, and academically selective schools in Britain have long been associated with socially advantaged intakes of pupils.

From the tables it can be noted that a wide range of characteristics are significant in predicting attitudes. Older respondents show slightly less pro-parental partiality than those who are younger; they are less likely than others to believe in 'putting your child first and leaving others to do the same' and less likely to support parents using the housing market to access schools, choosing the 'best' where others might suffer or engaging in less honest activities. More collectivist attitudes here might be generational in that older groups will remember a past, more social democratic age, growing up in an ethical environment where values such as equality and welfarism were more accepted than they are today (Haydon, 2006). However, lower support for partiality among older groups may also denote 'lifecycle effects', in that those who are older are also more removed from the real dilemmas parents face when choosing schools. Supporting this latter interpretation is the finding that parents with children under 16 living at home are significantly more likely than others (including those with older children) to support choosing 'the best' even where local schools may suffer (Table 7).

Gender is to some degree significant, in that men are more likely than women to support both 'paying for better' (Table 3) and avoiding local schools on the basis of pupils who go there (Table 5). However, previous analysis has shown that women are more likely than men to believe parents have a 'basic right to choose' (Exley, 2011), so the picture regarding gender and attitudes is mixed.

Where people live also matters. People in London, and also in the suburbs of other big cities, are more likely than others to support more extensive forms of partiality, as can be seen in Tables 3 and 5–8. Driving attitudes among these respondents may be a stronger sense that choice is part of a highly competitive educational marketplace, leading to particularly marked anxiety among parents and a fear that they may somehow 'lose out' if they do not 'play the game'. Absence of perceived appropriate schooling options may explain findings in Tables 7 and 8 that show an increased support for stronger forms of partiality among those belonging to minority religions. People who identify as non-Christian and religious are less likely to show concern for possible harm to others where parents choose 'the best' (Table 7) and they are also less likely to disapprove of less honest parental actions (Table 8). Such a finding would fit with a context of scarce provision of specialist non-Christian religious schooling in Britain.

Social class and income are in some respects important in predicting attitudes – those enjoying greater affluence tend to believe more that people ought to be able to convert class/income advantage into educational advantage for their children. People with higher incomes and those in middling social classes are more likely than those with the lowest incomes to support paying for better, and they are also more likely to say it is acceptable for parents to avoid local schools on the basis of pupil backgrounds. This may be partly a reflection of a particular ethical attitude that is arguably more pervasive among affluent respondents, namely the view that social mobility is largely the result of individual aspirations, attitudes and ‘moral fibre’ (Jones, 2011, p. 91). If ‘background’, according to this particular narrative, is thought of to a greater degree among such respondents in terms of a culture and attitude, they may be more likely to see it as something that could ‘rub off’ on others, with possibly negative effects on supposedly more ‘aspirational’ children. People in the highest classes are also more likely than others to approve of parents moving house for school choice reasons and those with the highest incomes are those least likely to disapprove of parents engaging in less honest school choice actions. Conversely, people with lower incomes are those with lowest approval of parents choosing ‘the best’ where local schools may suffer.

5. WIDER SOCIAL ATTITUDES

Background characteristics do seem to make a difference, then, in terms of predicting attitudes towards extensive parental partiality. Beyond this, Tables 3–8 also show that attitudes are predicted by wider social and political beliefs. Politically, those who identify with the Labour or Liberal Democrat parties are significantly less likely than others to approve of putting one’s own child first without considering others, and they are also less likely to approve of avoiding a local school on the basis of its pupils. Paying for private education and moving house to access better schools are both supported more among Conservatives, although it should also be noted that those who identify as Conservative also ‘draw a line’ when it comes to dishonest actions, being more likely than others to disapprove of these. Interesting patterns emerge when examining correlation between wider social/political attitudes and attitudes towards parental partiality. In Table 3 we can see that belief in paying for better education correlates with being more ‘right wing’, as does a belief in putting one’s own child first (Table 4), moving house to be nearer better schools (Table 6) and showing less disapproval towards parents’ dishonest actions (Table 8). More ‘authoritarian’ attitudes also correlate with belief in a right to move house in order to access better schools, belief in choosing ‘the best’ even where others may suffer and, curiously, *lower* disapproval towards parents’ dishonest actions.

6. FAMILY EXPERIENCES AND CHOICES

Moving on to consider specifically family choices and experiences, Tables 4–7 show interesting initial findings in that where respondents have had privately

or selectively-educated parents or siblings, more collectivist attitudes and lower approval for extensive parental partiality in education can be observed. Respondents whose parents attended private school are less likely than others in Britain to believe in 'putting their own child first and leaving others to do the same'. They are also less likely to support avoiding the nearest state secondary school on grounds of pupil backgrounds. Where respondent's siblings have attended private school, they are less likely than others to support moving house to be nearer better state schools. Finally, where a respondent's parents or siblings have attended selective schools, they are less likely than others to believe parents have a duty to choose 'the best' even when local schools might suffer. These slightly puzzling findings may be explained by a possibility that respondents have 'rebelled' against particular forms of education received by their parents or siblings where they themselves have not experienced the same education. Regression findings back up such a possible explanation in that there is little clear effect on attitudes produced where *respondents themselves* have attended private or selective school. One notable exception here lies in the fact that respondents are *more likely* to believe in 'choosing the best' (even where other schools may suffer) if they have attended a selective school.

Building on the latter finding, which perhaps reflects some *post-hoc* justification on the part of those who have been selectively educated, one clear and prominent effect seen throughout all regression analyses relates to where parents have made decisions to send children to private schools. Throughout Tables 3–8 it can be noted that respondents who have sent one or more of their children to private school are not only more likely to support 'paying for better' directly, they are also more likely to support putting their children first 'and leaving other parents to do the same', avoiding schools on the basis of pupil backgrounds, moving house to be nearer better schools and choosing 'the best' even where other schools may suffer. Beyond this, people who have chosen private schools are less likely than others to disapprove of parents' less honest actions.

One initial response here may be to say that extensive 'pro parental freedom' attitudes with less concern for equity among parents who have chosen private schools are unsurprising, because many of those choosing private schools are presumably those with more right-wing views in the first place. However, what is notable in regression analysis is that *an independent effect of 'going private' on pro-parental partiality attitudes remains even after general right-wing attitudes and indicators of income and social class have been taken into account*. Such an independent effect may mean that beyond holding general right-wing attitudes, some people in society may hold specific views about the importance of parental freedom that are different to and independent from general right-wing attitudes regarding the importance of prioritising individual freedom, and these beliefs may have driven them to choose private schools for their children. However, such an explanation is unlikely to account in full for the strong and significant effects emerging here. We suggest that an equally plausible explanation is that the effects in question are partly a result of people's views on the importance of parental

freedom and partiality becoming more entrenched following a decision to ‘go private’.

It has to be acknowledged that there may be a simple form of *post-hoc* rationalisation going on here; in other words, parents may be justifying decisions by expressing consistently clearer attitudes that are pro extensive parental partiality after having chosen a private school. Yet we think there is also at least a reasonable possibility that the very experience of ‘going private’ has additionally reinforced attitudes. Perhaps it is the case that the ethical environment characteristic of many private schools, both in terms of school ethos and the values of other parents sending their children to those schools, is one in which particular positions on individual freedom, aspiration, social class and excellence are promoted and articulated. Cribb and Ball (2005, p. 115) discuss ‘new ethical spaces’, ‘new clusters of goals, obligations and dispositions’ and new conceptions of virtue produced by what they describe as an increasing privatisation of education in Britain. Edwards and Gillies (2011) have further stressed the importance of discursive networks among middle-class parents, circulating normative ‘knowhow’ on what it is to be a good or socially responsible parent. West and Noden (2003), following a series of interviews with parents choosing private schools, indicated that these parents were more likely than others to emphasise ‘risky’ state education, highlighting instead the importance of (perceived) quality in private schools,² catering to individual children’s needs and talents, ‘stretching’ them more and reflecting more consistently ‘values at home’ than do state schools. Discourses of ‘fairness’ were also expressed, with privately educated parents believing their children ought to have the same advantages they themselves had. Edwards and Gillies highlight particular emphasis among middle-class parents on children’s individual ‘specialness’, and with this in mind it is possible to imagine a flowing of discourses in private school spheres, at school gates and parents’ evenings, part of a language of entitlement where ‘claims to privilege are founded on a notion of deserving individuality’ (2011, p. 149).

It is possibly not, therefore, simply the case that different schooling options for parents and government policies promoting these allow parents already committed to certain values to play these out in practice. Rather, the existence of certain kinds of schools and policies can be seen as part of a background that enables particular aspects of the ethical environment to prevail and flourish. For, as Haydon says:

... even if values do in some way exist independently of human practices and discourse, it is still, at least very largely, through practices, institutions and discourse that people come to be aware of values and to be influenced by them. (2006, p. 20)

7. IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND SOCIETY

It is perhaps useful to conclude by considering possible implications for society and for policy arising from our finding that the existence of private schooling in Britain and parents’ capacity to choose it appears to fuel more entrenched

individualistic and ‘pro-partiality’ attitudes among those parents. As suggested earlier, attempts on the part of governments to produce successful, socially just and progressive policies for education will always depend on wider cultural commitments among the electorate to normative values underpinning those policies and ultimately an ethical environment that is supportive of such policies. At the same time, however, existing government policies and discourses also send messages to the electorate about values they ought to uphold, reinforcing elements of our ethical environment. In a 2008 speech to the think-tank Centre Forum, (then Shadow) Secretary of State for Education in England Michael Gove denounced:

a schools system which widens the gap between the fortunate and the forgotten, which makes society progressively less equal over time.³

However, despite critiquing the way ‘it is remarkable how many of the positions of wealth, influence, celebrity and power in our society are held by individuals who were privately educated’, Gove has also stressed emphatically that he would not ‘decry the individuals concerned or criticise the schools they attended. Far from it.’⁴ Indeed, journalist George Monbiot has described a possible banning of private schools in England as being ‘the last policy Gove could contemplate’.⁵ Although Labour in 1997 abolished Assisted Places in Britain (granting funding to private schools via subsidised places for disadvantaged students), tax benefits and charitable status for private schools continue (Walford, 2009).

Does the existence of more individualistic views among those who have chosen private schools matter for society? We suggest that the freedom to exercise extensive partiality in such ways does look likely to entrench views about its importance more deeply, not just with respect to the action of ‘paying for better’ but also more generally. Within England, however, it must be noted that only 7% of the population *is* privately educated, with just 3% being privately educated in Scotland and an even smaller proportion in Wales (Gorard, 1996; Ryan and Sibetia, 2010; Walford, 2009), so even if individualistic views *do* become entrenched among this group, such individualism is not particularly far-reaching.

Nonetheless, exercising a right to ‘go private’ is of course just one in an ever-growing number of ways parents can exercise extensive partiality towards their children (Ball, 2010). Within England at least, if less so in Scotland and Wales, policies are being promoted in which parents are increasingly responsibilised (see Ball, 2008) into engaging actively in securing ‘the best’ and ‘most ambitious’ schools for their children. Where this is not possible, government funds are being dedicated towards enabling parents to set up ‘free schools’ (Department for Education, 2010). A 2011 Sutton Trust study showed that paid-for private tuition at home in England and Wales has been ‘booming despite the recession’.⁶ If it is the case that exercising extensive parental partiality *of other forms beyond a decision to ‘go private’* also feeds into more individualistic attitudes among families, actions such as the setting up of ‘free schools’ in England could mean that the ethical environment in which individualistic views are rendered meaningful and acceptable is likely to become increasingly dominant, rather than

just one of a number of possible ‘ethical environments’ in which people operate (Haydon, 2006, pp. 13–14). In sum, it is possible not just that the existence of private schools will have ‘feedback effects’ on attitudes, but gradually that there may be wider discursive processes feeding into support for an incremental shift towards educational policies that reflect a more individualist ethos. Cribb and Ball highlight the importance of ‘considering the defensibility of policies which have planned and foreseeable “ethical effects”’, ‘reconstructing institutional norms and constraints, practices, subject positions and subjectivities’ and producing ‘a new ethical commonsense for action in educational institutions’ (2005, p. 115):

... possible threat to ideals such as ‘the public good’ – i.e., conceptions of what is valuable to the public, or various ‘publics’, and not simply to individuals considered in isolation – is at the very least an obvious matter of contention and concern . . . An approach to policy making which does not explicitly address and respond to concerns of this magnitude either lacks ethical seriousness or is ethically dubious . . . Privatisation does not simply change how we do things, it also changes how we think about what we do, and how we relate to ourselves and significant others. (Cribb and Ball 2005, pp. 118–121)

Potential developments such as this seem particularly important now, at a time when, while figures indicating growing socio-economic inequality in contemporary Britain⁷ are hard to dispute, we are faced with two conflicting paradigms offering both explanations for and solutions to this situation: the traditional leftist perspective emphasising structural socio-economic reform and a redistribution of wealth, placing value on traditional blue-collar jobs, class solidarity and collective action, is, it seems, being increasingly displaced by a narrative that emphasises individual responsibility, entrepreneurship and economic competitiveness, while decrying the ‘politics of envy’ (Ahier and Beck, 2003). Which narrative captures the public imagination and becomes more prominent within the public discourse, and accordingly which moral and political values underpin the current government’s vision of ‘the Big Society’, is at least partly informed by and expressed through the kind of educational policies we promote and support.

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9. NOTES

¹ Such debates are well covered elsewhere (see Allen and Burgess, 2010).

² See also Edwards *et al.* (1989).

³ http://www.conservatives.com/News/Speeches/2008/03/Michael_Gove_Making_Opportunity_More_Equal.aspx (accessed 11 July 2013).

⁴ Speech to Brighton College, 2012. Available at: <http://www.education.gov.uk/inthenews/speeches/a00208822/brighton-college> (accessed 11 July 2013).

- ⁵ Available at: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2012/may/10/michael-gove-private-school-social-justice> (accessed 11 July 2013).
- ⁶ Available at: <http://www.suttontrust.com/news/news/private-tuition-booms-despite-recession/> (accessed 11 July 2013).
- ⁷ Average pay for FTSE 100 total executives in 2011 was 185 times the national average. CEO salaries have also risen more over time than national average salaries (High Pay Centre, 2012).

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