

FREE SCHOOLS IN ENGLAND: CHOICE, ADMISSIONS AND SOCIAL SEGREGATION

By

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the operation of school choice in the context of Free Schools in England. It focuses on three different aspects, each related to exploring the Free Schools policy from a social justice and equity perspective. The first of these looks at the admissions arrangements of secondary Free Schools, and considers the extent to which they have the potential to impact local patterns of social segregation between schools. Second, the reasons and strategies that parents reported when choosing a Free School are explored. Finally, the study explores the outcomes in relation to student composition. The study as a whole takes a multi-method approach, using Annual School Census data, parent questionnaires and interviews and a documentary analysis of admissions policies.

The findings show a complex picture, reflecting the heterogeneous and diverse nature of Free Schools. Disadvantaged pupils are under-represented in a majority of Free Schools, but not in all. The admissions policies also suggest that the majority of Free Schools are using similar methods for allocating places as those used by other schools in their area. A small number, however, are seeking to use more equitable methods such as banding or random assignment. Parents that had chosen the Free Schools tended to report looking for similar features but had taken different routes and encountered varying circumstances during the decision-making process. Many were attracted to the Free School by its promise of quality and used a range of proxy features to determine this, including factors relating to the social composition of the Free School, comparisons with other school types and a focus on a traditional approach to schooling. Recommendations for how the Free Schools policy could be used to encourage equity of access and opportunity are included at the end of the study. These include potential changes to school admissions procedures and continuing to encourage wider access to information about schools. In a number of instances though it is suggested that rather than simply focusing on particular types of school, policymakers should seek to implement these suggestions on a national scale if they are interested in making the 'choice' process fairer for all.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ASC	Annual Schools Census
BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
BERA	British Educational Research Association
BSA	British Social Attitudes (Survey)
CTC	City Technology College
DES	Department of Education and Science
DfE	Department for Education
DfEE	Department for Education and Employment
DfES	Department for Education and Skills
EAL	English as an Additional Language
ERA	Education Reform Act
FSM	Free School Meals
GCSE	General Certificate of Secondary Education
GM	Grant-Maintained
LA	Local Authority
LEA	Local Education Authority
LMS	Local Management of Schools
MAT	Multi-Academy Trust
NAO	National Audit Office
NPD	National Pupil Database
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
ONS	Office for National Statistics
OSA	Office of the Schools Adjudicator
SEN	Special Educational Needs
SES	Socioeconomic Status
SIF	Supplementary Information Form
SPSS	Statistical Package for Social Sciences
SSFA	School Standards and Framework Act
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
UTC	University Technical College
VA	Voluntary Aided
VC	Voluntary Controlled

CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Statement of purpose

This study emerged from an interest in the rapid expansion of the academies programme in England following the coalition government's Academies Act of 2010. Forming an important part of this new legislation was the introduction of a new type of academy: Free Schools. Like academies, they would operate autonomously, outside of Local Authority control, and have freedoms in relation to their curriculum, budgets, staffing and admissions arrangements. But what was perhaps most significant about them was the fact that these schools would be newly-established institutions and would enable a broader group of stakeholders to become involved in the setting-up and running of schools.

This new policy initiative provides an interesting research context in itself. But the introduction of Free Schools also offers a significant extension of existing education policy, encouraging us to reconsider and develop our current understanding of issues related to school choice and the social composition of schools. When describing the rationale for the Free Schools initiative, policymakers pointed to improved standards, the extension of parental choice and the importance of increased diversity within the system (The Conservative Party, 2010; Gove, 2011). Whilst the standards agenda is, of course, important and of interest, it is the two latter motivations that were most influential in developing the focus of this current project. Previous research and some academic and media commentary had raised concerns about the impact of increased quasi-marketisation on access and opportunity for some of the most disadvantaged pupils (Curtis *et al.*, 2008; Hatcher, 2011; Millar, 2010; West *et al.*, 2009). Approaching the Free Schools policy through a social justice and equity lens, I wanted to explore the extent to which the new schools appeared to be serving poorer pupils and fulfilling their role of being “engines of social mobility” (Gove, 2011; Morgan, 2015).

The purpose of this research is to provide some in-depth, early insight in to the Free Schools initiative. It is designed to give an overview of the social composition of all of the Free Schools in the country and provide a comparison with other schools in their local area. But in addition to exploring this outcome of the policy, it was also important to explore mechanisms

which have previously been identified as influencing school intakes, particularly intakes that do not appear to include an equal share of disadvantaged pupils. As a result, both the behaviour of schools (via their chosen admissions arrangements) and the attitudes and actions of parents (in relation to the school choice process) formed an important part of this study. I wanted to know the extent to which the Free Schools were opting to use their admissions freedoms and the factors that encouraged parents to choose a brand new school for their child. These foci contribute to a fuller overall picture of the Free Schools initiative whilst also providing potential explanations for some of the findings relating to the composition of the schools. The findings from the study indicate some areas where measures could be taken to make the introduction of new schools more equitable. Significantly though, the findings also suggest that in many instances, Free Schools do not appear to be operating that differently to some other types of school. As such, it is important to retain a sense of perspective in relation to the Free Schools policy. There are still only a very small number of these schools in existence; they should not serve as a distraction for equity issues that exist more widely across the education system.

At the time of beginning this study, empirical research explicitly focusing on Free Schools in England was scarce due to the recent introduction of the policy. Since 2012, however, a small body of research has begun to emerge, particularly in relation to the composition of the schools, and the extent to which they are meeting their objective of providing education for some of the most disadvantaged pupils (Green *et al.*, 2015; Morris, 2015). There has also been some focus on the experiences of those wanting to set-up new schools (Higham, 2014; Miller *et al.*, 2014) and some attempts to evaluate the effectiveness of the Free Schools in comparison to other school structures (Porter and Simons, 2015). The limited existing research on Free Schools in this country pointed to the need for studies in this area to be undertaken. Moreover, it highlighted the need to examine a broader evidence base when considering the policy and research literature. As a result, both similar international models and key predecessor policies within the English education system have been explored. This thesis aims to add to this existing body of work but also seeks to provide alternative perspectives from which to understand the introduction of Free Schools. The in-depth focus on the schools admissions policies, the experiences of parents that have chosen a Free School

and the use of segregation ratios to compare intakes with those of other local schools all provide new and original contributions to the existing field.

1.2 Significance of the study

This research matters because debates surrounding school structures, autonomy and equity continue to play an important role in influencing government policy, just as they have done in previous decades. The Free Schools initiative does not simply provide another name for another new school ‘type’; instead, it has provided a real policy commitment to opening brand new schools across the country. Its introduction was viewed as a radical development in education reform and was met with strong debate from advocates and critics in its early years (Gilbert, 2010; Gove, 2011; NUT, 2013; Young, 2011). While Free Schools are viewed as an extension of the Academies programme (Gunter, 2011), both their recent introduction and their emergence as new institutions provide an important and novel context for research.

Ongoing equity and social justice concerns in relation to autonomous schools in England and internationally provide a further motivation for studying Free Schools. One of the key policy objectives was the provision of extra choice and educational opportunity for those from the most deprived backgrounds. Yet a body of research from this country and abroad has indicated that often autonomous schools tend to serve children from more affluent backgrounds and/or are linked to maintaining a segregated system (Allen and West, 2011; Bunar, 2010; Gorard, 2014a; Kahlenberg, 2012; West *et al.*, 2011). It is essential to establish the extent to which Free Schools fit within this trend so that (i) there is awareness of whether policymakers are achieving their original objectives and (ii) equity issues can be highlighted and potentially addressed. At present the literature examining the Free Schools policy is small. When beginning to design this research, an initial investigation into the intakes of the first 24 schools had been conducted (Gooch, 2011). However, there was no subsequent analysis of either the intake of first wave schools in later years or the intakes of further Free Schools established in following years. This suggested that a study which explored both the most recent composition data for all Free Schools and also tracked the intakes of the schools year-on-year could be beneficial.

Data on the representation of disadvantaged pupils in Free Schools provide a small part of the picture. I felt that there was also a need to try and understand some of the mechanisms that might be contributing to who was attending the schools and their reasons for doing so. The focus on admissions policies and specifically oversubscription criteria was one way of doing this. At the time of beginning this analysis and publishing the initial findings (Morris, 2014), no other systematic examination of the methods used by Free Schools to prioritise the allocation of places had been conducted. The same is also true of the investigation into parents' motivations and strategies for choosing a Free School. In a review of parental choice research, Gorard (1999) suggested that "unless there are major shifts in policy, producing an essentially new situation to research, it is unlikely that further work in this area will uncover new findings of great consequence..." (Gorard, 1999, p. 26). The introduction of Free Schools, I believe, can and should be viewed as a major shift in education policy, and one which does indeed produce a new and dynamic context to explore. There has been very little work done on parents' experiences and attitudes towards selecting a recently-opened school, predominantly because historically, the opening of brand new schools occurs fairly infrequently and without the political force that has driven the Free Schools initiative. The emergence of Free Schools in their initial years, however, allows us to question whether the processes and strategies of parental choice alter when they are presented with this additional and unfamiliar potential option.

The aim of this study is to explore some of the issues linked to original concerns about the Free Schools policy. It is hoped that this research will provide both a useful reference point for understanding the early years of the initiative and a springboard for further research through the identification of key areas for subsequent study.

1.3 Research Questions

This research addresses the following objectives:

- To illustrate the diversity of admissions arrangements and allocation methods available and being used by new autonomous schools.
- To examine the strategies and motivational factors that encouraged parents to consider and choose a new Free School.

- To provide an up-to-date summary and overview of the social compositions of all Free Schools in England and to compare these with other local schools.
- To explore the extent to which the Free Schools initiative has, so far, met one of its policy objectives in relation to the provision of additional school choice, particularly for those from less advantaged backgrounds.

The first two objectives focus on two potential influences of school compositions: admissions arrangements and parental choice. The third objective relates very much to an ‘overview’ perspective. It seeks to establish first of all, whether there appears to be the unbalanced intakes in Free Schools that a number of commentators were concerned about, and that some researchers highlighted in very early examinations of the first wave of schools (Gooch, 2011). It is also focused on tracking the school intakes over time and beginning to establish a more developed description of how the compositions of the new schools compare with others in their local area. Finally, drawing on the previous three objectives, I consider whether the Free Schools policy does appear to be providing equality of educational access and opportunity to those from less advantaged backgrounds, and the potential impact that this may have on the wider schools system should the initiative continue to expand.

The overarching question which forms the central focus for this study is: ‘Who attends English Free Schools and why?’

The specific research questions used to address the objectives above are as follows:

- What allocation methods are Free Schools choosing to use in order to prioritise their available places?
- Why (and how) do parents choose a newly-opened Free Schools for their child?
- Are Free Schools taking an ‘equal share’ of socially disadvantaged pupils?

1.4 Overview of design and methods

The opening of new schools has created scope for a comparison of the behaviours and outcomes of Free Schools with other state providers. For a researcher, it is straightforward to establish Free School and non-Free School groups as detailed information on this is publicly available (see for example, DfE, 2015b). The introduction and distribution of Free Schools

across England, however, is not random and nor are the intakes of pupils that attend them. The study relies, therefore, on determining these groups *after* the schools were opened. As stated above, developing our knowledge of how this new policy initiative is functioning in its own right is important but it is arguably even more important that we understand how it fits in with the wider, established schooling system. In order to address this and to respond to the research questions, three quite distinct studies were designed, each using different data collection methods. The structure and method of data collection for each section was very much informed by each of the research questions (Gorard, 2013). Despite the questions being addressed separately, each section was treated as a component part of the overall study, with the aim being to address the overarching research question from different angles.

Table 1.1 gives an overview of each of the research questions with the selected data collection methods.

Table 1.1: Research questions and data collection methods

Research Question	Data Collection Method 1	Data Collection Method 2
What allocation methods are Free Schools choosing to use in order to prioritise their available places?	Documentary analysis of all secondary Free School admissions policies. Comparison with admissions policies of LA-maintained schools.	
Why (and how) do parents choose a newly-opened Free School for their child?	School choice questionnaire for parents of Year 7 children attending Free Schools and non-Free Schools.	Interviews with parents of Year 7 children attending a secondary Free School.
Are Free Schools taking an 'equal share' of socially disadvantaged pupils?	Annual Schools Census data on all Free Schools in England (2011-2014). Comparison with six geographically nearest schools and LAs.	

The findings in relation to each research question are presented in separate chapters. Where appropriate, links between the findings are also considered. A more detailed account of the methods used for data collection and analysis can be found in Chapter 5.

1.5 Theoretical framework

Many recent social policy reforms (including those in education, welfare, social care and housing) have been introduced as the result of political and economic commitments to a more market-based system (Adnett and Davies, 2002; Gorard *et al.*, 2003; Powell, 2003). In relation to schooling, this has led to an ideological interest in the provision of diversity and choice, permitting parents to have more individual power over the type of education that they would prefer for their child. In addition, increased competition, privatisation and autonomy have become more central features of the education system, developed as a result of powerful neo-liberal political influence over the last three decades. This study focuses on a policy initiative which when introduced was very much understood to represent a further shift towards marketization within the schooling system (Allen, 2010a; Hatcher, 2011). Free Schools were not simply about tackling demand-side issues and the provision of additional parental ‘choice’; they were also focused on developing a more dynamic supply-side, allowing a wider range of interested parties to be involved in encouraging new entries to the market.

The free market analogy provides a helpful lens through which to view recent policy reforms but it is problematic in that it does not sufficiently consider the state-funding and regulation that remains within public service provision. Instead the term ‘quasi-market’ (Le Grand and Bartlett, 2003) is deemed a more useful description and has been adopted by a number of commentators and academics interested in market-oriented education policy (e.g. Exley, 2012; Gewirtz *et al.*, 1995; West and Pennell, 2002). Bartlett and Le Grand (2003) outlined four criteria for evaluating the impact of quasi-market reforms in social policy: efficiency, responsiveness, choice and equity. This study is particularly concerned with the role of equity in the Free Schools policy and how this is linked with the behaviour of both schools and parents. There are economic arguments that indicate both the positive and negative impact that market-reforms in education potentially have on equity. Some suggest that they are preferable to a public monopoly system as children are not confined to attending a designated ‘catchment’ school irrespective of its quality. Advocates argue that this is likely to reduce ‘selection by mortgage’ and the stratification that occurs as a result. Diversity within the system also has the potential to allow more parents the freedom to choose the type of schooling that best fits the needs and interests of their child (rather than just those who can

afford to pay for diversity offered via the private system) (Chubb and Moe, 1990). By contrast, some economic theory suggests that a market-system is likely to disadvantage some groups, specifically those from lower-income backgrounds. There are concerns regarding the potential for schools in a competitive market to ‘cream-skim’ more advantaged pupils and increase segregation (see Allen *et al.*, 2014; Epple and Romano, 1998; West *et al.*, 2006).

In addition to the economic arguments, a body of sociological work has sought to examine the impact of market reforms in school systems. This work has predominantly focused on the role that social class plays in shaping parents’ choices and suggests that parents from different class backgrounds engage in the choice process in different ways (Ball, 2003; Gewirtz *et al.*, 1995). The notion of ‘middle class advantage’ plays an important role, particularly in relation to the amount of capital (financial, social and cultural) that parents have available to them and the influence that this has on the decision-making process for different groups. Academics in this field have argued that this leads to a situation of social reproduction within the schooling system, whereby those from lower socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds are persistently disadvantaged (Ball, 2003).

Previous work on school choice reforms has seen economic and sociological perspectives dealt with fairly separately. In the current study both approaches have been drawn on as it is felt that they each have something to contribute in relation to examining and understanding the mechanisms that are contributing to equity (or indeed inequity) within the current school system. These issues are discussed further in Chapter 3.

1.6 Scope of the study and limitations

This subsection outlines and justifies the scope of the current study. When designing this research, I was keen to try to gain a broad picture of the Free Schools policy. It was important to know where and how the Free Schools were ‘fitting in’ with the wider schools landscape. As a result of this I felt that it was necessary to examine the social compositions of all of the mainstream Free Schools across the country as well as considering how these compared with other schools in their local area. Access to the Annual Schools Census data made this very practical and also allowed for the tracking of intakes year-on-year. The findings from this part

of the study provide a valuable dataset which allow us to consider Free School intakes at a national, local and school level (Morris, 2014).

With regard to the study of Free School admissions policies, I took the decision to examine all of the mainstream secondary schools that had opened. Concentrating on secondary school admissions is in line with earlier studies in the field (White, 2001; West *et al*, 2009, 2011) and allows for a clear focus on the important transition between primary and secondary school. It is acknowledged that in studying just the secondary policies that some relevant and important examples of admissions arrangements used by the primary sector could have been missed. Examination of these could form part of a useful wider study in the future.

My concerns regarding scope though are most relevant to the parental choice part of this study. When developing this aspect of the research I began with very extensive plans of the number of schools and parents that I wanted to include in the study. A combination of practical issues (such as the cost of printing questionnaires, posting them and paying for Freepost envelopes) and relatively low numbers of willing participants meant that I had to adjust my expectations. By the end of the data collection period 346 questionnaires were returned (139 from Free School parents and 207 from non-Free School parents) and 20 Free School parents were interviewed. While fewer than I had hoped for, I still feel that I have been able to collect some original and valuable data which have provided important insights in to the motivations and strategies of school choice in relation to the Free Schools context. The findings have also been very useful in pointing to areas which would benefit from further, more in-depth study.

1.7 Structure of the thesis

The study is divided in to four main sections. These are:

- Literature review
- Design and methods
- Findings and discussions
- Conclusions and policy implications

The first part consists of three chapters. These explore the theoretical, policy and research literature in relation to the introduction of the Free Schools initiative. The first chapter provides a timeline of policy developments and reforms which have led to Free Schools entering the 'market'. The second chapter focuses on placing the Free School policy within a theoretical context, drawing on both economic and sociological perspectives to do so. The final chapter reviews the relevant empirical research linked to the composition of schools and segregation, school choice and admissions arrangements.

The second part describes the design and methodological decisions that were made in relation to each part of the study. The section makes clear links between the research questions and the selected research methods. It also discusses the creation of the data collection instruments, the limitations associated with the chosen methods, and gives some contextual information in relation to the schools and parents that participated in the study.

Part three consists of three main subsections, each of which presents the findings and discussion in relation to one of the research questions. The first looks at the data from the analysis of admissions arrangements. The second reports the findings relating to parental choice of a Free School. Finally I focus on the presentation of findings relating to student composition at the Free Schools. Each subsection also considers the data in light of the relevant policy and research literature. Where appropriate, links between the findings and different data sets are presented in order to build-up a clearer overall picture of the Free Schools policy.

The final part of the thesis draws together all of the findings to provide a response to each of the original research questions. The conclusions consider where this study 'fits' within the wider research and policy context but also acknowledges that its scope is somewhat limited, and that there are a number of areas which would benefit from further research. Recommendations focusing on the Free Schools policy, and on schools policy more broadly, are also included.

CHAPTER 2 POLICY BACKGROUND

2.1 Introduction

This chapter summarises key policy developments in English school-based education, mapping the route to the introduction of Free Schools in 2010. The trajectory towards market-oriented social policy that has been especially dominant in England over the last thirty years is discussed, making it clear that the Free Schools initiative has not simply appeared ‘out of nowhere’. This policy review takes the election of a Conservative government in 1979 and the subsequent 1980 Education Act as its starting point. Some of the key issues linked to choice, diversity and the reduction of local government control can, of course, be tracked back even further in history (see for example, Benn and Chitty, 1996; Jones, 2003 for a detailed discussion). The opening section briefly explores policy reforms between 1979-1997. A second subsection considers the developments introduced during the 13 years of a New Labour administration, and a final section discusses the most recent policy reforms following the election of Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition in 2010. This concludes with an overview of the features of the Free Schools policy and the rationale for its introduction.

2.2 Conservative government schooling reforms (1979-1997)

Within the context of economic recession in the early-mid 1970s, some policymakers reassessed the purpose of schooling and sought to challenge “the dominant ethos of personal development and promoted in its place the vocational preparation of young people for their future economic roles” (Ranson, 1990, p. 6). By the end of the decade, the comprehensive model had become a target for ongoing criticism in relation to academic standards, curricula, discipline and the control held by LEAs (Denscombe, 1984; Ranson, 1990). The politics of the New Right instead emphasised a school system based on the fundamental principles of public choice, accountability and individual control, values that were to underpin much of the education policy of the 1980s.

The 1980 Education Act also began to formalise an increased role for parental choice, allowing parents to state a preference for an alternative to their designated or ‘catchment area’ school. Alongside this, LEAs were compelled “to show why a parent's preference for a school

should not be satisfied” (DES, 1992, p.4) and ensured that appeals committees were established to hear parents’ cases. Whilst some highlight the limited amount of change that occurred in relation to choice and admissions in the early years of the new Conservative administration (Benn and Chitty, 1996; Stillman and Maychell, 1986), the government’s desire to shift power away from LEAs and towards parents had been firmly established (Stillman, 1986).

A focus on parental choice continued to be one of the key features of the heavily debated 1988 Education Reform Act (ERA). The Act legislated more radically than any since the Butler Act in 1944, enshrining many of the principles of marketization and seeking to apply them to a state-funded social schooling system. The Act limited the power of LEAs, diminishing the their controls over funding and allocation procedures. Local Management of Schools (LMS) meant that schools could be taken out of LEA financial control and budgetary powers could be given directly to the headteacher and governors of individual schools. Closely linked to the issues of financial and bureaucratic autonomy was an emphasis on further development of parental choice. With school budgets largely determined by pupil numbers, schools were encouraged to compete for pupils in order to maximise their funding. This competition was increasingly possible due to the system of open enrolment that had been introduced. Parents were allowed to state preferences for any chosen school with schools only being able to reject applicants if they were physically full. The creation of Grant-Maintained (GM) schools was also with a view to increasing parents’ choice and reducing the role of the LEA (Rogers, 1992). Maintained schools could apply to ‘opt out’ of LEA control, and become GM and as a result received a financial incentive and had control over their own budgets and admissions/allocation procedures. Education Secretary, Kenneth Baker, stated that GM schools would “provide a standard of excellence and will be beacons” (Baker, 1989, no page). Some commentators, however, were concerned that the development of diversity through new ‘types’ of school had the potential to encourage a hierarchy between schools, one where LEA-controlled, community schools were perceived as having the lowest status (Flude and Hammer, 1990).

This desire to increase diversity within the schooling system and present a further challenge to LEA provision was also evident through the introduction of the City Technology College

(CTC) programme. CTCs were to be brand new schools and were presented as a bridge between the state and independent sectors (Whitty *et al.*, 1993). Like GM schools, they would operate independently of the LEA but would be funded jointly by the government and sponsors from the industry and business sectors. They would also have control over their own admissions and were allowed to be selective (DES, 1986). One of the defining features of CTCs was their curriculum freedom. The 1988 ERA had introduced, for the first time, a National Curriculum to be followed by all state –maintained schools in the country. CTCs’ independent status meant that they were less bound by this although were still broadly required to adhere to it as a condition of funding (Ranson, 1990; Walford and Miller, 1991). Despite attempts to promote difference between CTCs and other schools, and the technology specialism of CTCs, initial studies showed that they offered largely similar programmes of study and pedagogy to other state-funded schools (Walford and Miller, 1991; Whitty *et al.*, 1993). There had been ambitious plans to open many CTCs across the country (Benn and Chitty, 1996). However, between 1988-1993 only 15 CTCs opened, primarily due to a lack of sponsorship funding from the business and industry partners that had been approached by the government (Rogers, 1992; Whitty *et al.*, 1993). The programme was subsequently abandoned and the government turned their attention to the introduction of the specialist schools policy where some schools could be designated as having a technology specialism.

In 1993, the Conservative government introduced another initiative in an attempt to stimulate the supply-side of an increasingly marketised system. Sponsored grant-maintained schools were designed as a way to deliver further diversity to meet reported parental demand (Walford, 2000a). The policy allowed sponsors to propose brand new schools or re-establish existing faith or independent schools as grant-maintained institutions. Unlike previous GM schools, those groups wishing to invest in a sponsored GM school were required to “pay for at least 15% of costs relating to the provision of school buildings” (Walford, 2000a, p. 148). As a result, sponsors could preserve the original religious designation and objectives of the school. Where attempts to establish new faith schools had previously gone through LEA procedures, instead applications for sponsored GM schools went straight to central government. Like the CTCs programme, however, the initiative floundered and only 15 sponsored GM schools opened. Walford (2000a) argues though that this failure was not due to a lack of willing sponsors but instead because of the demands of the application process. The

symbolic gesture of allowing religious minorities to open and run their own state-funded schools was the more significant result of the programme, paving the way for subsequent governments to encourage more faith schools within the maintained sector (DfES, 2001; Walford, 2000b).

2.3 The New Labour Years (1997-2010)

2.3.1 Changes and continuation of Conservative policy

For many supporters, the Labour party's landslide victory in 1997 signalled radical change for education policy. Pre-election, the Labour manifesto stated that the party would:

...put behind us the old arguments that have bedevilled education in this country. We reject the Tories' obsession with school structures: all parents should be offered real choice through good quality schools, each with its own strengths and individual ethos.

(The Labour Party, 1997, no page)

But those who hoped that the election would signal the end of market-driven reforms were left disappointed.

While suggesting a move away from Conservative attempts to create new types of school, there remained a focus on the issue of parental choice and schools providing this through the delivery of 'something different.' The continued promotion of choice and diversity endured throughout the New Labour years with a strong belief that the market had an important role to play in raising standards and meeting parental demand (Adonis, 2012; Blunkett, 2001). Alongside this message though was an additional focus: social equity (West and Pennell, 2002). New Labour were keen to abandon previous Conservative policies that may have been perceived as maintaining elitism and instead framed their reforms in the language of inclusion and social justice (Brown, 1999; Powell, 2000).

The Assisted Places Scheme was abolished within Labour's first year in office, breaking the link between state-funded and independent schooling, and ending a Conservative policy which opponents argued only benefitted a minority of children (Fitz *et al.*, 1986). The 1998 School Standards and Framework Act (SSFA) also ended GM status but New Labour

demonstrated their commitment to ‘difference’ between schools by creating new names for each type. ‘Local authority’ schools were renamed ‘community’ schools and those which had previously held GM status generally became known as ‘foundation’ schools. Faith schools and some GM schools were termed ‘voluntary’ schools under the new legislation. Notably though, these schools still remained as their own admissions authorities and many GM schools continued to gain additional ‘transition funding’ (West *et al.*, 2000).

The Labour Party’s drive for differentiation between schools was also made evident through the continuation and expansion of the specialist schools programme. This had been launched by the previous Conservative government in 1994 and had allowed GM or VA schools to operate as technology colleges. In the following two years language, arts or sport were added as possible specialisms (Schagen *et al.*, 2002). Achieving ‘Specialist School’ status was conditional on securing £100,000 (£50,000 from September 2000) of private sponsorship which would be matched by a government grant and an increase in their regular state funding.

To further diversify the system, new potential specialisms were added in 2001. These were: science, engineering, business and enterprise, mathematics and computing. By 2010 there were 3,068 specialist schools in England, approximately 93% of the total number of state secondary schools in the country (DCSF, 2010). Whilst it was claimed that the programme was successful in raising standards and improving attainment (DfES, 2001; Jesson and Crossley, 2006), others criticised the methods used to draw such conclusions (Goldstein, 2001) and highlighted other factors that may have positively affected achievement within specialist schools (Gillmon, 2000; Pugh *et al.*, 2011; Schagen *et al.*, 2002; West and Pennell, 2002). In short, it seems unlikely that improved standards could reliably be attributed to specialist status alone (BBC, 2007; Gorard and Taylor, 2001).

The impact of the specialist schools programme on social justice and equity was also a concern. Some researchers argued that the schools served to reinforce a hierarchy of status and in some cases, their admissions and allocation procedures were not equitable (Gorard and Taylor, 2001; West and Pennell, 2002). Permitting specialist schools to admit 10% of students based on aptitude was highlighted as a potentially unfair allocation method as the problems of differentiating between ability and aptitude meant that selection could be based on social

factors (West and Ingram, 2001). Other researchers questioned the supposed link between diversity and choice, suggesting that for many families the new specialism ‘labels’ attached to schools meant very little (Castle and Evans, 2006), and could even appear to limit choice if the specialism was not one of interest (Smithers and Robinson, 2009).

2.3.2 Admissions and allocation procedures

In their 1997 election manifesto, the Labour party stated that they wished to improve the application and admissions process, making it fairer and more transparent (Labour Party, 1997). This was a response to growing concern about the administration and equity of allocation procedures, particularly since the introduction of policy which had allowed many schools to have control over their own admissions. Gewirtz *et al.* (1995) present examples of different methods that schools used to covertly select more affluent or academic pupils. West and Pennell (1997) also argue that the increased fragmentation of the overall school system meant that there was limited impartial advice available for parents regarding admissions and that there was little regulation to prevent ‘cream skimming’ or selection of certain groups of children. As a response to such concerns, the 1998 SSFA outlined a new legal framework for admissions alongside a revised Code of Practice (DfEE, 1999). In an attempt to reduce the potential for schools to ‘select in’ or ‘select out’ certain groups of pupils, the Code of Practice stated that in secular schools there should be no parent interviews conducted prior to the allocation of places. In religious schools, interviewing would be allowed to continue but only to establish a family’s denomination and assess religious commitment (DfEE, 1999). The code also introduced the role of an adjudicator with the aim of reducing admissions disputes at a local level. In addition, the adjudicator also had the function of preventing any new attempts to use selective methods other than permitted ability banding (DfEE, 1999). Studies focusing on these policy changes reported some positive outcomes in terms of LEAs regaining some of their control over admissions and therefore being able to provide a more coordinated and equitable system (Fitz *et al.*, 2002; West and Ingram, 2001). Despite this, both sets of authors concluded that there was still more that could be done to make the application and admissions processes fairer for all families.

2.3.3 The Learning and Skills Act 2000: introduction of the first academies

In March 2000, Education Secretary, David Blunkett announced the introduction of the first City Academies (BBC, 2000; Carvel, 2000). Whilst the Labour government maintained that their establishment was about improving standards in some of the poorest areas of the country (Blunkett, 2000), critics argued that the government were reverting to the Conservatives' focus on school structures, introducing another type of school that was reliant on sponsorship from businesses and allowed to operate independently of the LEA (Beckett, 2000).

City Academies were to be non-fee paying schools, replacing failing or underachieving secondary schools in urban areas in England. Business, church or community sponsors were required to pay £2 million towards the set-up and running of the school with the rest of the funding coming directly from central government. Blunkett (2000) stated that the schools would form part of a wider drive towards diversity in the education system, claiming that the government “do not have a single blueprint for these Academies, and will be responsive to proposals from sponsors in each case” (Blunkett, 2000, no page). The Labour government had sought diversity through their rapid expansion of the specialist schools programme but failing schools had not been allowed to be part of this; the academies programme was designed to change this. The independence that the schools would be afforded would, Blunkett argued, “offer a real change and improvements in pupil performance, for example through innovative approaches to management, governance, teaching and the curriculum, including a specialist focus in at least one curriculum area” (Blunkett, 2000, no page). As with City Technology Colleges before them, the first academies were to have significant freedoms in their curriculum, staffing, budgeting and admissions. It was believed that these freedoms, coupled with the ‘fresh start’ approach of the academies programme would lead to the schools producing considerably better outcomes than those which they had replaced.

The first three City Academies opened in 2002. Nine more opened in 2003 and a further five in 2004. The term ‘city’ was dropped from the name in 2002 with the intention of academies opening all over the country, not just in large, urban areas. The government set themselves a target of opening 200 sponsored academies by 2010 (DfES, 2004) and sponsors were keen to report the early successes of the programme (BBC, 2004). However, claims that academies produced better results than their predecessor schools were questioned (Gorard, 2005; 2009a)

and a five year evaluation of the policy concluded that there was “insufficient evidence to make a judgement about the Academies as a model for school improvement” (Armstrong *et al.*, 2009, p. 123). There were also concerns that the schools being selected for academisation were not the ones most in need of it (Gorard, 2009a). Significantly, there was evidence that the composition of academies was altering over time, resulting in a decrease of poorer pupils attending although, on average, they still took more disadvantaged children than other types of secondary school (Curtis *et al.*, 2008).

By the time of the general election in May 2010, there were 203 sponsored academies open in England. Despite the growth of the policy and reports of some notable successes (Bedell, 2008), there was still some opposition to academisation. Commentators expressed concerns about, amongst other things, their effectiveness and cost, their ability to be selective and the lack of LA oversight (Ball, 2005; Hatcher, 2009; NUT, 2007). Nevertheless, both major political parties expressed full support for the academies programme, with both wishing to expand it further (The Conservative Party, 2010; The Labour Party, 2010).

2.4 The Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition and the expansion of the academies programme (2010-present)

2.4.1 Introduction of converter academies

In the White Paper *The Importance of Teaching*, the coalition government praised the successes and innovation of CTCs and the original academies, but criticised the limited ambition of the early sponsored academies programme. As a response they argued that the academies initiative should be significantly expanded and available to all schools (DfE, 2010). Autonomy from local and central government control was perceived as a vital component of an improved school system, with policymakers suggesting that schools would use this independence to improve standards and narrow the attainment gap (DfE, 2010; Gove, 2010).

Table 2.1 shows the number of academies in England and highlights the rapid expansion of the policy following the general election in 2010. The new type of academy schools became known as ‘converter academies’ and their introduction was formalised in the Academies Act 2010.

Table 2.1: Number of sponsored and converter academies open in England

Year	Sponsored Academies	Converter Academies	Total
2002/03	3	0	3
2003/04	9	0	12
2004/05	5	0	17
2005/06	10	0	27
2006/07	20	0	47
2007/08	36	0	83
2008/09	50	0	133
2009/10	70	0	203
2010/11	71	529	803
2011/12	93	1058	1954
2012/13	366	731	3051
2014/15	304	445	3800

Source: DfE (2015a) and DfE (2016)

Originally, schools which had been graded ‘Outstanding’ by Ofsted were prioritised for conversion. This was later relaxed so that all schools that were performing well could apply to convert (DfE, 2011a). Schools with lower performance could apply for academy status if they agreed to a partnership with an ‘Outstanding’ school (DfE, 2012a). The table above shows the number of sponsored and converter academies open between 2002-2014. The government also remained committed to the sponsored academy initiative, expanding it for secondary schools and allowing primary and special schools to join the programme. By January 2015, 60% of England’s secondary schools and 15% of primary schools held academy status (DfE, 2015c).

2.4.2 Free Schools

The 2010 Academies Act also legislated for another key Conservative party election pledge: the setting-up and opening of two new types of schools: Free Schools and University Technical Colleges (UTCs). At the time, these policies formed an important part of the Conservatives’ ‘Big Society’ ideology (Cameron, 2011) – a belief that the state had become too controlling and that private sector and individual interests should be actively addressed and promoted via decentralisation (Higham, 2014). Free Schools would provide the

opportunity for sponsors such as parent groups, teachers, businesses, charities, faith groups and academy trusts to propose and run new institutions. UTCs would be set-up by universities and businesses to provide education for 14-19 year olds. The rest of this section predominantly focuses on the introduction of Free Schools. For more on UTCs, see Fuller and Unwin (2011).

The new, autonomous Free Schools were based on similar models in Sweden and America (The Conservative Party, 2010; DfE, 2010) and could provide mainstream or special education. A small number of private schools have also opted to convert to Free School status and in doing so, must no longer charge fees for attendance. The DfE also encouraged sponsors to open new alternative provision institutions for children struggling to stay in mainstream schools (DfE, 2010).

Free Schools, as a type of academy, operate outside of Local Authority control, with some increased freedoms over budgets, staffing, curriculum and admissions. As with the converter academies initiative, Free Schools were expected to use their freedoms to improve standards and increase parental choice (Gove, 2011). In addition, the government argued that Free Schools would: improve the quality of schools in deprived areas, provide additional school places and encourage parental responsibility for children's education (DfE, 2010; Miller *et al.*, 2014). Perhaps most significantly though, the schools were to be brand new institutions, signalling a clear attempt to liberate the supply side of school provision and symbolising the government's commitment to extending choice and diversity within the system.

The table below shows the number and type of Free Schools that have opened in each year since 2011. Like academies, Free Schools only exist in England rather than across the whole of the UK. In their 2015 general election manifesto the Conservative Party pledged to open a further 500 schools by 2020 (The Conservative Party, 2015).

Table 2.2: Number of Free Schools opened each year

Year	Mainstream	Special Schools	Alternative Provision	Total
2011/12	24	0	0	24
2012/13	48	3	5	55
2013/14	75	5	13	93
2014/15	65	3	10	78
2015-To date	41	8	4	53

Source: DfE (2015b)

Following its introduction, there was strong support for the Free Schools policy from some academics and high-profile sponsors (Sahlgren, 2010; Young, 2011), and a number of established academy chains opted to open new schools within the first wave (BBC, 2011). Since the introduction of the policy, however, concerns have been raised by a number of academics and commentators. These have included concerns regarding the equity of the policy, school quality and whether there is demand for some of the new schools. The main issues are outlined below:

- Concerns that Free Schools would receive funds that had been diverted from other schools (Millar, 2010) or that Free Schools would receive more per-pupil funding than other schools (Mansell, 2015).
- New schools not being planned for or situated in areas with a ‘basic need’ for school places (NAO, 2013).
- The belief that Free Schools would predominantly be located in more advantaged areas where parental demand for them was highest (Vasagar and Shepherd, 2011).
- A lack of local oversight for LAs, making it more difficult to plan for future school places provision (Hatcher, 2011).
- A concern that via their admissions freedoms, Free Schools would be able to ‘select in’ pupils with certain characteristics, leading to less balanced intakes across and negatively impacting on the student compositions of other local schools (Vaughan, 2010; West, 2014).
- The ability for Free Schools to use unqualified teaching staff (NUT, 2013; Vaughan, 2014)

- Fears that despite government requirements that all schools must deliver a broad and balanced curriculum, the policy could give some schools too much freedom and allow the promotion of particular religious or fundamentalist agendas of their sponsors (Hawley, 2014; Vasagar, 2012b).

Some have also questioned the government's effectiveness argument, suggesting that similar reforms in Sweden and America had not led to the definitive academic success that proponents claimed (see Allen, 2010a; Hatcher, 2011; Wiborg, 2010). Whilst the Department for Education have attempted to refute such claims and publicise successes within the Free Schools programme, most schools have not been open long enough to receive examination data on which to base objective effectiveness measurements. To date, researchers have been particularly interested in a number of the social justice issues, including the experiences of proposers (Higham, 2014; Miller *et al.*, 2014), their admissions arrangements (Morris, 2014) and student compositions (Green *et al.*, 2015; Morris, 2015). The findings from these studies and others are discussed in more depth in subsequent sections.

This chapter has summarised the key policies and legislation that have paved the way for the recent introduction of the Free Schools programme. I now turn to the theoretical literature linked to the introduction and development of market reforms in social policy, specifically those relating to education.

CHAPTER 3

FREE SCHOOLS: A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

3.1 Introduction

This chapter provides a theoretical context within which to view the introduction of Free Schools in England. It outlines how the development of market-oriented education policy described in the previous section has formed part of a wider trend in public service reform over the last three to four decades. This has seen significant developments in the provision of not just education, but also health care, social care and housing (Le Grand, 2011). Whilst such changes have predominantly occurred in more developed countries such as America, the UK, Australia and New Zealand (Heyneman, 2009), more recently similar systems in countries such as Colombia and Pakistan have been emerging (Morgan *et al.*, 2013).

This chapter examines market-based reforms in education and discusses the concept of ‘quasi-markets’. The criteria and conditions outlined by Le Grand and Bartlett (1993) for evaluating the potential success of quasi-markets are also considered. The final section discusses the theoretical rationale and critiques of the recent introduction of Free Schools in England.

3.2 Monopoly public schooling

Economists have long regarded public monopolies as beset with considerable inefficiencies (Chubb and Moe, 1990; Shleifer, 1998). Critics argue that within a democratic monopoly there is no direct link between the funding that schools receive and the outcomes and satisfaction of those utilising them (Chubb and Moe, 1990; Friedman and Friedman, 1982). There is, therefore, no incentive for those running the school to improve or increase levels of parent or pupil satisfaction. As a result, it is believed that the schools operate solely in the interests of those working in them, with attempts to reform being tightly controlled by managers and unionised teachers (Hoxby, 2003). Even if schools did have a desire to improve, some argue that the bureaucratic control of political and administrative authorities stifles this through mechanisms of financial control, regulation and management of the admissions process (Chubb and Moe, 1990).

As a result a level of homogeneity is created, where schools have no interest in providing something different or in responding to the needs or interests of the community which they are supposed to be serving (Naismith, 1994). The monopoly system is viewed as highly restrictive and inequitable. Chubb and Moe (1990) argue that for two reasons the more affluent are able to persistently secure access to better quality schools at the expense of those from poorer backgrounds. The first is that they are more effective at using the ‘voice’ mechanism (Hirschman, 1970) to affect how schools operate and to ensure that their child’s needs are being met. Second, the authors argue that the financial capital of advantaged families means that they are able to purchase properties in the catchment areas of more desirable schools (see Tiebout, 1956). Those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds or ethnic or religious minorities are left with fewer options and are clustered together in under-performing schools (Chubb and Moe, 1990)

This chapter continues by outlining some of the key economic and sociological arguments for and against market reforms in education.

3.3 The market model and ‘quasi-markets’

Despite the reforms summarised in the previous chapter, state schools in England do not operate as a ‘free market’ and remain politically regulated in many ways. Le Grand and Bartlett (1993) coined the term ‘quasi-market’ to describe the nature of state-funded welfare provision within a more decentralised and competitive environment. As Bartlett and Le Grand (1993) note, quasi-markets are a form of ‘market’ because they replace a state monopoly with a system of independent and competing providers. However, they are described as ‘quasi’ because they differ from traditional markets in a number of important ways. These include: providers not always being profit-making; choice sometimes occurring on behalf of the service user rather than by the service user; and consumers’ ‘spending power’ being characterised by a budget or ‘voucher’ rather than actual money (Bartlett and Le Grand, 1993).

Bartlett and Le Grand (1993) outline four criteria for evaluating quasi-market policy. These are: a) efficiency, b) responsiveness, c) choice and d) equity. These, they argued can be used to judge the introduction of quasi-market reforms in social policy. The criteria discussed here

provide an important and interesting framework for understanding the recent education reforms that were outlined in the previous chapter. They are used to structure the arguments that have been used to justify and criticise relevant market reforms in education. First, the intrinsic value of introducing consumer choice and additional diversity in to the market is discussed. Second, freedom of entry to the market, competition and standards are considered. Third, I explore the promotion of autonomy and the potential for responsiveness by schools and finally, issues surrounding equity and social justice are addressed.

3.4 Choice and diversity for its own sake

On the one hand, choice can be justified as an end in itself (intrinsic value), and on the other as a vehicle for achieving other objectives (instrumental value) (Bartlett and Le Grand, 1993; Dowding and John, 2009). This section focuses on intrinsic value.

Advocates have argued that increased choice is important in its own right as it can contribute to individual citizens' sense of autonomy and empowerment (see Scott, 2013). If, for example, individuals are able to choose some things then there is no reason why they should not be able to choose which public services they want to use. This has led to an assumption that school choice is a popular and valuable feature of a national education system (Exley, 2014). The discourse associated with choice has meant that it is understood in some contexts to be a 'right', something that individuals are entitled to. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, for example, states that parents have the "prior right to choose the *kind* of education that shall be given to their children" (UN, 2014). The European Convention for Human Rights is even more specific, declaring that the State "shall respect the right of parents to ensure such education and teaching in conformity with their own religious and philosophical convictions" (ECHR, 2010). Closely linked to the notion of the 'right to choice' expressed here is also an expectation that some element of diversity is required. Whilst it would be possible to have choice without diversity, the statements above suggest that parents should be able to select the type of school that they think is best for their child and in order to do so, some form of diversity of supply is needed. The view that diversity is a desirable and necessary condition of choice has formed an important part of public service policy in England in recent years (Audit Commission, 2004).

Implicit here is the notion that individual consumers want different things. The right to opt-out of the state system and in to private or home schooling has been long established in England but some have suggested the benefits of other forms of diversity. Permitting schools to differ in terms of their curriculum, ethos, organisation or specialism allows parents to select the option that best fits with their values or desired outcomes for their children. Influencing these outcomes is, for Chubb and Moe (1990), the key incentive in encouraging parents to be involved with and informed about school choice. The purpose of schooling also becomes important here as the distinct preferences of some parents may mean that school is viewed as more than just a place to receive academic education. Instead it may be seen as a space which can further the cultural, social or civic development of a child. Wilson (2015) contends that the types of diversity offered by some schools allows for the creation of more homogeneous 'cultural communities' perhaps based on children's ethnic, socioeconomic, religious or linguistic backgrounds. For parents who want this for their child, and who are able to opt for a school which provides it, then their individual preferences have been met. This provision of diversity, however, is potentially only available to a subset of parents, raising questions of its value for those families whose individual preferences are not being addressed (Wilson, 2015).

Glatter *et al.* (1997) argue that diversity is a 'policy concept' with ambiguous meaning. They suggest that despite an overriding belief that diversity is wanted by parents, governments are often quite unclear about what forms of diversity are desirable or achievable. This raises questions about whose preferences should (and could) be recognised within a national school system. Abowitz and Karaba (2010) suggest that the provision of choice also means that the state necessarily has a role in recognising the potentially different preferences of those within its society. But within a quasi-market, the government retain considerable control over the structural and educational diversity on offer. Even if there is demand for particular forms of school diversity, it will not necessarily be realised if, for whatever reason, the government do not wish to support and fund it. Tooley (2002) questions state involvement in the provision of diversity, suggesting that rather being inflicted on parents as a result of top-down government policies to provide it, it should instead emerge as a result of parental demand on a localised basis. The regulation which forms part of the quasi-market model means that this is not always possible.

Responsibility and freedom of expression for the interests and preferences of the individual are at the centre of this values perspective (Lazaridou and Fris, 2005). While rarely used on its own to justify quasi-market reforms, this libertarian view is often closely interwoven with more instrumental objectives associated with choice and diversity. These are discussed in the sections below.

3.5 Competition, standards and freedom of entry and exit

Advocates argue that market reforms in public services can improve the quality of provision for consumers. The conventional economic rationale for this is as follows. By providing greater choice for these consumers, schools are encouraged to be competitive. The link between pupil funding and numbers of children attending means that in order to maximise their budget, schools need to attract as many pupils as possible. Market theory suggests that parents choose based on quality and performance. Therefore, ‘good’ schools attract more families and poorer performing schools are undersubscribed and cannot sustain themselves in order to stay open. Unless they can improve, they cannot adequately compete with the successful schools and must close. This argument has been used to justify many of the market-led education policies, providing parents with increased power to select their preferred schools and strengthening the link between consumer preferences and funding (see Chapter 2).

Hoxby (2003) argues that increased competition between schools acts as a ‘rising tide that raises all boats’, improving quality across the system. She uses voucher reforms in some American states as a basis for suggesting that providing parents with increased choice and the potential to opt away from poorly performing schools leads to fast rates of improvement for those that were underperforming. This reversal of a decline in quality is viewed as the market self-correcting. Hirschman (1970) termed this concept of choice ‘exit’ but argues that this is just one of the mechanisms through which consumers can reveal their preferences. He suggests that ‘voice’ serves as an alternative method, allowing consumers to express their concerns about the provision on offer more directly, perhaps through the means of complaints or other forms of protest. In a school context, ‘voice’ enables parents to share their views about a school (perhaps through sitting on parent councils, governing bodies or engaging with grievance procedures), with an objective of encouraging change or improvement where they

deem it to be necessary. Hirschman's (1970) particular concern is that, as 'exit' can be viewed as the simpler, more cost-effective mechanism for improving quality, it can reduce commitment to 'voice' even where that may be the more useful method of understanding *what* needs to change and driving forward that improvement. Wilson (2009) draws on Hirschman's concepts to consider how 'choice' and 'voice' can be implemented to respond to different aspects or dimensions of school quality. She suggests, for example, that where parents view 'quality' as being indicated by school composition then the 'exit' and/or 'voice' of some may lead to the school being incentivised to alter this. Wilson (2009) argues that this has implications for equity in terms of which 'voices' are responded to and who can access certain schools.

Economic theory suggests that schools which do not improve will decline and eventually leave the market. In England, however, there is currently limited scope for schools to exit the market as there is no mechanism in place for schools to go bankrupt (Bartlett and Le Grand, 1993) and failing schools are sometimes given additional investment to stimulate improvement (Sahlgren, 2013). Traditionally, school closure used to be the responsibility of the Local Authority when schools became financially unviable. In recent years though, Ofsted and central government have taken an increased role in closing down schools that they have deemed to be failing (DfE, 2015d; Richardson, 2013). Advocates argue that for improvement to occur, market failure should be more freely allowed but that freedom of 'entry' is also crucial in encouraging a competitive market (Sahlgren, 2013; Tooley, 1996). They contend that as a result of new schools being able to enter the market, local monopolies cannot emerge (Sahlgren, 2013), parents continue to be provided with choice and the "competitive threat" (Allen and Burgess, 2010, p.1) to underperforming local schools is maintained. In order for 'entry' to contribute to the competitive nature of the market and improved standards, however, the process must be straightforward and unrestrictive (Loeb *et al.*, 2011). If it is not, these barriers could stifle the quality or diversity that is being offered, resulting in limited competitive effects.

3.5.1 Information

In principle, the market mechanism should work effectively when parents make their decisions based on the academic performance of schools. But in order for this to happen it is

important that they have access to appropriate and accurate information regarding the quality of the provision on offer (Lee and Fitzgerald, 1996). Conventional economic theory assumes that well-informed parents are able to “accurately predict future streams of benefit that will follow each choice and they can, therefore make their decisions with confidence” (Adnett and Davies, 2002, p.52). It is not enough to simply have information though; parents must also be able to clearly understand it and use it in a way that informs a decision based on quality. If parents select schools on this basis, Rouse and Barrow (2009) argue that schools will compete for pupils in that way. They also state, however, that if parents value other features such as religious affiliation of the school or sports activities offered, then schools may well try to compete on these bases. Where parents make choices based on factors other than quality or differing interpretations of quality, theoretically the market mechanism cannot operate effectively. Schools do not have the incentive to improve academic quality if this is not what parents are necessarily looking for (Sahlgren, 2013).

Knowing whether a school offers a quality education before children attend is not always easy (Bartlett and Le Grand, 1993). Performance measures (such as examination data) provide an indicator of the ability of a previous cohort of children and give limited insight into the overall quality of education at the time of entering the school. Other forms of information, such as inspection reports, seek to do this to some extent although the conclusions drawn in them are also often connected to the prior examination performance of the school. As well as these more official, independent sources, parents also have access to information provided by Local Authorities and schools themselves (in the form of prospectuses, open events etc) and less formal sources such as social networks of other parents (Ball and Vincent, 1998).

Lee and Fitzgerald (1996) argue that the costs of exercising choice due to locating to be near preferred schools or the decision to switch schools can be high, meaning that is important for parents to make the ‘right’ choice based on the information available. But the costs of gathering a full range of information can be substantial too. As Allen and Burgess (2013) argue, this can lead to a number of informational advantages for some parents, usually those from higher socioeconomic groups. This, they suggest, has the potential to contribute to inequity in the choice process and the choices made and, in the longer-term, the achievement of individuals and the schools system.

Theory from the field of behavioural economics suggests that when making decisions, people do not have the capacity or time for unlimited information-processing. Choices are ‘bounded’ by these information and ability constraints and as a result, it becomes rational for individuals to adopt ‘short-cuts’ as a way of making the decisions needed (Kahneman, 2003; Simon, 1955). Work by Tversky and Kahneman (1986) also highlighted the importance of ‘framing’ in influencing the choices made by individuals. This refers to the positive or negative ways in which a decision problem is presented or described. The authors argue that the framing of outcomes may influence the choices made and that people are usually unaware of other frames, creating a potential bias in how they perceive the decision they must make (Tversky and Kahneman, 1986). Ben-Porath (2009) argues that these concepts can be usefully applied to the school choice context. She suggests that decisions surrounding school choice for parents are strongly impacted by framing from the government, schools and parents themselves. First, the notion of school choice is presented by the state as a positive and necessary ideal, an important part of being a parent. Second, she argues that schools are able to present themselves in ways that are likely to be influenced both by the parents that the school serves and the norms or values that the institution (or management of the institution) holds. Third, from a consumer perspective, parents approach the school choice process in different ways. Information and intuition both play a role in determining the decisions made. Prior to making their choices, parents are only ever able to access *some* of the information about schools, leaving many to feel that they have not made the ‘ideal’ choice. Further, the unequal distribution of even limited information about schools may also have implications for the choices made by parents (Ben-Porath, 2009). These issues are discussed further in the sections below.

3.6 School autonomy, choice and responsiveness

Increasing the autonomy of schools has been seen as a key way to encourage improvement across the system (see e.g. Chubb and Moe, 1990; Teelken, 2000). The main arguments for autonomy are summarised here. First, proponents argue that schools themselves are better placed than bureaucratic agencies to make more effective and efficient decisions about their provision and resource usage. Second, autonomous schools could lead to improvement across the system as they provide a competitive threat to non-autonomous schools, encouraging them to improve in order for parents to choose them. Finally, it is suggested that autonomy allows

schools to be more responsive to the needs/desires of their local communities. As a result they can offer innovative provision and additional diversity, and expand parental choice (Allen, 2010b; Jensen *et al.*, 2013).

For Tooley (1996) school autonomy is viewed as central to what he terms the “liberation of the supply side” (Tooley, 1996, p. 102). He suggests that freedoms in relation to budgeting, staffing, curriculum and the introduction of new, autonomous schools would allow schools to respond to market forces and contribute to a more effective operation of the system as a whole. Whilst he argues that “it would be desirable if all schools could become wholly autonomous... [and] all centralising measures need to be undermined...” (Tooley, 1996, p. 104), the quasi-market model indicates that central government will seek to maintain some form of control over the services being provided. Accountability measures (such as the publication of examination data and inspection reports) mean the freedoms which autonomous schools have are still somewhat limited. Although they may not have to, for example, follow the National Curriculum, the requirement to participate in national tests means that, providing they are subject to the accountability measures in place, their freedoms are somewhat limited. In addition, government guidance and legislation on what are deemed to be appropriate or inappropriate values to be taught in schools has the potential to restrict the pedagogical or curriculum freedoms that schools have. The requirement for all schools to be inspected is, in theory, supposed to monitor how schools deliver their education. The threat of enforced closure (whether or not there is parental demand for the school) is the government’s way of ensuring that freedoms are not taken ‘too far’. Merrifield (2008) argues that if accountability and regulation is too strict, there is likely to be only very limited attempts to innovate and improve, negating some of the purpose of increased choice. For Sahlgren (2013), creating a balance between holding schools accountable to particular goals and giving them the freedom to specialise and innovate is vital if the potential benefits of market reforms are to be realised.

3.7 Quasi-market reforms and equity

Before discussing the equity arguments for and against market reforms in education it is important to define how the term is being used. Equity in education, as used here, refers to the issue of fairness (Field *et al.*, 2007); more specifically, an equitable service can be defined as determined primarily by need rather than personal characteristics such as socioeconomic

status, income, gender, ethnicity or religion (Bartlett and Le Grand, 1993). In countries where education is a public service that all children are expected to participate in, equity is not about access to schooling per se. Instead, the focus is on the quality of education that different groups of children can access and equality of opportunity in relation to the outcomes that they are able to achieve. Whilst some question the extent to which equity should be a concern in the organisation of education systems (Tooley, 1996), this discussion takes the view that social justice and equity *are* desirable features and are compatible with excellence (Condrón, 2011). This section considers the arguments put forward by proponents of market reforms in education, suggesting that they can lead to improved equity within the schooling system. It then outlines the reasons why, in theory, social justice and equity may be undermined through the introduction of choice policies. The first subsection considers the arguments which suggest that choice could improve equity; following this is a review of the theoretical arguments which indicate that choice policies could limit or worsen equitable access and opportunity in schooling.

3.7.1 Improving equity through choice and diversity

Most arguments relating to market reforms and equity tend to focus on those which directly or indirectly provide additional parental choice. The term ‘additional’ is important here as it would be wrong to suggest that prior to choice reforms, parents had *no* involvement in which school their child could attend. There was, for example, scope for parents to opt-out of state-funded schooling and in to the private sector. The Tiebout choice model (Tiebout, 1956) also indicates that decisions about where to live are influenced by the quality of local public services (such as schooling). Market theory would suggest that where demand for certain schools is high, house prices are also likely to be high. A study by Dee (2000) confirms that when additional resources were injected in to some poorer school districts, perceptions of quality increased and a substantial Tiebout effect occurred. His work indicates though, that while the popularity of the schools increased, the subsequent rise in housing costs raised questions about the extent to which the poorest families were able to gain access to these schools. Within a public monopoly system, those without the financial capital to opt for private education or move in to the catchment area of their preferred school, were considerably limited in which schools they could attend. As the previous chapter outlines, the 1988 ERA brought substantial change to the choice system, allowing parents to state

preferences for any school in the country, whether or not it was within their designated catchment area. Choice became something that was, in principle, available to all families irrespective of their socioeconomic status. In relation to the liberty argument described above, this was an important shift, extending choice to the wider population. Advocates have argued that providing additional choice through mechanisms such as voucher systems can indeed provide greater educational opportunity to those from poorer backgrounds, challenging existing inequality caused by residential location and income, and allowing admission to schools which might otherwise have been inaccessible (Friedman and Friedman, 1982; Tooley, 1996).

A critique of a public monopoly schooling system is that the schools represent the values and ideologies of the dominant group as reinforced by the state (Ball, 1993; Blackledge, 2000). This means that whilst schools might be viewed as favourable options by those from this dominant group, they ignore the interests and voices of minority groups. Market-oriented reforms focused on parental choice and the provision of diversity allow the 'one-size-fits-all' model to be broken down and for schools to be more responsive to the wishes of those families who opt to use them. They allow the state sector to provide schooling which serves the needs or interests of religious or ethnic minorities, or those families who are interested in academic or pedagogical specialisms. Where in a public monopoly system, wealthier parents may be able to choose fee-paying schools in order to access their preferred type of schooling, market reforms which increase diversity within the state sector allow this to be more of an option for all families.

Hirschman's concepts of 'exit' and 'voice' (Hirschman, 1970) can also be used to explain how choice policies can equalise opportunities for those from poorer backgrounds. It is suggested that in a bureaucratic, monopolistic system, 'voice' is the only mechanism for parents to express dissatisfaction, and even this may only act as a limited incentive for schools to improve. The potential for 'exit' is also limited due to the lack of available alternatives. Hirschman (1970) argues that it is only more affluent parents who are able to exploit the voice mechanism due to their increased levels of social and cultural capital, the likelihood that their voice will be listened to and the fact that they may have the resources to threaten 'exit' and move their children out of the state-funded system and in to the private sector. For poorer

parents this option is not available. By allowing for increased choice between publicly-funded schools, the role of ‘voice’ diminishes as the potential for more parents to ‘exit’ grows. As a result, introducing market reforms and shifting power away from a bureaucratic system is seen as a way of equalising the opportunity to access and attend a good school.

3.7.2 Choice, inequity and stratification

This section introduces the arguments which suggest that market-oriented reforms (particularly choice policies) have the potential to maintain or exacerbate existing inequity within the education system. In contrast to the above sections, here I consider how, in principle, the behaviour of schools and individuals with different characteristics could limit access and opportunity, particularly for disadvantaged pupils. First, the demand-side issues are addressed, exploring perspectives which suggest that some individuals are more likely to exercise choice and that this choice may be influenced by particular characteristics such as socioeconomic status or ethnicity. Next, the motivation and potential for schools to behave inequitably is discussed. Finally, I consider how choice policies can be linked to stratification between schools.

3.7.2.1 The role of parents in choosing schools

Classic market theory assumes that parents are rational choosers who will all opt for schools based on their academic quality with the aim of maximising the outcomes of their children. They will make their decisions using a range of accurate and relevant information, choosing a school from a clearly defined choice set. This model ignores, however, how differing economic circumstances might influence the extent to which choice is exercised and the choices that are eventually made. Allen *et al.* (2014) outline three areas where this may occur. First, income constraints may mean that lower income families are unable to buy houses in areas where there are good schools or afford transport to reach them. This explanation does not mean that these families do not want high-performing schools, just that they cannot access them. Second, Allen *et al.* (2014) suggest that there may be different preferences for school quality with lower income families deriving lower utility from higher-performing schools. This may affect the areas that families choose to locate to and the choice set that they consider. It could also mean that other factors related to a school’s environment or the potential for the child’s happiness are influential in forming the final decision. Finally, Allen

et al. (2014) argue that more affluent parents are likely to have informational advantages over lower income families. The costs (both financial and time) associated with gathering and processing information could mean that higher income families are able to gain a better understanding of school quality through accessing and using a wider range of sources. A distinction needs to be made here between ‘having’ information and ‘valuing’ and ‘using’ it. It may be that families place different amounts of value on information (or particular forms of information), meaning that even where it is possible to have it, they may choose not to.

3.7.2.2 Schools and ‘cream-skimming’

A further concern linked to choice policies and equity is the potential for ‘cream-skimming’ to occur. ‘Cream-skimming’ refers to the ability of organisations to select high-value or low-cost customers to provide their products or services to. In relation to education, it is the ability of schools to select students who will produce the best outcomes with the least amount of input (Bartlett and Le Grand, 1993). Accessing schools and the opportunity to gain a ‘good’ education, therefore, becomes not just an issue of need but is also potentially dependent on the background characteristics (related to socioeconomic status, academic ability, ethnicity, religion or language) of the families involved.

‘Selection’ by schools can operate in a number of ways and can be either overt or covert. Private schools, for example, select based on the fact that families can afford to pay fees. Some schools are permitted to select all or a proportion of children by their academic ability. For state-funded, comprehensive schools, however, the academic and social characteristics of children are not supposed to be a consideration. Yet, as West *et al.* (2006) argue, within a quasi-market system, schools may be incentivised to perform highly but that some lack the incentive to be equitable. Put simply, where a measure of success for schools is their ability to produce high performance outcomes, they are motivated to admit pupils that are most likely to contribute to this goal. These are likely to be more affluent pupils with higher levels of prior attainment. Poorer pupils, children with lower academic attainment or those with behavioural issues or special educational needs may be viewed as less likely to reach the required performance levels and may be more ‘expensive’ to educate in terms of finance, resources, staffing and time (Fiske and Ladd, 2000; Lacireno-Pacquet *et al.*, 2002). Epple and Romano (1998) showed how a flat-rate voucher system promoted a quality hierarchy of schools,

leading to ‘cream-skimming’ based on pupils’ socioeconomic background and ability. In a further study though, Epple and Romano (2002) provide a model for choice through an ability-linked voucher which must be accepted as a full tuition fee without the requirement for top-ups from parents. This, they argue, provides a solution to the ‘cream-skimming’ problem.

The potential for schools to select pupils occurs both before and after parents apply. Schools may be able to persuade or dissuade certain parents to consider them as an option through the way that they present and market themselves. Those with, for example, particular curriculum or pedagogical specialisms, locating themselves in certain areas, offering transport support or promoting a particular ethos may be able to (consciously or unconsciously) attract or deter parents from certain backgrounds to consider the school and state a preference for it. This issue is closely tied to the arguments described above in relation to the different ways that parents exercise and value choice and their access to and use of relevant information. Following this initial potential sorting mechanism, another occurs in the way that places are allocated to pupils. Where schools are oversubscribed, they use criteria to prioritise who can be offered a place. Commentators have expressed particular concern with those schools which operate autonomously and determine their own admissions arrangements (Academies Commission, 2013; Goldring and Mavrogordato, 2012; West *et al.*, 2009). Despite legislation outlining how schools can and cannot behave in this situation (see DfE, 2014a), some suggest that the diversity of admissions procedures being used by schools and limited local oversight make it possible for autonomous schools to compete for and ‘cream-skim’ more ‘desirable’ pupils (West *et al.*, 2006). Promoting further educational diversity amongst autonomous schools is also viewed by some as problematic for similar reasons to those outlined above. First, the provision of diversity could mean that the schools seek to target particular families or communities who are supportive of the approaches chosen. Second, they are able to use admissions criteria to influence the student composition of the school should they wish to. Faith schools, for example, are permitted to use religious criteria to prioritise places, and autonomous schools in England are also allowed to select 10% of their pupils based on their aptitude for a particular subject area. Some suggest that these criteria may be proxies for other social characteristics such as socioeconomic status or ethnic background (Allen and West, 2011; Gorard and See, 2013). Despite this concern, there is scope for admissions to work the other way, and for schools to create more socially balanced intakes if desired. They are, for

example, allowed to prioritise poorer pupils or those with particular medical or social needs and use ballots or banding mechanisms. Schools may be wary of doing this, however, if it is likely to substantially affect their potential to produce the performance outcomes required.

3.7.2.3 Sociological theories of parental choice and inequity

Taking a predominantly sociological approach, a body of British work from the 1990s sought to highlight the influence of social class on school choice. Often rooted in the theories of Bourdieu and Foucault, there is an emphasis on inequality and on the social contexts that function to preserve it. Parents, whilst acting individually, are also, it is assumed, unable to extricate themselves from the norms and values of the social class to which they belong. As a result their decisions are influenced by this and result in a “classed” school choice process that has the power to reproduce in schools the inequality seen in wider society. Bourdieu’s concepts of social, economic and cultural capital are particularly relevant (Bourdieu, 1986) and are used by those in the field as a framework for explaining persistent middle class advantage in the school choice process (see for example, Ball, 2003). Two main interlinked themes emerge in explaining class differences in school choice. The first is that parents from different class backgrounds understand and engage with choice in different ways. This may be in relation to the factors that influence the choice of schools and the strategies used to exercise choice. The second revolves around the uneven division of resources (such as time, money, knowledge and skills) and the impact that this might have on the choices made and the methods used to make them.

Middle class parents are described as looking for something different in a school to those from a working class background (Ball, 1993; Reay and Ball, 1997). Those from more affluent backgrounds focus on finding academic quality, a factor that they often consider to be closely associated with the ‘quality’ of intake at a school (Ball, 2003). By contrast, working class families are portrayed as being more interested in factors linked to distance between home and school and the child’s short-term happiness. In addition, differences in attitudes towards the choice process are highlighted. Whilst those from middle class backgrounds are described as taking school choice very seriously, the importance placed on gaining the ‘right’ outcome can mean that they feel it is an uncertain and ‘risky’ time. Reay and Ball (1997) contrast this by suggesting that “working-class patterns of educational choice are characterised by ambivalence, and appear to be as much about the avoidance of anxiety,

failure and rejection as they are about choosing a good school..." (Reay and Ball, 1997, p.93). To summarise these differences, Gewirtz *et al.* (1995) developed a classification of three types of choosers, arguing that each one is heavily influenced by social class. They describe a hierarchy of 'skilled choosers', 'semi-skilled choosers' and 'the disconnected' (Gewirtz *et al.*, 1995), each relating to the amount of economic and cultural capital available and the ability and inclination to make 'good' choices. This analysis is further extended by the notion of 'circuits of schooling' (Ball *et al.*, 1995) which identifies a typology of schools defined by the class backgrounds of those who state preferences for them (Ball *et al.*, 1995).

The arguments here are rooted in the idea that those defined as middle class have substantial advantage over the working classes in terms of their ability and willingness to engage in the school choice process. As such Ball (1993) argues that "the market works as a class strategy by creating a mechanism which can be exploited by the middle class as a strategy of reproduction in their search for relative advantage, social advancement and mobility" (Ball, 1993, p. 117). This strategy-based approach is likely to see middle-class parents actively seek out and engage in ways to ensure access to what is perceived as a 'good' school. Gewirtz *et al.* (1995) conclude that these practices inevitably result in unfair resource allocation and a "growing inequality of access to the quality of provision necessary for children to succeed educationally" (Gewirtz *et al.*, 1995, p.189). Ball *et al.* (1996) argue that it is this increasing inequality of access that it is likely to exaggerate social segregation between schools (Ball *et al.*, 1996).

3.7.2.4 Stratification

Stratification between schools refers to the extent to which pupils with different characteristics are separated or grouped together. In the literature this phenomenon is also known as 'segregation' or 'clustering'. Pupils may be unevenly distributed across schools according to their socioeconomic status, academic ability, ethnicity, religion or special education needs status. If, as the models described above suggest, more affluent and educated families are more likely to obtain places in 'better' schools, then there is the potential for levels of stratification to be maintained or to potentially increase. Disadvantaged children are disproportionately likely to attend poorer-performing schools, reinforcing the cycle of underachievement on an individual and school level. Segregation is an important concern; it has been shown to have potentially negative effects on children's academic and social lives,

as well as adverse outcomes for society more widely (Gorard, 2014a). The introduction of choice reforms in England in 1988 led a number of commentators to suggest that these would increase social segregation and lead some disadvantaged schools in to a ‘spiral of decline’. This, Gorard *et al.* (2003) explain is where a “school both loses student numbers (and therefore a proportion of its resources) and increases the proportion of socioeconomically disadvantaged students in its intake” (Gorard *et al.*, 2003, p. 24). The study by Gorard *et al.* (2003) found no clear evidence supporting this theory although work by Allen and Vignoles (2007) questioned some of the methods used to reach such a conclusion and argued that on a more local level, there was rising stratification. These methodological and substantive issues relating to empirical work on between-school segregation are discussed in more depth in the subsequent chapter.

Both the economic and sociological theories above may go some way to explaining how segregation might occur in a quasi-market schools system. They are not, however, the only factors involved nor do they necessarily operate independently of each other. Where circumstances allow, a combination of both demand-side and supply-side mechanisms could operate to maintain or increase levels of segregation. Adnett and Davies (2002) suggest that, in principle, local factors could also have a significant role, and that school stratification could be dependent on the segregation of housing type. They argue that there is both the potential for stratification to increase with open enrolment but also for it to be reduced “when there is strong segregation of housing type according to school catchment area and popular schools are able to increase enrolments” (Adnett and Davies, 2002, p. 194). They conclude that factors contributing to segregation on a local basis make it impossible to predict the overall impact of choice policies.

3.8 Conclusion

This chapter has outlined how the market metaphor has been used to justify the introduction of choice policies, increased diversity and autonomy in the schools system. The theoretical arguments discussed here provide a framework for understanding many of the education reforms discussed in the previous chapter, and most notably for the purpose of this study, the introduction of Free Schools in England. But as with all theory, there are problems. Economic arguments do not sufficiently take in to account the irrational decision-making that some

empirical work has highlighted (Kahneman, 2011). In addition, the goals of efficiency and diversity appear to outweigh an interest in outcomes associated with social justice and equity. The sociological arguments, whilst providing a rich descriptive base for considering school choice and issues of social reproduction, draw sometimes unsupported links between inequalities and market reforms. They are very much rooted in the period immediately following the introduction of choice policies in the England, and therefore may not be as helpful for predicting the current situation. There is also limited acknowledgement of the fact that these inequalities in the access and opportunity within the schooling system existed prior to the 1988 ERA and the introduction of choice reforms.

This chapter has provided a framework through which to understand the decisions and rationales of policymakers in the introduction of quasi-market reforms. It has also outlined the key theoretical concerns that arise in relation to social justice, focusing on two of Bartlett and Le Grand's (1993) criteria for evaluating quasi-markets: choice and equity. To gain a fuller understanding of the impacts of introducing market-oriented reforms, we must next turn to the empirical evidence. The following chapter considers the literature in light of the theoretical framework discussed here, focusing particularly on what is known about school compositions, the role of parents in the choice process, and the impact of admissions arrangements.

CHAPTER 4

SOCIAL COMPOSITION, PARENTAL CHOICE AND ADMISSIONS: THE RESEARCH LITERATURE

4.1 Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to review the literature in relation to the key foci of the current study. The chapter is separated into three main sections. First, I provide an outline of research on the social composition of schools in this country and internationally. It specifically focuses on the student profiles of different school types, particularly those that operate autonomously. The section also discusses the literature on between-school segregation. The second part of the chapter examines the role of the parent during the school choice process. It draws on existing evidence on parents' school choice and also discusses some of the methodological issues associated with research in this field. The final section focuses on the role of the admissions and allocation process in influencing school intakes. It gives a brief outline of some of the key legislation relating to the allocation of school places and describes the criteria which authorities (Local Authorities, academy chains or schools) use to prioritise access to schools. There is a particular focus on the approaches used by autonomous schools in England and the implications that this has had on equity within the system. It is acknowledged that there are other supply-side features of schools that contribute to our understanding of market reforms in education (e.g. curriculum choice, autonomy and culture). Whilst there is small body of work focusing on these areas, for the purposes of this study, these issues are not explored in depth. For further reading in this area, see Adnett and Davies (2000), Fitz *et al.* (1997) and Whitty *et al.* (1993).

4.2 The social composition of schools

This section is concerned with the unequal distribution of children with different characteristics across schools. The first subsection gives an overview of the evidence on the social composition of schools, focusing particularly on initiatives which have sought to achieve greater diversity (and often autonomy) in the schools system. In addition to evidence from the English context, specific focus is also given to Sweden and America, both countries with school structures that were cited as successful models on which to base the Free Schools policy. In the second part of this section, I consider the concept of 'segregation'. Here, the

term ‘segregation’ is discussed and some of the key debates surrounding its significance, measurement and changes over time are explored.

4.2.1 Student composition and school type in England

Pupils with different background characteristics are not evenly spread across schools in England. Whilst residential location (and the residential clustering of groups from different social and ethnic backgrounds) has been highlighted as a significant factor influencing this, researchers have also found higher levels of sorting in schools than can be explained by neighbourhood composition alone (Johnston *et al.* 2006). This suggests that there must be other factors at work too. In this chapter I draw attention to the association between school type and student compositions. The existence of selective schools, faith schools and some types of autonomous schools (as opposed to Local Authority maintained comprehensive schools) has been found to be associated with higher levels of school stratification on a local level (Gorard, 2015).

Before considering diversity within the wider state system, it is important to acknowledge the well-established private and selective sector that exists in England. The private/independent sector currently educates around seven percent of all pupils (The Economist, 2015) and, unsurprisingly, these pupils are much more likely to be from a higher socioeconomic background due to fees and other costs associated with attendance. Academically-selective grammar schools – which serve around four percent of Year 7 pupils - also tend to cater for more advantaged pupils, both in terms of prior ability and affluence (Burgess *et al.*, 2014a). While the schools are only overtly selective by ability, the costs associated with additional tuition in order to pass the entrance exam and transport mean that they also have the potential to sort by socioeconomic status too (Cribb *et al.*, 2013).

The debates surrounding the intakes, equity and effectiveness of private and selective schooling persist. But it is to intakes within different types of state-maintained schools that I now turn. Imbalanced intakes across schools in England are not a new phenomenon, existing long before the extension of open enrolment policies in the 1988 ERA (Gorard *et al.*, 2003). The introduction of increased autonomy and diversity within the system has, however, been associated with increasing or reinforcing differences between schools and their intakes. The

establishment of grant-maintained schools in 1988 gave schools the opportunity to ‘opt out’ of LA control, and were promoted as an important part of the developing choice and competition discourses. Although studies found little evidence that the schools were offering anything that new or different to their community school counterparts, their ‘opt out’ status did seem to reinforce the notion of ‘difference’ (Power *et al.*, 1994), something which some believe contributed to the advantaged intakes that they had (Benn and Chitty, 1996).

The specialist schools initiative was another policy aimed at encouraging distinctiveness and diversity within the system (DfEE, 2001). But evidence suggested that having a specialism allowed the schools to more easily overtly and covertly ‘select in’ and ‘select out’ certain pupils. This ‘cream-skimming’ (Epple and Romano (1998; West *et al.*, 2006), it was argued, led to specialist schools having disproportionately advantaged intakes (Gorard and Taylor, 2001), encouraging what Exley (2009) describes as ‘positional advantage’ within the schools market and potentially contributing to a two-tier state system.

But while the grant-maintained and specialist schools programmes have since been abolished, other examples of diversity within the system still exist. Research has shown that faith schools (which account for around a third of all maintained schools in England) are more likely to have advantaged intakes (Allen and West, 2009; 2011). A recent study of the top 500 comprehensives also found that these high-achieving schools were both more likely to have a faith character and take substantially fewer poorer children than would be expected based on their local area (The Sutton Trust, 2013). As more faith schools (representing a wider range of faiths) enter the market via the Free Schools programme, it will be important to establish whether this picture of advantaged intakes remains the same.

The Academies programme has been one of the most significant and encompassing structural initiatives of recent times. Like earlier grant-maintained schools and CTCs, academies operate independently of LA control and have additional freedoms in relation to their budgets, staffing, admissions and curriculum. There have been ongoing debates about their educational benefits but concern has also been raised about their impact on access and opportunity for those from disadvantaged backgrounds. The original sponsored academies were designed to replace failing schools and serve disadvantaged pupils in deprived urban areas. However,

studies showed that in many cases the social profiles of the pupils attending were quite different (and more advantaged) to those of the predecessor schools (Curtis *et al.*, 2008; PwC, 2008; Wilson, 2011). The rapid expansion of the policy in 2010 via the converter academies initiative also allowed thousands of other schools to adopt academy status, raising concerns that these schools would use their additional freedoms to be more selective with their intakes (Academies Commission, 2013). Most recently, Gorard (2014) found that converter academies are considerably less likely to take an equal share of poorer pupils and their existence within a local area is strongly associated with higher levels of between school stratification. Free Schools were another type of academy introduced in 2010. Whilst there are still only a small number of these schools in existence at present, the early evidence suggests that, on the whole, they are not taking an equal share of disadvantaged pupils (Green *et al.*, 2015; Morris, 2015).

4.2.2 School composition and international policy contexts

This section considers issues relating to school diversity and student composition in international contexts linked to the English Free Schools policy. It focuses particularly on the *friskolor* (Free Schools) policy in Sweden and the charter school initiative in America. The UK Conservative government cited both programmes as successful models on which to base the Free Schools programme in England. Despite this endorsement, there has been on-going debate surrounding the educational effectiveness of these schools (Allen, 2010; Betts and Tang, 2011; CREDO, 2013). Some researchers have also raised concerns that these autonomous schools have less balanced intakes than their local government-maintained counterparts. This is the focus for the following two subsections.

4.2.2.1 Sweden

Free Schools (or independent schools as they are often known) were introduced to Sweden via a voucher system in 1992, developing private involvement in to an education system where previously it had been almost absent. The decentralisation and deregulation was seen as a way of encouraging efficiency and improving standards (Arreman and Holm, 2011). Although the independent schools are provided with some degree of autonomy, local and central government still retain considerable control, particularly in relation to their curriculum, financial arrangements and inspection (Wiborg, 2011). In 2014, the Swedish government

reported that around 17% of ‘compulsory’ schools (ages 7-16) and 50% of upper secondary schools (ages 16-19) were independent schools (Sweden.se, 2014). Evidence also shows that the Free Schools are disproportionately located in large urban areas, and that as the numbers continue to grow, this clustering is becoming more pronounced (Fjellman, 2015; Skolverket, 2010).

Wiborg (2011) notes that pupil compositions of Free Schools differ from those in municipal schools. They are disproportionately located in affluent, urban areas and, according to government statistics, Free Schools have higher proportions of pupils with more highly educated parents (Wiborg, 2011). In addition, the schools take higher proportions of pupils with a foreign background and the parents of such “pupils in independent schools are relatively well-educated compared with the parents of similar pupils in municipal schools” (Skolverket, 2006, p.51). Recent research has raised concerns about the unequal distribution of resources between free and municipal schools, and therefore, between pupils from more advantaged and disadvantaged backgrounds (Dovemark and Holm, 2015; Fjellman, 2015).

Some have sought to draw links between Sweden’s independent schools and levels of social segregation within the education system. The Swedish government suggested that Free Schools and increased parental choice could be linked to increased segregation (Skolverket, 2005). Böhlmark and Lindahl (2007) found some evidence that supported this argument, concluding that reforms to Sweden in the early 1990s led to an increase in socioeconomic and ethnic segregation between schools. This study supports the earlier association that Söderström and Uusitalo (2005) highlighted in their work on an admissions reform in Stockholm. While they argued that it was the reform itself which contributed most to the increase in ability, ethnic and social segregation, the recent addition of new independent schools to the city was also cited as a contributory factor. Some researchers, however, feel that the impact of the independent schools has been overstated, and that it is residential segregation that remains the most influential cause of unbalanced school intakes (Lindbom and Almgren, 2007).

4.2.2.2 America

Charter schools were first introduced in America in 1991. There are now around 6,400 charter schools across 42 states plus the District of Colombia. They educate around 2.5 million

students, approximately 5.1% of the school-age population (CREDO, 2015; NAPCS, 2014). As with the Swedish model, charter schools operate autonomously and have freedom over their staffing, curriculum, budgeting and admissions. The most recent data indicate that, on a national level, charter school intakes are not representative of the school population as a whole. But rather than being socially advantaged (as was seen in the Swedish independent schools) pupils who attend charters are more likely to be poor and are more likely to have English as an additional language. They are also more likely to be from an ethnic minority background but less likely to have special educational needs (CREDO, 2013).

When examining the potential association between charter schools and the sorting of students with different characteristics, a series of recent studies have indicated that they do contribute to segregation on both socioeconomic and ethnic bases (Frankenberg *et al.*, 2010; Ladd *et al.*, 2015; Ni, 2012). Despite some efforts to encourage integration via the charter schools system (West *et al.*, 2006), the evidence suggests that there is still some way to go before their intakes (and those of other schools) become more balanced (Kahlenberg, 2012).

4.2.3 Segregation

4.2.3.1 What is segregation?

The term ‘segregation’ is widely used across society and the media. It is often strongly associated with notions of inequality and discrimination (Levy and Razin, 2015). Historically, segregation has been particularly linked with the racial separation enforced with the Jim Crow laws in the United States and the apartheid system in South Africa. In Northern Ireland, religious (and political) segregation between Protestants and Catholics has impacted on patterns of residential distribution, schooling and social interaction (Hamilton *et al.*, 2008). Important political change and legislation has resulted in concerted efforts to desegregate in these countries. Whilst not on the same scale, nor with the same sense of enforcement seen in the previous examples, policymakers and commentators in England continue to raise concerns about the segregation of some religious and ethnic groups in some parts of the country (Cantle, 2013; Goodhart, 2014). Most recently, Prime Minister, David Cameron, used the terms ‘segregation’ and ‘segregated’ ten times in a single speech to describe some Muslim communities in Britain, making controversial links to isolationism, limited social cohesion and potential extremism (Cameron, 2015).

Segregation can essentially be defined as the “differential distribution of social groups among social organisational units” (James and Taeuber, 1985, p. 24). But the term is complex and multifaceted, and researchers have attempted to further explore the concept by pointing to different dimensions that exist within it. Massey and Denton (1988), for example, highlight five elements of (residential) segregation. These are: evenness, exposure, concentration, centralisation and clustering. The authors argue that whilst empirically there may be overlap between these elements, conceptually they are quite distinct (Massey and Denton, 1988). In relation to research in to between-school segregation, it has primarily been the former two dimensions (evenness and exposure) that have been of interest to researchers (see for example, Gorard and Taylor, 2002; Gorard *et al.*, 2003; Jenkins *et al.*, 2008; Orfield and Lee, 2005). Exposure, in this context, refers to the extent to which members of minority social groups may have the opportunity to interact with those from the majority social groups or with each other (Gorard and Taylor, 2002). Evenness, or indeed unevenness, is concerned with the distribution of individuals with certain characteristics across different social contexts (e.g. residential areas, schools, occupational settings). This is the focus for the analysis in this study.

4.2.3.2 Why does between-school segregation matter?

Economic and ethnic segregation across schools remains an important research topic both in the UK and internationally (Elacqua, 2012; Gorard, 2015; Karsten *et al.*, 2006; Logan *et al.*, 2012) primarily due to the substantial impact that it has been shown to have on the performance and social outcomes of individuals, schools and society more widely. Some researchers have attempted to point towards an academic effect, suggesting that social segregation can have a negative impact on pupils’ attainment (Micklestone *et al.*, 2013; Palardy, 2013; Willms, 2010) although the potential explanations for this association are complex and difficult to measure. Some have argued that there is a small ‘peer effect’, suggesting that where less advantaged pupils are exposed to more advantaged pupils, they are more likely to do well (Gibbons and Telhaj, 2012; Massey and Fischer, 2006). Gorard (2014), however, suggests that the link between integrated intakes and higher academic attainment is fairly unclear and warns against using it as a primary justification for reducing stratification. He and others do suggest though, that segregation tends to depress the achievement of those

who are already disadvantaged, increasing the achievement gap between advantaged and disadvantaged pupils (Kahlenberg, 2012; Mickleson *et al.*, 2013).

Perhaps more well-established is the impact that segregation across schools can have on longer term individual and societal outcomes. In America, studies have found that pupils attending schools with more diverse intakes were more likely to demonstrate religious tolerance and understanding (Levinson and Levinson, 2004) and have positive interactions with those from different ethnic backgrounds (Frankenberg *et al.*, 2003). Other research has indicated that more mixed learning environments can affect pupils' attitudes and aspirations (Burgess *et al.*, 2005). The learning experiences of pupils can also be negatively affected when they are educated in schools with disproportionately high numbers of disadvantaged pupils. McCoy *et al.* (2012) suggest that students in these schools are more likely to be labelled as having behavioural difficulties while similar children in other schools might be classed as having learning disabilities. Pupils attending 'high poverty' schools, also tend to have less well-qualified teachers (Clotfelter *et al.*, 2007) and experience much higher teacher turnover (Simon and Moore Johnson, 2013).

School segregation has also been shown to have an effect on students' longer term educational participation and career choices. Some studies have linked segregated school settings with students being less likely to successfully complete further educational study (Billings *et al.*, 2012; Gorard and Rees, 2002). Following the implementation of ethnic desegregation policies in America, Guryan (2004) found that black students were less likely to 'drop out' of school. Others have reported positive effects on pupils' occupational aspirations (Frankenberg *et al.*, 2003) and future earnings (Johnson, 2011) when they attended more socially mixed schools.

In short, the evidence suggests that there is no clear academic benefit to more selective or stratified school systems (Gorard, 2014a), no advantage in terms of social mobility (Boliver and Swift, 2011) and no discernible social benefit either. By contrast, there *do* appear to be substantial longer term social, wellbeing and civic advantages to having schools which are more diverse. For policymakers this should call in to question the rationale for allowing stratified school systems to be maintained, and in some cases extended. This has been the case

in a small number of districts in America, where for example, local school boards have sought to challenge social and ethnic segregation through various allocation and transport policies. These are frequently politically unpopular, however, and their patchy implementation results in limited impact (Kahlenberg, 2012; West *et al.*, 2006).

4.2.3.3 How do we measure segregation?

The measurement of segregation (residential, social, occupational and educational) has been, and continues to be, an area of considerable dispute (James and Taeuber, 1985; Johnston *et al.*, 2010; Peach, 1975). This section briefly considers some of the more recent debates in relation to the measurement of segregation across schools. It does not attempt, however, to outline or critique the indices in too much technical detail; this has been done extensively and successfully elsewhere (see for example Gorard and Taylor, 2002). For the purposes of this study, it is simply necessary to have an understanding of how segregation has been measured in the past and the purposes and features of the indices that have been used.

As seen above, the measurement of segregation has predominantly been conducted with a view to identifying, describing and tracking the inequality experienced by those who are disadvantaged or marginalised within society:

Segregation indices are used, therefore, to measure how various social or ethnic groups of people are distributed across a study region, and whether there is evidence or not that they are separated. In themselves, the indices are not restricted to any singular view of the processes which led to the separation, or to whether those separations should necessarily be prevented.

(Harris, 2012, p. 671)

A number of ‘index wars’ (Taylor *et al.*, 2000) have debated the role and validity of different indices. The Dissimilarity index, developed by Duncan and Duncan (1955) has long been held up as the optimum measure of segregation (Allen and Vignoles, 2007). Taylor *et al.* (2000) note that its importance can be linked to the fact that it meets James and Taeuber’s (1985) four criteria for a useful measure of segregation. These are:

Size invariance - The index should be unaffected by the size of the area(s) used for analysis. For example, the same picture should emerge nationally and locally.

Organisational equivalence - The index should be unaffected by changes in the number of sub-areas, by combination for example of two sub-areas on the same 'side' of the line of no segregation.

Principle of transfers - The index should be capable of being affected by the movement of one individual from sub-area to sub-area.

Composition invariance - The index should be unaffected by scaling of columns or rows, through increases in the 'raw' figures which leave the proportions otherwise unchanged.

(Taken from Taylor *et al.*, 2000, no page)

Measuring segregation in relation to schools in England primarily occurred following the 1988 ERA. The objective was to find out whether increased marketisation and 'choice' in the system would lead to increased social segregation across schools. Since then the Dissimilarity Index has been used and advocated by a number of researchers (see for example, Allen and Vignoles, 2007; Burgess and Wilson, 2010; Noden, 2000). Gorard and colleagues introduced a further index, termed the Segregation Index (Gorard *et al.*, 2003) or the Gorard Segregation index as it has also become known. This, it is argued, compares favourably to the Dissimilarity Index because it is "strongly composition invariant. Changes in the levels of segregation are not artificially affected by changes in the overall size of the minority group, such as occurs in England when records change from take-up to eligibility for free school meals" (Gorard *et al.*, 2003, p.36). Advocates of this index suggest that it clearly describes the proportion of disadvantaged students that would need to exchange schools in order to achieve evenness. They do, however, note that there tends to be very little substantive difference between the results it produces compared with those from the Dissimilarity Index (Bartholo, 2013; Gorard, 2009b). Despite this, the debates appear to continue but with an increased emphasis on the spatial dimensions of measuring segregation (Watts, 2013).

The segregation indices described above provide a useful tool for understanding the proportion of pupils from a defined locality that would have to move schools in order for there to be balanced intakes across the system. What they do not do, however, is indicate from *which* schools pupils would have to move. The segregation ratio (SR) as used by Gorard *et al.* (2003) does exactly this, giving a “proportionate measure of the level of social stratification in the school compared to its surrounding schools” (Gorard *et al.*, 2003, p. 37). Exley (2009) argues that the SR has been “unfairly overlooked as an ‘evenness’ segregation measure” (Exley, 2009, p.12) and has used it to explore levels of segregation across specialist schools in England. Further details on the segregation ratio and its use can be found in the Methods chapter (Chapter 5) of this thesis.

4.2.3.4 Segregation changes over time

The measurement of segregation between schools took particular prominence following the 1988 Education Reform Act in England. The quasi-market reforms were viewed by advocates as a way of ending ‘selection by mortgage’, and making it easier for disadvantaged children to access ‘good’ schools outside of their immediate locality (Coleman, 1992). For others, however, it was felt that the increased ‘choice’ that was being given to parents would lead to an increase in social segregation due to the differences in parents’ ability and inclination to choose effectively. But did the 1988 reforms have any discernible effect either way on the levels of segregation on a national and/or local level?

It is important first to note that prior to the 1988 ERA, the situation across England’s schools was already one of historically entrenched social segregation (see Coldron *et al.*, 2010; Gorard *et al.*, 2003). At the time of the reforms being introduced, around one in three pupils would have had to move school in order to achieve balanced intakes (Gorard *et al.*, 2003). The extensive use of catchment areas for school allocation meant the intakes of local schools simply tended to reflect the characteristics of the families living locally. But just as with the debate about how to measure segregation, there came debate about whether, following the 1988 reforms, levels of segregation had increased or decreased.

A large scale research project led by Gorard and colleagues suggested that overall segregation across schools in England and Wales declined in the period following the 1988 ERA (Gorard and Fitz, 1998; Gorard *et al.*, 2003), a view that was supported by Allen and Vignoles (2007)

despite some differences over which index provided the most valid measure. Noden (2000) sought to challenge some of the findings from the earlier work (Gorard and Fitz, 1998) by using a data set based on intakes between 1995-1999 and the isolation index to suggest that segregation had actually increased. These findings were robustly challenged (Gorard *et al.*, 2003). From 1996, however, segregation by socioeconomic status (on a national level) steadily rose until 2008 (Gorard, 2009b); since though, it has continued on a gradual downward trajectory, measuring 30% in 2014 (Gorard, 2015). Of course these national figures do not acknowledge the substantial differences in segregation levels that exist between different local areas (Gorard, 2015). These are considered further in the discussion of the potential determinants of segregation in the subsection below.

4.2.3.5 The determinants of segregation

The previous sections have shown that the original concerns surrounding a significant increase in segregation following the introduction of market reforms were largely unfounded. The data suggest that the 1988 choice policies did not cause any substantial long term change in the level of socioeconomic segregation between schools, and instead, on a national level it has remained stubbornly persistent (Gorard, 2015). But the descriptive data do not tell us explicitly about the processes which influence and maintain these levels of segregation. This section considers some of these potential processes and the extent to which various stakeholders (including parents, schools and the government) might be able to influence their impact.

The possible determinants can be broadly split in to two groups – those that are outside the control of education policymakers and those that are potentially within their remit. The first group include factors such as the global, national or local economic cycle, patterns of residential segregation, local levels of employment, local population density (Cheng and Gorard, 2011; Gorard, 2015), changes to immigration policy (Hamnett *et al.*, 2013) and gentrification of urban areas (Butler and Hamnett, 2011). The existence of residential segregation is a persistent determinant of school stratification with levels of population density also having some impact (Gorard *et al.*, 2003). Segregation tends to be lower in more densely populated urban areas such as London. The impact of residential segregation is reduced due to the closer proximity of schools with different types of housing, and the

extensive provision of public transport. This makes travel from home to school easier and often more affordable compared with that in rural areas. In a more recent article, Gorard (2015) also highlights the lower school segregation in areas with low population density but higher levels of population uniformity (i.e. where more children come from the same social background).

Research has indicated a number of important factors - both on the supply and demand side for school places - that impact segregation from within the schools system. The use of both overt and covert admissions practices to prioritise access to pupils with certain characteristics has been shown to be one such factor in recent years (Allen *et al.*, 2012; Coldron *et al.*, 2010; Gorard, 2015). Another key issue that has been raised is the ongoing development of 'diversity' within the education system. West (2014) states that there is a concern that "choice policies may lead to the separation of children into different types of schools" (West, 2014, p.344). Here, she makes particular reference to religious schools but others have suggested that academically selective schools and those that operate autonomously also play a role in maintaining or exacerbating segregation (Coldron *et al.*, 2010; Gorard *et al.*, 2014). On the demand side, Allen *et al.*, (2014) draw attention to the actions of parents as potential determinants of stratification. This includes the choices that parents make about schools as well as where they live and the extent to which they can afford to pay for transport for their children to attend school. This report helpfully draws on both sociological and economic descriptions of inequality in the choice process. On the sociological side, it builds on the work of Coldron *et al.* (2010), discussing the impact of 'middle class advantage' on the composition of some schools. Looking at economic models, it focuses on the effect of income constraints, the different school preferences of those from advantaged/disadvantaged backgrounds and informational deficits. These factors, it is argued, can contribute to the different choices that parents make and the reinforcement of segregated school intakes (Allen *et al.*, 2014). These issues are discussed in more detail in the section below.

4.3 School choice and the role of parent

The expansion of market reforms within education systems around the globe, and more specifically, the development of school choice policies, has increasingly sought to hand power to parents. Recent governments in England have reinforced this idea, arguing that it is parents

who are best placed to decide which school their child should attend (The Conservative Party, 2010; DfES, 2005). Choice policies are popular with parents (Coldron *et al.*, 2008) yet this does not necessarily mean that all parents or children engage with them or benefit from them. In order to effectively choose a school, families must be provided with the tools to do so. They need information about available choices. Whilst standard market theory assumes that all parents engage in this process with the aim of maximising their child's outcomes by selecting the highest performing school, the prevailing evidence indicates that in reality this does not always happen (Allen *et al.*, 2014). Instead, marked differences occur between individuals and groups in society in terms of the amount and types of information that people have available to them and their capacity and inclination to utilise it. Those who do not choose schools based on performance or quality are sometimes labelled as 'poor' or 'bad' choosers (Brighouse, 2003; Reay and Ball, 1997). A situation of imperfect information also means that making the 'best' choices is complex and constrained by a whole range of practical, personal or social considerations. As a result, families often operate within a bounded rationality, unable to really know or access what may, in theory, be the optimal choice (Ben-Porath, 2009).

This section explores the literature surrounding parental school choice. It considers who is involved in the choice process, the factors that influence school choice, and the strategies that parents use to determine their options and make their choices. The section refers to the most current literature where possible but also acknowledges the significant body of school choice work carried out in the UK during the 1990s. These studies played an important role in developing our understanding of the emerging nature of school choice post-1988. Some more recent studies suggest, however, that as choice has become a more established phenomenon, the attitudes and experiences of those engaging with it may have altered over time.

4.3.1 Who chooses schools?

The notion of a 'consumerist' approach to school choice raises interesting questions about who exactly *is* the consumer. The discourse of 'parent choice' (Cameron, 2012) encourages us to feel that power is substantially weighted with the parent and this is reinforced by the assumption that it is they who will be responsible for making decisions in the interests of their child and completing the necessary administration during the process. The design of policy

which is apparently responsive to the demands of parents and the use of performance indicators aimed at an adult audience compound this sense of parental power (Gorard, 1997). The use of more complex formal measures of school performance may also go some way to explaining why children are more likely to use anecdotal information to influence which schools they prefer (Smedley, 1995). Some earlier studies of school choice showed that the child's preference was frequently the most important in making the final decision (Thomas and Dennison, 1991; Walford, 1991). Other researchers, however, found that the child had the main responsibility for choosing their secondary school in just one fifth of the cases studied (West *et al.*, 1995).

Gorard (1997) provided a useful framework to understand the different stages in which parents and children engage in the choice process, suggesting that parents first make an initial decision about the type of school the child will attend. This tends to be influenced by factors related to size, convenience, pupil safety and the preference for a traditional style of education. A second stage involves the parents forming a choice set of potential alternatives based on this chosen type. Finally, the parents and children make a final decision which is satisfactory to both parties. At this point factors including extra-curricular activities and pupil happiness also form part of the reasoning process (Gorard, 1997). This notion of school choice as a collaborative 'family activity' is supported by the work of Woods *et al.* (1998). Despite these findings, more recent studies on school choice have reported solely on the role of parents in the process (Burgess *et al.*, 2009; Francis and Hutchings, 2013; Harris and Larsen, 2015), making it difficult to know how relevant the model proposed by Gorard (1997) is within the current education context.

4.3.2 When does the choice process begin?

Previous research has shown that different parents start thinking about secondary school options at different times. West *et al.* (1995) reported that two fifths of parents seriously considered secondary schools when their child was in the final year of primary schooling whilst the remainder were thinking about the issue earlier. A further study also indicated that the process of considering schools began earlier for those parents that opted for private rather than state schooling (West *et al.*, 1998). Starting the process 'early' is often presented as responsible behaviour, important in gaining a more informed understanding of the available

options (Exley, 2009, 2013). To widen participation in this decision-making and in an attempt to support those from more disadvantaged backgrounds who it was felt ‘missed out’ on better schools due to a lack of knowledge or understanding of the system, Choice Advisers were introduced by the Labour government in 2006. Early engagement and preparation were viewed as model characteristics and were therefore encouraged by Choice Advisors with the aim of promoting ‘better’ stated preferences that focused on academic performance (Exley, 2013; Stiell *et al.*, 2008). Unfortunately, it was found that often considering the choice process early did not have a particularly positive impact as, even where disadvantaged families altered their choices as a result of engaging in more depth with the process, they were still unlikely to be as successful as those who could afford to live closer to the ‘best’ schools, were prioritised through the oversubscription criteria (Exley, 2013).

4.3.3 Identifying performance: formal information

Making it possible for parents to identify school success and failure as a characteristic has been cited as a key factor in delivering a successful system of school choice (Allen and Burgess, 2010). Since the early 1990s this has led to the increased development and publication of performance information about individual schools including their examination results, ‘value-added’ measures and inspection reports. This was seen as a way of both making schools accountable for their outcomes and allowing parents to compare schools and make more informed choices (Goldstein and Leckie, 2008). The quantifiable and objective nature of the data is designed to make comparisons between schools straightforward although some earlier research suggested that many families did not use or value this type of formal information (Ball and Vincent, 1998). Whilst more recent studies report that the growing use of the internet has changed *where* parents find information about schools, the majority were still not consulting Ofsted reports or attainment data during the decision-making process (Coldron *et al.*, 2008). Instead, information provided by the schools themselves (i.e. school prospectuses and brochures) was the most popular written source with 89% of parents reporting that they found it useful (Coldron *et al.*, 2008).

Evidence has also been found that more formal or ‘cold’ types of knowledge about schools (Ball and Vincent, 1998) are more likely to be used and valued by those from more affluent or educated backgrounds (Coldron *et al.*, 2008; Francis and Hutchings, 2013; West and Pennell,

1999). This is likely to affect which schools children apply to and gain access to (Allen *et al.*, 2014) with middle class families maintaining an advantage in entering those that perform best (Francis and Hutchings, 2013), thus maximising their chances of succeeding academically and reinforcing pre-existing inequalities.

Attempts to make access and engagement with information about schools more widely available have had some positive impact in terms of shifting the school choice aspirations of those from poorer backgrounds. The Choice Advice policy was introduced in England in 2006 with the aim of providing enhanced and personalised information to poorer parents on an individual basis. Stiell *et al.* (2008) found that parents generally valued the support that they were given by Choice Advisers. Others though have highlighted problems with the programme, including the seemingly contradictory aims of raising parents' aspirations for school choices whilst simultaneously stressing the need to be realistic in which schools they opted for (Exley, 2012). Coldron *et al.* (2008) point to the limited impact that just 250 Choice Advisors could have on the system as a whole considering the high demand and need for their input. In America, Hastings *et al.* (2007) demonstrated that providing parents with simplified attainment information and the odds of gaining a place at schools in their area substantially increased the likelihood of them applying for a higher performing school. The same natural experiment revealed particular academic benefit for students from disadvantaged backgrounds who attended the higher performing schools (Hastings and Weinstein, 2008).

New technologies continue to be developed as a way of providing further information and supporting parents during the choice process. Whilst having the potential to provide access to a wide range of school-related information, the persistence of a societal 'digital divide' means that strategies need to be found to ensure that disadvantaged families with limited understanding of or access to the internet are also able to engage with the available resources (Smrekar, 2009). An evaluation of the 'SmartChoices' website developed in Hartford, Connecticut, showed that two thirds of parents either "clarified or changed their top-ranked school" (Dougherty *et al.*, 2013, p.121) having used the site. In England, the Department for Education operate a 'Compare Schools' site for parents to use when considering schools in their area. However, the information provided is fairly limited and there is not the targeted and localised technical support to encourage the most disadvantaged to use it. Whilst a very

small-scale evaluation survey suggested that parents found the site useful (DfE, 2015e), there is no evidence of its potential to influence choice decisions. Astle *et al.* (2011) have put forward suggestions for a more comprehensive comparison and accountability online tool to support parents' scrutiny and choice of schools. There is, however, currently no indication that the government are considering its development.

4.3.4 Informal information about schools

Informal networks have been shown to be as, if not more, important than the use of performance data or information received from the schools (Francis and Hutchings, 2013; Woods *et al.*, 1998). Discussions with other adults and children have been found to be a highly valued and influential source of informal school information (Ball and Vincent, 1998; Coldron *et al.*, 2008).

A body of related sociological studies have suggested links between parents' social class and the quality and quantity of informal information that is available (Ball, 2003; Bowe *et al.*, 1994; Gewirtz *et al.*, 1995; Reay and Ball, 1997), and its role in reinforcing the inequalities discussed above. Those from working class backgrounds are presented as less likely to engage in searches for the best performing schools and, due to limited resources and/or social and cultural capital, are less likely to have the peer networks that might encourage choice based on school quality (Bowe *et al.*, 1994). Ball and Vincent (1998) explore the use of 'grapevine' or 'word-of-mouth' information by different groups of parents. For some, predominantly middle class parents, it is enthusiastically sought but tends to supplement more formal knowledge and is used sceptically and with suspicion. By contrast, Reay and Ball (1997) posit that school choice for working class parents is characterised by a feeling of uncertainty and an individual sense of low social worth. They suggest that this influences the features that these families look for in a school and limits their expectations of being able to access a 'good' school. As such, attempts to gain knowledge about school quality through both formal and informal channels are also limited.

For families who experience high levels of residential mobility (such as Gypsy, Roma or traveller communities, recent migrants, asylum seekers or refugees) locating and accessing information about schools is also likely to be a challenge. An absence of established peer

networks and local knowledge of schools combined with limited economic resources, internet access and transport mean that parents may not be clear on which schools perform well and/or suit the needs of their children (Doyle and McCorrison, 2008). Like the limited options experienced by working class families in the study by Reay and Ball (1997), these parents also experience a lack of choice and a sense of having to accept the least worst option (Reay and Lucey, 2003). Whilst the UK government have published some of the good practice which local councils and schools are engaging in to assist Gypsy, Roma or traveller families with locating suitable school choices for their children (Wilkin *et al.*, 2010), this is happening on a very small scale and with no mandatory requirement. No other official interventions are known of for supporting other marginal and/or transient groups with this issue.

4.3.5 Different ‘types’ of chooser

The discussion above acknowledges that there are likely to be differences in the amount and type of information that different parents use during the school choice process, the extent to which they are making a choice based on school quality and their willingness or ability to engage in the process. Some researchers have attempted to categorise these different ‘types’ of chooser, linking parents’ background characteristics with their role in school choice. A study by Willms and Echols (1992) adopts the terms ‘alert’ and ‘inert’ (taken from Hirschman, (1970)) to describe those parents who either exercised choice by selecting non-designated schools and those parents who opted to stick with their designated ‘catchment’ school. They found that those parents who had exercised choice were more likely to be affluent, working in professional occupations and choose a school based on higher mean attainment and socioeconomic status. In a smaller scale, qualitative study in England, Gewirtz *et al.* (1995) developed a class-related typology: disconnected choosers (working class parents), semi-skilled choosers (a mix of both working and middle class parents) and privileged/skilled choosers (upper/middle class parents). The researchers state that they use both judgements of parents’ ‘inclination’ and ‘capacity’ to make rational choices in producing their categories. Gorard (1997) critiqued the classifications, questioning first why inclination and capacity are presented as separate qualities when the two qualities are covariant. Aside from this, he also raised concern at the omission of a fourth category, those parents who had high capacity or ability for engaging with the choice process but who ended up making what

might have been perceived as a non-rational choice. These parents, he argued, do exist and were not considered in the theory developed by Gewirtz *et al.* (1995).

More recently, a similar class-based typology was created to describe parents' decision-making in relation to childcare and primary school settings (Vincent *et al.*, 2010). Francis and Hutchings (2013) categorised parents in their study in to four groups, depending on the extent to which they used different sources of information to choose a school. Links were made to social class with more parents from the highest SES groups being found in the 'hyper choosers' and 'informed' categories whilst the 'partially informed' and 'limited choosers' groups were predominantly made-up of those from lower SES backgrounds. These ideal types are perhaps useful in describing the differences between parents during the school choice process and in highlighting where policy interventions or support could be helpful. However, there is a danger that they can oversimplify the issue and also overstate the role that social class plays. They also provide only a snapshot of the situation, based on the data collected at one point in time. With choice now being well-embedded in to the English schools system, it would be worthwhile trying to establish through a longitudinal study, whether the proportion of parents making poorly informed and less rational choices is decreasing.

4.3.6 What are parents looking for in schools?

Over the past two decades a number of studies have consistently highlighted the importance of academic achievement in decisions about school choice (Burgess *et al.*, 2014b; Denessen *et al.*, 2005; Gorard, 1997; Harris and Larsen, 2015; West *et al.*, 1995). Gorard (1999) argues that the quantifiable nature of the information about academic standards (such as performance tables, inspection reports) perhaps makes this a more straightforward indicator for comparisons across schools, and therefore is more likely to be used during the decision-making process. The studies above also show, however, that academic quality or performance is rarely the only feature influencing parents' school choice. Other factors frequently play an important role with parents perhaps having a "more holistic view of 'good schools' than appears to be held by policymakers" (Maddaus, 1990, p. 289). One of the key methodological issues that emerges from research in to parents' reasons for school choice, is the potential lack of validity. Where parents are *reporting* the factors that have influenced their choices, there is a need to remain mindful that for a variety of reasons, these may not reflect the *actual* factors

involved. To address this, some recent studies have bypassed the parents' stated reasons for choice, instead directly examining preferences using economic modelling and large datasets (Burgess *et al.*, 2014b; Hastings *et al.*, 2008). This section briefly discusses both types of study.

Convenience or location factors have been shown to be important for parents choosing both primary schools (Burgess *et al.*, 2009a) and secondary schools (Burgess *et al.*, 2009b; Coldron and Boulton, 1991; Leroux, 2015). Where families live in terms of a rural or urban setting has an impact on the number of feasible schools available to them but also affects the availability and cost of public transport options (Burgess *et al.*, 2006). Other factors such as school ethos, pupil safety, behaviour and extra-curricular activities (Echols and Wilms, 1995; Gorard, 1999; Harris and Larsen, 2015) have also been highlighted as important factors for some parents. One study suggested that these factors were often understood by parents as potentially important in contributing towards children's happiness, and that this was often a key consideration in addition to the academic provision on offer (Coldron and Boulton, 1991).

Some studies have found the socioeconomic composition of a school to be an important factor in influencing some parents' choices (Benson *et al.* 2014; Burgess *et al.*, 2009, 2014). Ball (2003) argues that for middle class parents, school quality and student composition are inextricably linked and that parents focused on maximising their child's chances of academic success look to their potential peer group as indicator of this outcome being achieved. Moreover, he suggests that middle class parents who opted for private schooling were not only interested in having their children educated with others 'like them' but also were actively attempting to avoid those who were perceived as socially 'different' (Ball, 2003). This self-sorting based on socioeconomic status and/or other characteristics is unlikely to be a phenomenon exclusively linked to the private sector (Bunar, 2008; Reay, 2004).

In addition to socioeconomic mix, ethnic composition has also been illustrated to be a key factor for many parents although it is often not something that they willingly report in survey responses (Schneider and Buckley, 2002). Bagley (1996) highlighted methodological discrepancies here, finding that parents were more likely to discuss the role of ethnic composition in school choice during interviews rather in questionnaires. Both the avoidance

of other pupils and ethnic composition were cited by parents as reasons for rejecting certain schools in the local area (Bagley, 1996). By contrast, more recent studies have found that, for some middle class families, some level of ethnic diversity was an important attribute in preferred schools (Ball *et al.*, 2013; Reay *et al.*, 2011).

There is very limited evidence which explicitly links school *type* with parents' preferences. Where research has focused on parents' reasons for selecting particular school types (such as CTCs or private schools, for example, or charter schools in America), the reasons for choosing them tend to be linked to the factors already described above, particularly academic qualities in relation to outcomes, teaching or subject focus (Gorard, 1997; Whitty *et al.*, 1993; Stein, 2009). Research also suggests that for many families, types of school may be of little relevance when considering options due to constraints of location and proximity or income (Burgess *et al.*, 2009).

4.3.7 Does social background influence school choice?

Whilst academic quality has generally been shown to be an important factor for many parents in choosing a school, differences between the preferences of groups of parents with different social backgrounds have also been highlighted. Burgess and Briggs (2006) show, for example, that FSM-eligible children are less likely to attend a good school than other children who live on the same street. A report studying the intakes of the 500 top-performing comprehensive secondary schools in England showed that children eligible for FSM were substantially underrepresented when compared with local and national averages (The Sutton Trust, 2013). But what influences these differences in school choice?

In America, a number of studies have shown that lower income families have weaker preferences for academic outcomes (Harris and Larsen, 2015; Hastings *et al.*, 2006; Schneider and Buckley, 2002). Allen *et al.* (2014) argue that parents from lower socioeconomic backgrounds may place less emphasis on school quality during the decision-making process as they may “underestimate the importance of education for their children’s future earnings, or because they place a greater value on the family’s current well-being than on their future income status” (Allen *et al.*, 2014, p.14). Income constraints and access to information at the time of the choice process may also compound this issue, resulting in the prioritisation of

other factors by these parents or limited awareness of the options available. An OECD (2014) report suggests that much of the variation is explained by the fact that these families are selecting from a more limited choice set, in large part due to their residential location and the poorer quality of provision available locally. Burgess *et al.* (2014) present similar findings but conclude that “there remain differences in preferences for academic quality between low and high-SES households even after allowing for differences in constraints” (Burgess *et al.*, 2014b, p.27).

Researchers express concern about these differences in choice patterns for two main reasons: the potential for choice programmes to raise standards and their role in contributing towards stratification between schools. Leroux (2015) argues that where parents do not base their choices primarily on school quality, all schools are less incentivised to raise their academic standards and compete on this basis. In addition, Allen (2008) concludes that the different choice behaviours of those from different social backgrounds can be a contributing factor to the maintenance of a segregated school system. She suggests that the behaviour of schools and admissions policies may also have some role in this too.

4.3.8 Gaining Places

This section considers the strategies that parents engage with in order to secure places at their preferred schools. It builds on the previous sections where factors that have contributed to the school choice process have been explored as well as the information used when making decisions. Acknowledging that there are some differences in parents’ preferences and eventual choices linked to their social background, this section considers how these may influence the strategies used to gain a place at a chosen school. Describing these mechanisms and their use by parents is important in building up a picture of the existing inequalities during the choice process and understanding how these work alongside admissions and allocation procedures of schools and Local Authorities.

Francis and Hutchings (2013) outlined three categories of strategies used by parents to gain entry to a preferred school: first, legal strategies such as moving in to a school’s catchment area; secondly, legal but ethically dubious strategies such as attending church services for a short period of time prior to being allocated a place at a faith school; finally, illegal strategies,

such as using a false address to gain priority entry where proximity was a deciding factor. Media reports suggest that the number of parents attempting to use fraudulent means to gain access to preferred, oversubscribed schools has risen in recent years (Brady, 2013). The British Social Attitudes survey (Exley, 2011) indicated very low approval for activities such as getting involved in religious activities in order to secure a place at school, using a relative's address or renting a second home closer to a school to use during the application procedure. However, just over a third of respondents felt that it was acceptable to move house to be nearer a higher-performing school and two thirds approved of paying a private tutor to improve the chances of gaining entry (Exley, 2011).

Francis and Hutchings (2013) demonstrate that often these strategies are more likely to be available to those from more affluent backgrounds. Perhaps unsurprisingly, they found that parents from social groups A and B (defined as upper middle class and middle class respectively) were considerably more likely to pay for private tutors and move house to be nearer a good school. Inequalities in financial capital, they conclude, support a system whereby the wealthiest in society are able to maintain advantage by gaining access to the best schools.

In relation to moving house, a study by Allen *et al.* (2010) suggests that the numbers of families relocating in order to gain entry to a higher quality secondary school is limited, calling in to question the notion of extensive 'selection by mortgage' across the country. The study indicates that the role of moving house contributes very little to the overall picture of school segregation and that the vast majority of families do not move house in order to maximize their school choice decision. The existence of extensive segregation by the time children are aged five (Allen, 2010) may mean that those who have the financial means to move house do not need to if they find themselves in an area that already has high quality provision available.

4.4 Choice and the role of the admissions process

In this section I turn to the role of admissions authorities, examining the evidence on how admissions and allocation procedures are used and their influence on school compositions. The admissions system in England has a wide ranging and significant role to play in the

organisation and administration of the allocation of children to schools. It is expected to work efficiently and effectively in ensuring that all children have a school place but also that parents' preferences for schools are considered and adhered to where possible. In addition, the admissions system is expected to provide a level of accountability, encouraging transparency and fairness during the application and allocation processes as well as providing a mechanism whereby parents can complain or appeal if they consider any arrangements to be unfair (see Coldron *et al.*, 2008 for a more detailed overview of the aims and purposes of admissions systems).

But the admissions system is not a single overarching body with responsibility for all of the school admissions in the country. Instead, legislation and policy in relation to admissions is passed down from central government and the arrangements are handled by admissions authorities, groups responsible for overseeing and running the application and allocation procedures. These may be Local Authorities or individual schools/groups of schools that have been granted autonomy from LA control. The number of schools acting as their own admissions authorities has grown considerably in recent years with the rapid expansion of the academies programme since 2010 (West and Bailey, 2013). In addition, an independent body, the Office of the Schools Adjudicator, works to clarify the legal position of admissions arrangements used by schools. They are able to rule on objections to state school admissions and make decisions about proposed changes to admissions arrangements but do not deal with individual pupil cases (OSA, 2014).

There has been an enduring policy and research focus on fairness within the admissions process. This interest has attempted to improve equity in the system on both an individual level but also on a local or national scale where concerns about persistent segregation between schools and its impact on attainment, social cohesion and social mobility continue (Allen *et al.*, 2012; Coldron, 2015; The Labour Party, 1997; West *et al.*, 2011). As a result, issues of equity and social justice form a significant focus of this section and are considered with particular reference to the admissions arrangements used by different types of school.

4.4.1 Changes to admissions policy and legislation 1998-2014

Prior to the 1998 Schools Standards and Framework Act, a range of concerns had been raised about both the organisation and equity of admissions processes and allocation procedures in England (Audit Commission, 1996; Gewirtz *et al.*, 1995; Murphy, 1990; West and Pennell, 1997). These concerns were particularly in relation to those schools that had control over their own admissions arrangements, including grant-maintained schools, voluntary-aided religious schools (sometimes GM too) and CTCs. For these schools, the governing body, as opposed to the Local Authority were responsible for developing and implementing their admissions procedures. This, some commentators suggested, gave schools more freedom to both overtly and covertly select students based on educational or social characteristics; indeed, it was felt that the development of the quasi-market incentivised them to do so (Gewirtz *et al.*, 1995).

The Labour Party's 1997 election manifesto stated a clear intention to make school admissions fairer (The Labour Party, 1997). Following election victory, the 1998 SSFA introduced two new mechanisms designed to do this. The Code of Practice on School Admissions (DfEE, 1999) was drawn up, providing a clearer framework on permitted allocation procedures and preventing the use of new selection by ability, with the exception of fair banding arrangements. The schools adjudicator was also introduced to provide independent oversight and with the powers to rule on admissions practices that did not adhere to the new legislative framework. Whilst a starting point for improving equity in the admissions system, some research suggested that the reforms did not go far enough in reversing levels of admissions control that existing autonomous schools already had, allowing for the preservation of established patterns of social stratification between schools (Fitz *et al.*, 2002). Work by West and Ingram (2001) also highlighted the problematic nature of continuing to allow religious schools to interview applicants and the use of aptitude as a means of selection for specialist schools. They argue that policymakers seemed uncertain over whether they wished to continue the use of selection in schools or not but recommended that it should be made unlawful in all cases as part of a commitment to fairer allocation procedures.

West *et al.* (2009) note that the guidance in the second Code of Practice (DfES, 2003) is generally similar to that found in the first. Oversubscription criteria were expected to be

published and “clear, fair and objective” (DfES, 2003, para A.51). Moreover, the Code provided “explicit advice that priority should be given to school place applications from children in public care” (Select Committee on Education and Skills, 2004, para 43). This provision did not become mandatory, however, until the third Code of Practice was published three years later (DfES, 2007). All forms of parent interviews prior to the allocation of places were also prohibited and a series of other mandatory requirements and prohibited practices were also outlined (see West *et al.*, 2011 for a fuller discussion). Significantly, the 2007 Code also made it obligatory for admissions authorities to ensure that all of their policies and practices complied with equal opportunities legislation (DfES, 2007).

On election in 2010, the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government introduced a number of policies aimed at providing greater autonomy for individual schools and a reduced role for Local Authorities. Education Secretary, Michael Gove, sought to pare down the requirements of the Admissions and Appeals Codes, making them less complex, costly and unfair (DfE, 2011c). As a result, the 2012 Admissions Code introduced a number of significant changes to the system, some reflecting the considerable shift towards autonomy. Academies and Free Schools, for example, would not be required to consult over proposed changes to their Pupil Admission Number, allowing them to expand freely if they wished to. The Code prohibited the use of area-wide random allocation by Local Authorities although academies and Free Schools were able to use it if desired. In an attempt to increase local accountability, the Code also allowed for any individual or body to raise objections to school admissions. Moreover, it was stated that LAs would be held accountable for the oversight and operation of fair admissions and must scrutinise all admissions policies, including those from autonomous state-funded schools (DfE, 2012b). LAs were also no longer required to be responsible for in-year admissions. A revised Admissions Code was published in 2014. This permitted all admissions authorities to prioritise admission to children eligible for Pupil Premium funding (DfE, 2014a) from September 2016. Previously, only those academies or Free Schools which had requested this provision in their funding agreement had been allowed to use this criterion.

As stated above, Free Schools, as state-funded academies must comply with the most recent Admissions Code. The coalition government, however, did make provision for two key

derogations from the code. First, Free Schools are allowed to prioritise access to children of those who have founded the school. Second, Free Schools are permitted to operate their admissions and allocation processes outside of the Local Authority co-ordinated arrangements in their first year (DfE, 2014a). The rationale behind this was to ensure that the schools were not delayed in opening. Commentators have expressed concern at derogations from the code (Academies Commission, 2013; TES, 2011) although as Coldron (2015) states it is too early to draw any conclusions on the effects of any of the recent changes to admissions arrangements. It is to the empirical evidence on admissions and allocation procedures that I now turn.

4.4.2 How do schools allocate their places?

Since the 1988 ERA and the shift to open enrolment, parents have been able to state preferences for their chosen schools. Where schools have more places than applicants, they are obliged to provide places for all who have applied irrespective of where children live or other background characteristics. Where schools are oversubscribed, they are required to utilise a clear, transparent and fair system, allocating places based on pre-determined oversubscription criteria to prioritise places (DfE, 2014a). In the case of Local Authority-controlled schools, the oversubscription criteria used are designated by the LA and are usually common to all community schools in that area. Research by Fitz *et al.* (2002) and White *et al.* (2001) highlighted some of the variation in the application methods and allocation criteria used by different LAs, finding that in many cases LAs had not altered their policies for prioritising places following the 1988 ERA and the SSFA. This, the authors argue, was problematic in the way that geographical criteria were still predominant, reinforcing ‘selection by mortgage’ which the choice policies had the potential to alter. West *et al.* (2004) distinguished between admissions criteria that had the potential to ‘select in’ or ‘select out’ particular groups of children and criteria that indicated a commitment to social justice from the admissions authority. The former include the use of ability/aptitude criteria, prioritisation of children of staff and the use of faith criteria. The latter include the prioritisation of children with specific medical or social needs, children with SEN and Looked After children (West *et al.*, 2004). Whilst banding is included as a method of selection by ability, the aim is usually to provide a balanced, comprehensive intake of children within a particular school and so can also be viewed as a way of encouraging equal access to schools irrespective of prior ability

and other background characteristics (West, 2005). A recent OSA report, however, has drawn attention to the use of banding by some schools as a method to “increase their intake of higher ability pupils such that children living near the school, but placed in a band with many similar children may not be allocated a place (OSA, 2015, p.32). It is not clear what the impact of this kind of practice might be on student compositions across schools within a particular local area.

In addition to the work on LA-maintained schools and their admissions, some analyses explored admissions information for all state-funded secondary schools across England (Coldron *et al.*, 2008; West and Hind, 2003). These have indicated that the majority of schools (whether community schools or academies) have continued to use geographical criteria to prioritise substantial proportions of their intakes. Many also implement a range of other allocation methods. Since the findings of Coldron *et al.* (2008) some significant policy changes occurred, which potentially altered the ways that the admissions criteria were being used and the parties involved in determining the criteria. The third Admissions Code (DfES, 2007) stated that schools *must* admit a child with a statement of SEN that names the school. This was a shift from the previous ‘recommendation’ to do so. It also stated that admissions authorities must give the highest priority to Looked After Children (DfES, 2007). Interviews with applicants or their families were also prohibited. The introduction of these statutory requirements was reflected in an updated overview of schools’ admissions arrangements in 2008 (West *et al.*, 2009; West *et al.*, 2011).

Another important development in policy has been the rapid expansion of the academies programme and the dramatic increase in the number of schools responsible for their own admissions as a result of this. As earlier chapters have shown, schools having admissions autonomy is not a new phenomenon. Grant-maintained schools, voluntary-aided schools, CTCs and the early sponsored academies have all been able to determine their own arrangements. Between 2011 and 2014, however, the proportion of schools designated as academies (sponsored or converter) or Free Schools (as a total of all mainstream state-funded schools) has increased from 2.3% to 21.6% (DfE, 2014b). These schools must operate within the regulation of the Admissions Code (DfE, 2014a) but they also have the option of using some allocation methods that maintained schools are prohibited from using. These currently

include the use of random allocation for the majority of school places, the prioritisation of Pupil Premium-eligible children, and in the case of Free Schools, prioritisation for founders' children. The most recent analysis of admissions policies used in secondary schools across England, found that distance and sibling criteria remained the most common for non-selective state schools (Noden *et al.*, 2014). The authors highlighted a small increase in the number of schools that used selection by aptitude (6% of schools in 2012) and a slight increase in the use of banding. They also noted that 42 (of the 3,001) schools used random assignment as the primary method of allocation. These latter methods were particularly employed by Free Schools and sponsored academies although still account for a very small proportion of schools overall.

4.4.3 Admissions, allocation procedures and equity

Having established the types of allocation methods that schools are using when oversubscribed, I now turn to the potential impact of such arrangements on equity within the admissions process. This section acknowledges that the opportunity to choose and gain access to schools, particularly 'good' schools, is not equally available to all families, and that the admissions process plays a role in this. Poorer families are likely to be less able to be allocated a place via geographical criteria if they cannot afford to purchase a house near to a successful school (Gorard *et al.*, 2003; Noden *et al.*, 2014). Other allocation methods, such as the use of faith criteria and aptitude, have also been shown to favour those from more affluent backgrounds. A number of the policy changes discussed above have sought to improve the potential for disadvantaged children (including those with statements of SEN, Looked After Children and those from poorer backgrounds) to gain places.

The literature suggests that historically there has been particular concern with the admissions arrangements of autonomous schools (Coldron *et al.*, 2008; OSA, 2015; West and Hind, 2003). These schools have the power to choose their own allocation methods (whilst still adhering to the guidance of the Admissions Code). Some argue that this allows the schools to either overtly or covertly select pupils through the use admissions criteria and allocation methods which can disadvantage particular groups of children (Academies Commission, 2013; West *et al.*, 2009). This, they argue, can serve to maintain or exacerbate an already segregated system. In addition, these schools have been found to use more complex and less

objective admissions criteria than community schools (West *et al.*, 2011). This section considers these issues, focusing first on the admissions practices of autonomous schools and then exploring the extent to which recent changes to admissions policy and legislation have had any discernible impact on the pupil composition of schools in England.

4.4.4 Autonomous schools and admissions

Autonomous schools operate outside of LA control, and have the power to determine their own admissions arrangements. This usually involves schools also deciding the criteria that should be used to prioritise entry if the school is oversubscribed (West *et al.*, 2009). As schools are incentivised to perform well in terms of examination results, in theory, it is possible to see why they might want to ‘select out’ students with lower prior attainment or who may need additional academic or social support. This section focuses on the admissions arrangements of three autonomous school ‘types’, CTCs, faith schools and academies (including Free Schools). It does not consider academically selective schools such as grammar schools. The final subsection briefly considers the impact of recent admissions policy and legislation changes.

4.4.4.1 City Technology Colleges (CTCs)

The CTC programme was first established nearly 30 years ago (DES, 1986). Although it led to just 15 schools opening across the country, the initiative provides important historical context as a precursor of the more recent academies and Free Schools initiatives (Walford, 2014). CTCs were designed to provide a specialist approach to schooling, and a ‘new choice of school’ (DES, 1986) for parents. Advocates also promoted their potential to improve educational access and opportunity for those living in large urban areas (Walford and Miller, 1991). Whitty *et al.*, (1993) highlight the conflicting views at the time over whether CTCs would represent an elitist approach, supporting academic selection and social segregation or whether they could attract pupils from a wider range of social backgrounds. There appeared a tension between their initial aims to take pupils from a designated catchment area whilst also taking a representative range of pupils of different ability and *yet also* supporting the specialist nature of the schools (Whitty *et al.*, 1993). The schools were, for example, allowed to use admissions arrangements which prioritised pupils based on their “aptitude” and “readiness to take advantage” of this particular kind of education (DES, 1986, p.5).

CTCs used a non-verbal reasoning test in order to split children in to nine bands. Once this ability spread had been established, children were selected from each of the bands (West and Hind, 2003). The representativeness of abilities was based on the ability range in the local area. Whitty *et al.* (1993) explain that due to the often disadvantaged, urban settings of the schools, this had the potential to skew intakes towards the middle-lower end of the ability spectrum. In addition though, it has been suggested that the follow-up aptitude test (which was essentially an ability test), the use of children’s primary school reports, the use of parent interviews and the information required from parents about their occupation and ‘commitment’ to their child’s schooling could lead to social and cultural selectivity (Edwards and Whitty, 1997; West and Hind, 2003). Whilst very initial analyses suggested that the first two CTCs had intakes broadly representative of their local areas (Whitty *et al.* 1993), others later contended that as they became more established, they became more socially selective (House of Commons, 2010).

4.4.4.2 Faith schools

It is important to define what we mean by the term ‘faith schools’. They are not a school ‘type’ in themselves. Instead, they ‘attach’ their religious designation to schools with foundation, VA, VC or academy status. Table 4.1 is taken from the most recent summary of faith school statistics available and indicates the numbers and proportions of different types of schools with a religious character. In 2015, 19% of all state-funded secondary schools were faith schools. The figure for primary schools was higher at 37%. Both primary and secondary sectors have seen a slight increase since the year 2000 in the proportion of religious schools (Long and Bolton, 2015).

Table 4.1: Mainstream state-funded schools in England by status and religious character, September 2015

	Primary			Secondary		
	Faith	Non-faith	% faith	Faith	Non-faith	% faith
Community Foundation	0	7,891	0%	0	603	0%
Voluntary Aided	29	665	4%	3	273	1%
Voluntary Controlled	3,118	39	99%	264	22	92%
Academy sponsor led	2,136	36	98%	23	20	53%
Academy converters	172	729	19%	95	485	16%
Free schools, UTCs and studio schools	693	1,168	37%	226	1,167	16%
All	6,182	10,611	37%	635	2,746	19%

Source: Long and Bolton (2015)

Faith schools have a religious character or ethos, and the majority opt to use at least some faith-based criteria to allocate places if they are oversubscribed. The most recent Admissions Code (DfE, 2014a) states that the funding agreements of new academies or Free Schools allow faith schools to prioritise 50% of their places on religious grounds. A substantial proportion of established Roman Catholic, Jewish and Muslim schools, however, use religious selection to allocate more than 50% of their places, with many admitting 100% of pupils on these grounds (Pennell *et al.*, 2007; Thompson, 2015). Table 4.2 shows the most recent data on the number and proportion of schools and pupils (primary and secondary combined) by religious character.

Table 4.2: The number and proportion of schools and pupils by religious character (in England), September 2015

	Primary				Secondary				Total			
	Schools		Pupils		Schools		Pupils		Schools		Pupils	
	number	%	thousands	%	number	%	thousands	%	number	%	thousands	%
No religious character	10,558	63.0%	3,072	71.1%	2,682	80.8%	2,557	81.7%	13,240	65.9%	5,619	75.5%
Church of England	4,395	26.2%	805	18.6%	214	6.4%	189	6.0%	4,609	22.9%	993	13.4%
Roman Catholic	1,661	9.9%	408	9.4%	324	9.8%	298	9.5%	1,985	9.9%	706	9.5%
Methodist	26	0.2%	5	0.1%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	26	0.1%	5	0.1%
Other Christian ^(a)	71	0.4%	14	0.3%	74	2.2%	71	2.3%	145	0.7%	85	1.1%
Jewish	36	0.2%	10	0.2%	12	0.4%	8	0.3%	48	0.2%	18	0.2%
Muslim	9	0.1%	3	0.1%	9	0.3%	4	0.1%	18	0.1%	7	0.1%
Sikh	5	0.0%	1	0.0%	3	0.1%	2	0.1%	8	0.0%	3	0.0%
Hindu	3	0.0%	1	0.0%	1	0.0%	0	0.0%	4	0.0%	1	0.0%
Greek Orthodox	1	0.0%	0	0.0%	1	0.0%	0	0.0%	2	0.0%	1	0.0%
Quaker	1	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	1	0.0%	0	0.0%
Seventh Day Adventist	1	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	1	0.0%	0	0.0%
United Reformed Church	1	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	1	0.0%	0	0.0%
Total	16,768	100.0%	4,320	100.0%	3,320	100.0%	3,129	100.0%	20,088	100.0%	7,438	100.0%
<i>Faith schools</i>	<i>6,210</i>	<i>37.0%</i>	<i>1,248</i>	<i>28.9%</i>	<i>638</i>	<i>19.2%</i>	<i>571</i>	<i>18.3%</i>	<i>6,848</i>	<i>34.1%</i>	<i>1,819</i>	<i>24.5%</i>

Source: Long and Bolton (2015)

Concerns about faith schools and their admissions tend to focus on the way that their admissions arrangements are used to select pupils and the potential for this kind of selection to contribute to segregation. Where schools are selecting on the basis of religious criteria, it is also quite likely that they are often also selecting on the basis of ethnicity and/or socioeconomic status too (Allen and West, 2009; Pennell *et al.*, 2007).

Studies by West *et al.* (2003, 2004) concluded that faith criteria do provide an opportunity for the schools to ‘select in’ and ‘select out’ some groups of students based on their faith

background. Pennell *et al.* (2007) found that Supplementary Information Forms (SIFs) used by faith schools were sometimes complex and required parents to demonstrate their personal commitment to a particular religion and provide personal information (such as occupation or marital status). Sometimes parents were also required to write at length about their reasons for choosing the school, allowing those reading the SIF to make judgements about the parent's (and perhaps the child's) levels of literacy. (Pennell *et al.*, 2007). Further research on Roman Catholic and Church of England schools in London, found that in some 'elite' faith schools (high performing schools with socially advantaged intakes) socially selective admissions arrangements were being used. These included interviews with parents, banding (sometimes skewed towards higher ability pupils) and the use of 'aptitude' as a criterion (Allen and West, 2009). The first of these practices is no longer permitted and banding which favours higher ability students must not be introduced (although is allowed to continue if it has been used since 1997/8) (DfE, 2014a). Importantly, Allen and West (2009) stress that whilst these admissions arrangements and the faith criteria permit selection and allow for more unbalanced intakes to occur, there is also likely to be a degree of self-selection by some families who choose not to apply to these schools. Although this is the parents' decision some argue that there are measures that schools can also take to ensure that their admissions processes are viewed as inclusive and equitable, and to encourage parents from different backgrounds to apply. Pennell *et al.* (2007) and Coldron *et al.* (2008) suggest that having clear admissions criteria for children of 'other faiths' or 'no faith' should form part of this.

In the most recent analysis of all state-funded secondary school admissions arrangements in England, Noden *et al.* (2014) focus particularly on the impact of the expansion of the academies programme. An important finding is that a minority of designated religious schools are opting not to use faith oversubscription criteria. This is interesting and perhaps does reflect a commitment from these schools that despite having a religious ethos, they wish to represent a wider community within the school. Despite this, the vast majority of religious schools still use measures of faith adherence for admission. A further finding was that in areas where banding was being used by other local schools, VA (faith) schools were less likely to opt for this as a method of allocation. Noden *et al.* (2014) conclude that this indicates a greater interest in the religious background of pupils rather than achieving a balanced intake. An in-depth examination of the admissions arrangements of faith schools in 19 Local

Authorities, reported that 69 of the 70 schools were in some way non-compliant with the Admissions Code (Thompson, 2015). Widespread problems with clarity, fairness and objectivity were found and half of the issues highlighted were related to individual schools' religious criteria. The main concerns raised were that:

- Nearly one in five schools requiring financial or practical support in relation to organisations associated with the school or places of worship.
- A quarter of schools were using religious criteria that were not permitted by their religious authority's own guidance.
- The majority were making insufficient prioritisation of Looked After Children or previously Looked After children.
- A quarter of schools lacked clarity in how children with statements of SEN would be admitted.
- Nearly 90% of schools were asking for information from parents that they did not need. In some schools this included occupational information, ability to speak English and disclosure of medical issues.

(Thompson, 2015)

This report, whilst just focusing on approximately one eighth of the secondary faith schools in England, is useful in that it acknowledges the developing landscape of religious schools. Where in the past studies have tended to examine faith school admissions in a general sense or have focused predominantly on those with a Christian (Church of England or Roman Catholic) designation, this report demonstrates that issues previously associated with these schools also seem to be arising with some other faith schools too.

As a way of addressing some of the issues with unfair faith admissions, particularly the need for families to demonstrate commitment to a faith, Clarke and Woodhead (2015) propose a system of random assignment. They suggest that individual religious schools should make their faith ethos explicitly clear so that parents can 'opt-in' to it and maintain their position as a 'choice' school. This would remove the need for prior faith commitment to be shown and provide a clearer and more transparent approach to faith school admissions. It would be likely to allow wider access to the schools but as with all admissions arrangements, the random assignment could only be used for children who had chosen to apply to the schools. The

authors also acknowledge that a lack of political will is likely to result in no significant reform to faith admissions occurring, particularly when the emphasis appears to be on encouraging autonomy rather than removing it from schools. (Clarke and Woodhead, 2015).

4.4.4.3 Academies and Free Schools

The first sponsored academies opened in England in 2002. There is limited research detailing the types of admissions arrangements that they used. However, evaluation reports in the early years of the initiative found that academies were tending to use the admissions flexibility that they had and adopt different arrangements to those of their LA (PwC, 2008). An analysis by West *et al.* (2011) of school admissions in 2008 showed that sponsored academies (there were just 133 at the time of the study) were less likely to have ‘children in care’ as their first oversubscription criterion. They were also more likely to use random assignment and aptitude as methods of allocation (West *et al.*, 2011).

A rapid expansion of the academies initiative from 2010 onwards saw the introduction of the converter academy and the number of academies in England rose to 4,351 (21.6% of all mainstream schools) by 2014 (DfE, 2014b). This expansion led to increased concerns specifically regarding the regulation and monitoring of academy admissions, their complexity and fairness (see for example, Comprehensive Future, 2010; Rudd *et al.*, 2010; Vasagar, 2012; Walton and Burns, 2013). An Academies Commission (2013) report gave some support to a number of these concerns, highlighting examples of schools using arrangements that may be covertly selective and using SIFs to gain unnecessary information (Academies Commission, 2013). While the authors report that many of these issues are not exclusively an ‘academies’ problem, they do acknowledge the additional freedoms that academies have and the derogations from the Admissions Code that they are allowed to employ do mean that more careful monitoring is required to ensure compliance and fairness.

Noden *et al.* (2014) found that the 2012-2013 admissions arrangements for sponsored and converter academies were broadly similar to each other. The vast majority (over 90%) used distance and sibling criteria and half included priority for children with medical or social need. One in ten used some faith criteria. Some differences occurred though with more converter academies using catchment areas and sponsored academies being more likely to use

area-wide random allocation and/or banding. This random assignment and banding was only found in a very small minority of schools though (Noden *et al.*, 2014). A recent report focusing on within-year admissions also argued that autonomous schools (such as academies) were more easily able to reject pupils that they did not wish to accept to the school (Rodda *et al.*, 2014). The authors recommend that autonomous schools should be subject to increased accountability in relation to their admissions, specifically suggesting that Ofsted should be directed to check the objectivity and fairness of the schools' procedures.

The research on the admissions arrangements of Free Schools is also fairly limited, primarily because of their recent introduction. A 2014 DfE report (Cirin, 2014) asked head teachers to report on their chosen admissions criteria. Nearly half of the 74 schools reported using methods that were different to other local schools (although it is not clear whether this means LA-maintained schools or other local academies). A further analysis of all mainstream secondary Free Schools opened in 2011 and 2012 highlighted the wide range of oversubscription criteria that some schools were using but also showed that the majority of Free Schools were using geographical and sibling criteria (Morris, 2014). An updated version of this data is presented in Chapter 6 of this thesis.

4.4.5 The impact of recent changes to policy and legislation

There are two potentially linked areas which are worthy of consideration here. The first is the extent to which policy and legislation changes ensure that admissions authorities are operating transparently and objectively, and ensuring fair access to pupils from different backgrounds. The second is the extent to which such changes have any impact on school intakes. Coldron (2015) has warned against "simplistic conclusions" (Coldron, 2015, p.3) that imply that the former will necessarily lead to improvements in the latter. He posits that the choice process (both from the perspective of parents and schools) is complex and multifaceted, and that for changes to occur in school compositions wider social inequalities must first be tackled. In the absence of this kind of action, however, a number of authors argue that improving equity within the admissions system is a positive step in itself, and appear optimistic that it may lead to at least some beneficial outcomes in terms of reducing stratification (Allen *et al.*, 2010; Gorard and See, 2013; Noden *et al.*, 2014).

Allen *et al.* (2012) looked at whether the changes introduced in the 2003 and 2007 Admissions Codes had had any discernible impact on school intakes. The authors found evidence which suggested that these policy changes were likely to be in part responsible for some changes to school compositions. These results held when they controlled for changes in neighbourhood composition. School type was not found to be strongly associated with the changes although there were some quite dramatic shifts in the intakes of a number of autonomous foundation and voluntary-aided schools. Allen *et al.* (2012) draw a link between these changes and the decline in between school segregation. The authors concluded that whilst only one factor in influencing school intakes, the role of the admissions process was an important one and that further tightening of the Admissions Code could have additional positive effects. Unfortunately there have not yet been any subsequent reports examining the impacts of the revised 2009, 2010, 2012 and 2014 Admissions Codes. This analysis would be welcome, particularly in light of wider policy changes such as the expansion of the academies programme.

4.5 Conclusion

This chapter has reviewed the literature in relation to school compositions, parental choice and the role of the admissions system. Along with the previous theory and policy sections, it provides a clear framework for the current research. It has foregrounded some of the key areas which warrant research following the emergence of a new type of autonomous school in England. Despite policymakers' intentions that market reforms will boost standards and provide additional choice for parents, the literature indicates that, in reality, there are often negative unintended consequences for equity and social justice. These have been shown to disadvantage certain groups more than others, reinforcing an already stratified and unequal system. Whilst not always given high priority when introducing new policy, for those evaluating it, fairness in relation to access and opportunity irrespective of social background, is a justifiable and sensible policy focus (Bartlett and Le Grand, 1993).

The literature review highlights the historical policy developments that have occurred both in England and internationally and also acknowledges the significant amount of research that has emerged in relation to quasi-market reforms. It indicates both demand and supply side features that have the potential to contribute towards inequity. Importantly, the review also

demonstrates how, at present, there is still a very limited body of research focusing specifically on these issues in relation to the new Free Schools context. Although the Free Schools initiative is still in its formative years and the number of schools is still relatively small, symbolically the policy is radical. It represents the most significant attempt in this country to liberate the supply side of schooling provision through the introduction of new schools. Establishing the impact of this sort of new policy reform is important and necessary, particularly if it allows us to make recommendations which may be of benefit as the initiative expands.

The empirical research discussed in this chapter has not only contributed substantively to the framing and organisation of this study, but has also influenced what data will be collected and how it will be interpreted. The subsequent design and methods section discusses these decisions in more detail.

CHAPTER 5

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

5.1 Introduction

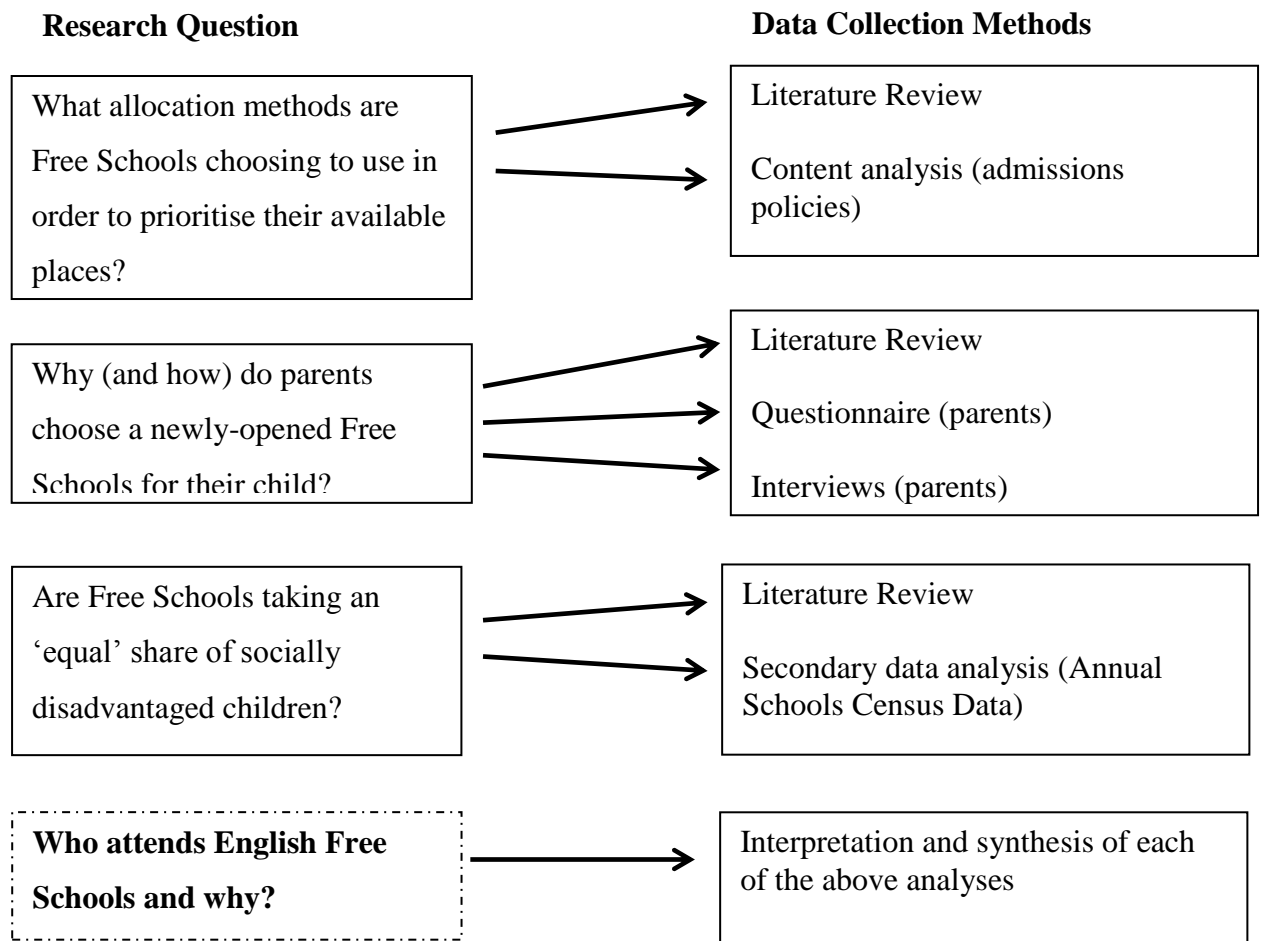
This chapter provides details of the research design and methods used in this study. First, it gives an overview of the research strategy and design decisions that were taken when planning the project. Next, the decision to adopt a multi-methods approach for the overall study is discussed followed by more in-depth consideration of each phase of the research and the corresponding methods used. The study can be divided into three separate methodological parts, each of which relates to one of the research questions. These are: a) the use of admissions policies as documentary data b) questionnaires and interviews focusing on parental school choice, and c) the use of Annual Schools Census data to explore student intakes in Free Schools. Whilst each of these phases is dealt with separately in this section they were developed with the aim of complementing each other and building a fuller overall picture of the English Free Schools policy at present.

5.2 Research Questions and Strategy

Before continuing, it is useful to outline the links between the research questions and the data collection methods used to address each question. The research questions indicate an interest in both the behaviour of the schools (through their admissions policies), parents (through their choices and choice strategies) and with outcomes (in relation to student composition and potential stratification). This overview is shown below in Figure 5.1.

The previous chapters explored the introduction of the Free Schools policy and highlighted some potential problems arising from increased school diversity. Despite one of the key objectives of the policy being to increase the quality of provision for deprived communities, early analyses suggested that some disadvantaged groups were underrepresented in Free Schools (Gooch, 2011; Higham, 2014). There has, however, been limited tracking of this since the first years of the policy. The literature highlights the need for some longitudinal investigation, focusing on the student composition of Free Schools. Gaining this overview is key in helping researchers, policymakers and parents to understand the equity and social justice implications of opening these new types of institutions.

Figure 5.1: Overview of research questions and data collection methods



Unlike the early work on Free School intakes, this study uses a national dataset to address this question. The Annual Schools Census dataset contains detailed information on school intakes throughout the country and this overcomes problems of sample bias which could undermine a smaller study. It also allows for useful comparisons with other schools on a local and regional basis.

In establishing the student composition and levels of segregation in Free Schools, this study focuses on the outcomes of increased school diversity and 'choice'. This is interesting and important in itself but gives us no insight into the processes that are occurring prior to children being allocated places at a school. Chapter 4 has outlined much of the research that has emerged in this field outlining both issues of parent/child choice and the admissions/allocation policies and procedures used by schools. The literature indicated the

qualities that parents reportedly prioritise in choosing a school and differences that might occur in these choices due to social or economic circumstances. Studies focusing on admissions and allocation have also demonstrated the potential that these processes have to influence parental choice and affect school composition. In England and internationally, particular concern has been raised about unbalanced intakes and schools that operate their admissions system autonomously. For this reason, a comprehensive review of the admissions policies that Free Schools were using was deemed necessary, with a focus on the potential effects of the chosen oversubscription criteria, and the extent to which Free Schools appear to be considering issues of equity and social justice. The most effective and practical way to gain this data was via the online publication of the admissions policy that each school is required to make available on their website (DfE, 2014a). In addition to this analysis, the views of parents were sought in an attempt to learn more about their decisions regarding school choice, the strategies they employed to choose schools and their experiences of the process. This data was collected using both a parent questionnaire and a small number of semi-structured interviews. The development and use of these instruments is discussed further in section 5.4 below.

5.2.1 A multi-methods approach

As has been discussed above, it is the research objectives that led the decisions about what data was needed and the most appropriate ways to collect it. Whilst some might express concern at the apparent incompatibility of incorporating methods from traditionally opposing epistemological viewpoints in one project, such anxiety would be unjustified. This research is not defined by a particular philosophical stance on what is or is not considered to be reality. Nor, therefore, have methodological decisions been based on the personal preferences or abilities of the researcher. Instead, the research questions have driven the identification of what information is needed and how best to gather it. In a project that has a number of research questions it is unsurprising that more than one research strategy will be required to sufficiently address them. By accepting this, much of the debate surrounding paradigms, ‘worldviews’ and the apparent dichotomies between quantitative and qualitative methods can be put to one side with a focus remaining solely on producing more robust, quality research. These issues are picked up and discussed further as they arise in the sections below on research design and combining methods.

The current research was structured in three stages, each linked to one of the research objectives outlined above. Data collection for each phase occurred concurrently, allowing for each type of data to be collected and analysed separately and then overall conclusions to be drawn following examination of the findings as a whole. Whilst the individual methods stand independently and provide useful and interesting data on their own, combined with each other, a more holistic view of those attending Free Schools and the reasons behind this is achieved. Furthermore, in a field where there has been relatively little research conducted due to the recent introduction of the policy, a combined approach such as the one here is perhaps more likely to generate useable theory (Gorard and Taylor, 2004) for ongoing examination of the programme.

Using ‘mixed’ or ‘multiple’ methods in research has become a more recognised and accepted approach in recent years (Burke Johnson *et al.*, 2007). That is not to say, however, that it is a completely new way of conducting research as there are examples of combining methods in social sciences research dating back decades (see for example Denzin, 1970). Over the years differing, and often conflicting definitions of what ‘mixed methods’ research is have emerged. Some of these appear to define the approach as a ‘paradigm’ (Denscombe, 2007) or a type of ‘design’ (Creswell, 2003). As discussed above, this is not the view taken here as the mixing or combining of methods is seen simply as that: a methodological decision. A pragmatic approach would suggest that it is not (or, at least, should not be) determined by the philosophical viewpoints of the researchers nor the overarching structure of the data collection and analysis. That is the design. Instead, the reasons for using a mixed or combined methods approach should be a response to the data required in order to properly address the research objectives.

Based on a review of relevant theoretical literature and 57 mixed-methods evaluations Greene *et al.* (1989) established a framework of the five purposes of using mixed methods: triangulation (or convergence of results); complementarity (to elaborate or enhance the results from one dataset with another); developmentally (one method is used to develop the other); initiation (discovering paradox, new perspectives and contradiction); and expansion (extending the breadth and range of the project). In this project, a number of these purposes come to the fore. The combination of methods is used in a complementary way so that the

student composition outcomes which emerge from the statistical data can be discussed in light of what is known about the schools' and parents' behaviour as described in the other sections. In relation to the data collection of parental choice, the interviews are used to develop the ideas and issues that arise from the questionnaire. This phase also offers some attempt to 'initiate' or elicit new perspectives of parental choice within the new schooling context of Free Schools. The project did not attempt to use the combined methods to corroborate each set of findings in a traditional triangulation approach (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2007) but instead sought to explain or extend our understanding of some findings through others collected using different methods. This moves beyond a simplistic view of multi-methods research where it is often incorrectly assumed that agreement or convergence can easily be found in the data (Blaikie, 2000) and towards an approach which addresses and draws from the different stages and requirements of the overall project.

5.3 Research Design

Before any further discussion of data collection methods can be undertaken, it is necessary to have fully considered the elements of research design relevant to this study. Design, as discussed here, is not about methods of collecting data nor methods used to analyse it. As such it cannot be 'quantitative', 'qualitative' or 'mixed methods' as is sometimes suggested in social sciences textbooks (e.g. Creswell, 2003). Instead, I take the approach that research design deals with the structure of the research and the measures that are taken to ensure or enhance its robustness and the quality of the conclusions drawn from it. More specifically research design addresses the following elements of a project: the cases (or participants) involved in the study, the ways which these cases are assigned to groups, the time sequence of data collection, and the number and nature of any interventions used (De Vaus, 2001; Gorard, 2014b).

In thinking about research design, just as when thinking about methods, the research questions were at the centre of the decisions made. Whilst many of these choices about how the research would be conducted were made prior to data collection, there was an acceptance that certain elements may have to be adapted, improved or perhaps even removed due to practical issues linked to time, financial cost or access to data. Despite this, the research was planned with optimism, in the hope that the required data could be accessed and that sufficient

data collection and analysis could be completed within the three year funded period and within the researcher's limited budget. Details of the research in relation to the design elements discussed above are outlined in the remainder of this section.

5.3.1 Intervention and sequence of data collection

This research has emerged as a result of a new government policy which has initiated the opening of a new 'type' of school in England. Designation to Free School status was not something that the researcher could decide or implement for a school. The aim, however, was not to try and establish whether the introduction of the Free Schools had had an impact on schools in the local area but instead to provide an initial description of student compositions in the early years of the initiative. The data from the Annual Schools Census allowed for this information to be collated for every school and to be added to each year.

This also meant that it would be possible to track patterns or changes in the student intakes over time. This is, however, made more difficult by the relatively recent introduction of the policy meaning that even the oldest Free Schools have only been open for four years. Despite this it is still considered important to learn more of these initial school intakes as they provide a picture of the characteristics of families who opted for a Free School before it gained a more established reputation in the local community.

A further stage of the research involved the participation of parents at both Free Schools and non-Free Schools. This was clearly something which could only be done *after* the Free Schools were open and parents had had their children allocated places there. Due to practical reasons linked to time and cost it was decided to just have one data collection point for the parent surveys. This occurred during the Spring and Summer terms of the 2013-2014 academic year. The interviews with parents who had responded to the survey also took place between September and December 2014. The purpose of both the questionnaires and interviews was to gain some understanding of the parents' attitudes and experiences in relation to the application and allocation procedures at Free Schools. Although it would have been interesting to consider parents' views both before the application process and after, the aims of the research did not mean that these multiple data collection periods were necessary.

5.3.2 Identification of cases and allocation to groups

5.3.2.1 Free Schools and their oversubscription criteria

The other objectives of the research were also relatively straightforward in terms of deciding upon cases and allocating to groups. In exploring both the admissions policies of Free Schools, I opted to focus particularly on the schools catering for secondary-age children. Comparison groups were needed so that the Free School data were not analysed in isolation. Where possible, the Local Authority criteria were used as a comparison. In a small number of cases there were no maintained secondary schools in a particular LA and so comparison in this way was not possible.

5.3.2.2 Parents' reasons for choosing a Free School

A second stage of the research aimed to understand parents' reasons for choosing a Free School and their experiences of the admissions processes being used. It was decided that the best way to access groups of parents was via the schools. This would give access to whole cohorts of children and their parents, with the intention of giving as many as possible the opportunity to share their experiences. With this decision to contact parents through schools, however, came a number of difficulties, the foremost being gaining the school's consent to be involved.

Due to the relatively small number of secondary Free Schools that existed at the time of the research, it was not necessary to try and identify a sample but instead all of the secondary Free Schools (including all-through schools with a secondary age cohort) that opened between 2011-2013 were asked if they would be willing to participate in the research (n=67). As predicted, some of the schools agreed and some did not or opted not to respond to the request. The results, therefore, are based only on the schools who agreed to participate in the research. The schools being able to operate as 'gatekeepers' in this way is a clear limitation of this part of the study. There are numerous reasons why a school may or may not choose to be involved in a project like this. It could be the case that the schools who agreed to participate did so because they were clear that they were adhering to legislation and guidelines surrounding admissions, and that they had parental support for how they are operating. Some might have wanted to 'showcase' their successes by 'allowing' their parents to respond. In contrast, schools that chose not to take part may have done so for the opposite reasons; they may not

have wanted any potential issues with their admissions process to be further highlighted by this research. Issues of time, resources and staff were also given as reasons for non-participation. The decision by schools not to participate did mean, however, that a significant number of parents were not made aware of the project and were prevented from participating.

The survey was to be completed by parents of Year 7 children (aged 11/12). This decision was made for a number of reasons. First, as the aim of the questions was to explore parents' experiences of the admissions process, it was deemed necessary to have participants who had had the most recent involvement in this. Including parents who had chosen their child's school more than a year before completing the survey may have resulted in less accurate responses due to participants not remembering the processes that they went through, and their attitudes towards it at the time. Second, due to the size of some of the schools, the costs of producing questionnaires for every child, posting them to schools and paying for the postage of returned questionnaires would have been even more substantial.

As with the previous phase, it was important to introduce a comparator group in order to gain some kind of insight into whether parents approached the choice of a new Free School in a different way to established schools. Initially, the plan had been to try and recruit the geographically closest competitor school to the Free School. However, it quickly became apparent that many of these schools were not able or willing to participate and so the search area had to be widened. As a solution, non-Free Schools located in a LA with a Free School were approached; pleasingly some agreed to be involved and these formed my 'non-Free School' comparator group. Parents of Year 7 children at these schools were asked to complete the same questionnaire as the Free School parents. The non-Free School parents were not involved in the interview phase of the research, primarily due to the limited scope and timeframe of the project. In addition, it was felt that a focus on the experiences of the Free School parents was more pertinent due to the new context in which they were operating and the extensive existing literature based on parents' experiences of school choice more generally.

5.3.2.3 Free Schools and their intakes

The final research question in this project seeks to learn about the student composition of every mainstream Free School in England, particularly in relation to the proportion of disadvantaged children that are attending each school in comparison to other schools in the local area. It was clear, therefore, that population data for the intakes of every Free School would be needed in order to address this question. In addition to this, however, data for other schools both in the immediate vicinity to the Free School and in the Local Authority as a whole was required in order to create the comparators. Dealing with schools rather than individuals made this process easier as it was not necessary to be allocating students to groups; this was already determined by whether or not they attended a Free School. The schools were therefore the ‘cases’ for this particular design and were allocated to either a Free School or non-Free School ‘group’ depending on their status. Within this it became necessary to decide on numbers of comparison schools and criteria for being a comparison school.

One of the aims of this study was to explore both the national and local picture in relation to Free Schools and their intakes. Previous studies of segregation have highlighted the complexities of creating appropriate geographical units for analysis (Gorard *et al.*, 2003; Taylor, 2001). For ease, comparison of the Free School compositions with the Local Authority figure (in relation to FSM eligibility) was an important first step, placing the Free School within an area-wide context. Data relating to the LA are collated by the government and is publicly available via the annual ‘*Schools, Pupils and their Characteristics*’ reports (see for example DfE, 2015c). A Local Authority, however, is often quite a large area with significant differences in the characteristics of the population in different areas. What was needed was a smaller unit of measurement as a comparison with the Free School and so it was decided to create a group of the six geographically closest schools. The characteristics of the children attending these schools would give a better idea of what we might expect the intakes of the Free School to look like and would also be able to demonstrate whether Free Schools appeared to be taking an equal share of certain groups of children.

The decision to have six non-free school comparisons in each group stems from research by Burgess *et al.* (2006) which showed that, on average, students in England have six schools within a 10 minute drive of their home. Clearly due to population density and accessibility

this varies between rural and urban areas. Nevertheless, this number of schools seemed appropriate in forming a useful unit of analysis which would provide an indicator of intakes in schools surrounding the Free School. The six closest schools to the Free School were identified using the DfE's *Compare Schools* online tool which has been designed to help parents identify and compare the performance of schools in their area. In addition to using straight-line distance from the Free School to identify the six closest schools, it was also decided to have a 15 mile 'cut-off' point for comparison schools as it was felt that schools outside of this radius were less likely to be considered realistic alternatives to the Free School. The schools that were chosen to be comparators with the Free Schools were matched only in the sense that they had to be feasible alternatives in terms of age and sex. For a girls' Free School, for example, only coeducational or girls' schools would be considered as comparison schools. Similarly for primary-age Free Schools, only primary alternatives were used in the analysis. A number of 'all-through' Free Schools now also exist, catering for children aged 4-16 or 4-18. To address this, a comparison using both the six nearest primary and secondary schools was included in the project.

The nature of this part of the study meant that as comparisons were going to be made with the Free School, the group of local schools and the LA could only be identified and studied after the Free School had opened. Clearly there could be no allocation to comparator groups or exploration of the Free School intakes until the location of the Free School had been identified and the postcode used in the *Compare Schools* tool. Even this provided some difficulties, with some Free Schools opening on temporary sites and moving after a period of time. This is taken into account in the analysis and comparator groups were altered accordingly when this information became clear.

5.4 Methods

5.4.1 Combined methods research in this project

As discussed above, the decision to use a combined methods approach for this piece of research was based on the need to respond to questions which required both objective measurements (of numbers of children, proportions of children with different characteristics, levels of segregation, distances that children were travelling to school) and exploration of the processes, attitudes and experiences linked to admissions and segregation in a particular type

of school. In doing this, the project takes an adapted ‘new political arithmetic’ approach (Gorard and Taylor, 2004; Heath, 2000). This involves using a staged design, starting with a large-scale dataset to describe a particular situation or pattern; this is then followed up with a second phase of inquiry using additional methods to more closely examine a subset of cases from the initial analysis. In this case, the second stage involved the documentary analysis of the admissions policies used by Free Schools (Morris, 2014) and the parent questionnaire. This project also included a third phase, inviting those who completed the questionnaire to participate in a semi-structured interview to gain a richer, more in-depth data on topics that had been raised in the earlier stage. It is also important to note that due to the availability of the ASC data (on school intakes), this analysis did not all take place prior to the other phases of data collection. Instead, the findings relating to school intakes were updated annually as the government data were released.

The use of a combined approach to the research enables exploration on both a macro and micro scale. The large-scale dataset makes it possible to analyse the intakes of every Free School in England, and indeed every other type of state-funded school in the country. This allows for comparisons on a school or LA level, or on any other spatial unit that might be useful (e.g. closest alternative schools). It also means that a complete overview of Free School compositions can be gained, and that their intakes can be tracked year on year. In addition to this, the schools and parents who participated in the questionnaire and interview phases provided more in-depth insights in to the experiences and attitudes of individual which, to some degree, help to explain the findings from the first phase.

As with all methodological decisions, there are some limitations to using a combined approach. It could be argued, for example, that the varied approaches do not allow for full and in-depth exploration of each area but instead provide more of an ‘overview’ approach. This may well be the case. However, it was felt that this was justified in order to gain a broader understanding of a number of the key issues linked to the Free Schools policy. A wholly qualitative approach focusing just on the attitudes and experiences of parents during the school choice process would not have been able to contribute to an awareness of the national picture in relation to all Free Schools and their intakes. In addition, the longitudinal approach of tracking the schools’ compositions year-on-year would also not have been possible.

Instead, it was felt that the different components of the project could each be used to answer the different research questions, but in the end would fit together to form a more complete understanding of the Free Schools policy as a whole.

5.4.2 Secondary Data

Partly due to the availability of the required data, the first phase of this research project was to establish a simple statistical representation of the student composition of Free Schools in England. Further to this, and in an attempt to make the research more robust, the intakes of schools close to the Free School were observed in order to make comparisons on a yearly basis. Whilst giving us a clear overview of the school compositions, basing findings purely on percentages of students with different characteristics had problems too. First, many of the Free Schools opened with very small numbers of students. To calculate percentages using these, and to then compare them with schools that had fully established intakes provided, in some cases, skewed and unreliable results. Second, it was understood that the data being used were for the Free Schools' initial years. It is quite possible that the compositions of the schools when they first opened would alter as the school became more established. Despite these concerns, it was still thought that calculating such figures could give some useful insight into the proportions of disadvantaged pupils at the schools, their local competitor schools and in their LAs. It was also necessary, however, to focus on the distribution of children *across* a certain set of schools and to gain a clearer picture of whether individual schools were taking their 'fair share' of disadvantaged pupils. For this, the segregation ratios were used.

The data, chosen measures and analytical methods that are used in this part of the project are discussed in the sections below. Attention has been given to ensuring that the analysis of the data is straightforward and replicable, and that it can be continued in future years in order to track trends that may begin to emerge from the Free Schools programme.

5.4.2.1 Data and indicators

The analyses here are based on data from the Annual Schools Census (ASC) which is administered annually by the Department for Education. All state-funded schools in England are required to submit details about their student body on a range of indicators including sex, age, ethnicity, FSM take-up and eligibility, first language and Special Educational Needs

(SEN) status. It also includes the number of full and part-time students attending each school, and details of students' attainment. The ASC is an invaluable resource for researchers and policymakers aiming to gain an overview of schools across the country. Whilst it is acknowledged that there will inevitably be some missing or inaccurate data, the benefits of having such a detailed and accessible dataset far outweigh such limitations.

A major advantage of the ASC data is that it can be used longitudinally. For this project that meant that it was possible to track the compositions of the Free Schools year on year. In addition, it meant that it is possible to identify any changes in student intakes in local non-Free Schools following their introduction. Data on the schools before the Free School opened was examined and compared with the same data following the introduction of the new school in order to establish whether there had been any change in numbers on roll or composition.

While the ASC records numbers of students with certain characteristics in each school, it is important to highlight the fact that the definition of these indicators sometimes alters slightly over time (Gorard *et al.*, 2003). Furthermore, sometimes new indicators are included to take into account for new government policies or to enable additional analysis. Examples of this include the addition of data relating to Pupil Premium eligibility and more detailed SEN measures.

5.4.2.2 Indicators

One of the objectives of the first phase of this study was to establish the extent to which Free Schools are allocating places to socioeconomically disadvantaged students. The Department for Education currently define 'disadvantage' as those eligible for Free School meals and Looked After children (DfE, 2014c). The measurement of FSM using the ASC will be considered below. Due to its sensitivity, it was not possible to attain data on Looked After children and so this will not form part of the current study.

5.4.2.3 Free School Meals

Socioeconomic disadvantage has been the indicator most focused on when analysing the intakes of academies and Free Schools to date (Gooch, 2011; Gorard, 2005). This tends to be measured using the binary FSM variable which highlights whether a child's family is in

receipt of certain state benefits (such as Jobseekers Allowance, Income Support or Child Tax Credits), and is therefore deemed to be living in poverty. The 2014-2015 ASC showed that 15.2% of pupils in state-funded schools in England were eligible for FSM, down from 16.3% the previous year (DfE, 2015c). Data are collected on both the numbers of students eligible for FSM and the numbers who take-up the FSM. It is important to be aware of this distinction, and to be aware that each year, some children do not take the FSM that they are eligible for. This might be for dietary, cultural or other reasons. In recent years the difference between the two measures has continued to decrease, however, for the purposes of this study eligibility is used as the sole indicator of poverty.

There are still some further methodological issues with the FSM measure that deserve consideration in order to more fully understand the limitations of the analyses included in this study. First, FSM eligibility can be subject to change when new government guidelines alter the rules for who can or cannot apply. Since 2003/4, for example, additional benefits have been added to those which designate a pupils' eligibility for FSM (Hobbs and Vignoles, 2008). Secondly, claiming FSM, and therefore, the reporting of FSM eligibility by schools relies on parents applying for them. It is thought that the introduction of the Pupil Premium (increased per-pupil school funding for children who are Looked After or eligible for FSM) has encouraged some schools to ensure that they know who is able to claim FSM (Carpenter *et al.*, 2013). Despite this, there are still considerable numbers of pupils with missing FSM data. Researchers have highlighted the problems with this, particularly with the assumptions that are made about the students without FSM data, creating an element of bias when using the measure. Gorard (2012), for example, argues that the FSM-missing pupils should be considered as a separate group of potentially 'super-deprived' students, rather than being assumed to be like non-FSM children as is often the case (Gorard, 2012).

It should be noted that the focus of the FSM measure is on poverty not class. Whilst it is acknowledged above that measuring socioeconomic disadvantage is relatively straightforward using the dichotomous FSM indicator, an attempt to measure social class via the ASC would be impossible. No data on this area is requested from schools in this country. Even if it were, it would be difficult to know what indicators the DfE would use to measure it due to the ongoing complexities associated with defining social class (see for example, Savage *et al.*,

2015). Some other smaller-scale studies of school choice have attempted to use parental occupation/level of education as an indicator for categorising families or students based on class (Benson *et al.*, 2015; Gewirtz *et al.*, 1995). However, as these data were not available nationally (as is the case in Sweden, for example), and as these indicators still have substantial problems when equated with a definition of social class, no such measure was included within this phase of the research.

5.4.2.4 Segregation ratios

In addition to analysing the proportions of FSM children in each Free School, in nearby schools and within the LA, the idea of segregation relative to student compositions is considered. Croxford and Paterson (2006) define ‘evenness’ between schools as ‘whether a group is over-represented in some schools, and under-represented in others’ (Croxford and Paterson, 2006; p. 384). Segregation ratios are able to indicate these levels of evenness, providing useful comparisons between Free Schools and their nearby competitors.

The SR specifies the level of social stratification in an individual school; where the SR is equal to one for all of the schools in a defined area, there would be no segregation that year. But if a school has an SR of 0.5 it is taking half of its ‘fair share’ of disadvantaged children. As a result of this other schools will be taking proportionally more FSM eligible students. This could be calculated in relation to all schools nationally or for the relevant LA but for the purpose of this analysis the SRs for the nearest six schools to the Free School are presented in order to make comparisons on a more local basis (Gorard *et al.* 2003). The SR is calculated as follows:

$$SR = (A_i/A) / (C_i/C)$$

where: A_i , the number of disadvantaged children in school i ; C_i , the number of children in school i ; A , the total number of disadvantaged children in a subarea; C , the total number of children in a subarea. For further detail on calculating segregation, see Gorard *et al.* (2003). Exley (2009) has reiterated the benefits of using the SR, arguing that rather than giving an overall figure of unevenness within a particular area, it is able to indicate exactly from which schools children would have to move in order to establish more balance across the defined locality. This is particularly useful when exploring whether there are differences between individual schools or school types.

5.4.3 Documentary data

5.4.3.1 Gathering the data

The first research question focused on the ways which Free Schools were prioritising and allocating places for children. As a result, it was necessary to analyse the admissions policies, and particularly the oversubscription criteria being used. All secondary Free Schools that opened between 2011-2014 were included within this study. According to the Admissions Code (DfE, 2014a) schools “must publish a copy of the determined arrangements on their website” (DfE, 2014a, p. 19). This meant that, where Free Schools had complied with this requirement, gathering the necessary data was straightforward. All schools must have separate oversubscription criteria for each relevant age group (DfE, 2014a) and therefore in the analysis of ‘all-through schools’ only the criteria applicable to secondary age children would be used.

The most up-to-date admissions policies available were used; the majority of these were for the 2015-2016 academic year although a small number stated that they were for the 2013 or 2014 academic years or had no year mentioned on them. Unless specified, only approved, final copies of admissions arrangements were used for analysis as opposed to copies that were in draft or consultation stages. As a comparator, the oversubscription criteria for Local Authority maintained schools in the area where each Free School was situated was also collated. In a small number of authorities included in the study, there are no longer any secondary LA-maintained schools and so this comparison was not possible.

5.4.3.2 Analysing the data

The analysis of the oversubscription criteria followed similar methods to those used in a study by White *et al.* (2001) on the school allocation procedures employed by Local Authorities. As such the oversubscription criteria for each school were collated, grouped into categories and then tabulated in order to establish the ranking of each criterion. This allowed for comparisons of which criteria had and had not been used by each school, as well as the significance attributed to the criteria based on where it featured within the allocation procedure.

Frequency and percentage tables were produced, showing which criteria were used by different schools and the priority that the schools gave to each criterion. These were analysed

alongside the LA admissions criteria in order to establish the extent to which the Free Schools were utilising their freedoms in relation to allocation procedures.

5.4.4 Parent survey

5.4.4.1 Developing the questionnaire instrument

The first method used in this phase of the study was a parent questionnaire focused on factors that influenced school choice and respondents' attitudes and experiences of the choice process. Of itself, this type of questionnaire is not particularly original (see Gorard, 1999 for a summary of studies that have taken similar approaches). However, it is the context of it being used specifically amongst parents of children attending a Free School that makes it more unique, hopefully contributing something to our understanding of more recent developments in education policy.

Bowe *et al.* (1994) levelled criticism at the type of school choice research described above, arguing that seeking to establish 'criteria' that impact school choice was problematic for the following reasons:

- i) a methodological concern that the language of factors and reasons draws from a positivist tradition and ignores the complexities and intertwined nature of the decision-making process.
- ii) an analytical concern regarding the aggregation and grouping of some factors resulting in a loss of meaning or nuance in their interpretation.
- iii) a representational concern in the way that researchers present their findings. The 'criteria' approach and its often statistical reporting suggests that participants have navigated the choice process in a rational, judgemental way and ignores factors that cannot be neatly quantified such as 'gut instinct'.

As a result of this critique Bowe *et al.* (1994) argued that a move away from the discourse of consumption and rational choice is necessary in order to develop a better understanding of the school choice process. They advocate a more contextualised approach using a proposed concept of the 'landscape of choice'. Gorard (1999) also argues that prefixed lists of reasons are often incomplete, resulting in potential bias in the data. Despite these concerns, the aim of this study from the outset was to learn about the experiences and attitudes of parents at a range of Free Schools across the country. It was felt that a simple questionnaire asking parents

to report their reasons for school choice was the most practical and efficient way of gaining this information. The concerns that *Bowe et al.* (1994) and others raise, however, were taken into account when designing the questionnaire with the provision of space for parents to report reasons that were not included within the prefixed list. It is also hoped that some of these issues are also offset to some extent by the inclusion of the in-depth parent interviews in the second part of this phase of the study.

The questionnaire used for this study was original although the sections focusing on reasons for choosing schools and the types of information used to form these choices were based on findings from existing literature in the field (see for example, Hammond and Dennison, 1995; Gorard, 1997; West *et al.*, 1995). The questionnaire used predominantly closed questions, asking parents to tick reasons, statements or responses that applied to them. This approach, it was hoped, would reiterate the fact that the questionnaire was not onerous in terms of the time commitment or depth of response required. It was important, however, to include some flexibility within the questionnaire and so 'other' categories were included following a number of the questions. This allowed participants to include additional comments if they felt that anything had not been adequately addressed through the stated response items.

Selecting the response items from the literature was done methodically with appropriate criteria first identified and collated in order to establish the most definitive list possible. The factors reportedly influencing school choice were then categorised and those that were considered too similar or duplicative were removed. A small number of new items were introduced based on the specific Free School context and the rationale that had been presented by advocates. An example of this can be seen in Section A of the questionnaire where parents are asked to consider whether their desire for 'A new/different approach to education' was a factor in their school choice decision.

It has been noted that questionnaires of this nature have the potential to be problematic because they prompt or guide parents to certain responses that they perhaps otherwise would not have reported (*Cohen et al.*, 2011). This is quite possibly the case, however, it was felt that this approach would allow parents to relay the relevant factors without having to rely purely on their memory and the features that first came to mind. It was anticipated that in

providing the potential reasons, parents would consider these individually and respond using the three-point scale of importance. The 'other' categories also allowed parents to note down any further reasons that they felt had been important.

The language used throughout the questionnaire was considered carefully. To ensure that it did not present a barrier to parents' participation, complex vocabulary and potentially unfamiliar terminology were avoided. Phrasing of the questions and instructions were kept as simple as possible and the recurring use of 'you' and 'your child' was included to ensure that parents were reporting responses based on their own personal experiences. For the final section (on background characteristics) a brief introduction was included to explain why this personal information was being collected. The layout of the questionnaire was kept simple, covering just four sides of A4 paper. Each section included a title and sufficient space was allowed for parents to write in the 'other' sections or to provide additional comments if they wished to.

The questionnaire asked for some demographic information in the hope that it could be used to identify the different approaches and experiences of families within the school choice process. It was also felt that this information might give some insight in to the types of families that different Free Schools were attracting. A balance between gaining some of this potentially sensitive information and not making participants feel uncomfortable needed to be struck. In relation to occupational status, the eight-class version of the classification as described by the Office for National Statistics (ONS) was used (Gayle *et al.*, 2015). For ease, the two professional categories were collapsed in to one and an additional 'Full Time Student' option was included. In relation to ethnicity, the ONS guidelines on data collection relating to ethnicity were followed and the five broadest categories were used in this questionnaire (ONS, 2015). It was felt that if respondents wanted to be more specific in describing their ethnicity, then there was scope to do this in the space next to the 'Other' option. It is acknowledged that the classification of both occupation and ethnicity is problematic for a number of reasons (see for example Gayle *et al.*, 2015; Gorard, 2001). However, at the outset it was felt that this additional data could provide further depth and relevance to the analysis and therefore was worth asking for.

The cover letter to the questionnaire was another important component to the instrument. As I was not distributing the questionnaires personally to parents, it was necessary to briefly explain some details of the project and provide details of who participants could contact should they have any questions or concerns. The university logo was also included to reinforce the fact that despite the questionnaire being distributed by the schools, the project was being run from the university. The project was presented as a general study of secondary school choice as opposed to being specifically focused on Free Schools. This was to avoid parents thinking that there was any particular agenda attached to school type which may bias their responses. In addition, low response rates for questionnaires meant that it was important to stress the small amount of time required to complete it (around 8 minutes). The cover letter also conveyed important information about confidentiality, anonymity and voluntary participation. The decision to attach Freepost envelopes was important in reinforcing the message of confidentiality as they provided a free (for the parents) and easy way for the completed questionnaires to bypass the schools. This was also an advantage for the schools who otherwise would have had to use staff and time to collect them in, and therefore may have been less willing to participate. It was felt that the financial cost to the researcher of using Freepost envelopes for returning the questionnaires was worthwhile if it would encourage more parents to participate.

5.4.4.2 Piloting the questionnaire

Before piloting the questionnaire, it was pre-tested on friends and family, a number of whom had been through the school choice process and so were familiar with the content being referred to. Following this, a pilot took place at the secondary school where I was working at the time. The questionnaires were distributed to a whole cohort of Year 7 children (approximately 95 children). Unfortunately only about 15 were returned but these were still useful in helping to improve the instrument. They indicated that on the whole the questionnaire had been straightforward to understand and complete. The layout and option lists were effective and the time needed to complete it was not too onerous or off-putting. One parent suggested underlining some of the key terms in some questions and this was taken on board, particularly where I wanted parents to comment on the school that their child was currently attending as opposed to schools in general. Another parent also completed the first part of the questionnaire (about the reasons for choosing schools) using 'N/A' (meaning 'not

applicable) rather than ticking one of the provided boxes. This made me consider whether to include an 'N/A' box but I decided, on balance, not to as these responses could be later inputted and analysed using the same code as that attributed to the 'not important' box. They may not mean exactly the same to the parents engaged in the process but in attempting to understand which features simply had and had not been important to parents, this was thought to be sufficient.

The Freepost envelopes were not used in the pilot and parents were asked to return the questionnaire directly to school. Informal discussions with three of the parents who did complete the questionnaire indicated that the Freepost envelope would be a preferred method of return for two main reasons. First, they were unsure whether their child would remember to hand in the completed questionnaire to the school and second, they did not like the idea of the school reading their responses as they felt that some of the data collected could make them identifiable. One parent commented that some of her friends with children at the school might not be able to understand all of the vocabulary used due to their limited English proficiency. This was a very real consideration when designing the questionnaire although aside from making the language as clear and accessible as possible, there was very little practically that could be done to address this.

5.4.4.3 Distribution and collection of questionnaires

The surveys were distributed by post to all schools (both Free Schools and non-Free Schools) that had agreed to participate. In total 14 Free Schools and nine non-Free Schools were involved. A follow-up email to the relevant contact at the schools asked for confirmation that the surveys had been distributed to all Year 7 parents. One school lost the batch of questionnaires before distribution. However, they helpfully re-copied the questionnaires, handed them out and collected them back in themselves as the original Freepost envelopes had also been lost. This method of collecting in the questionnaires may have had some effect on parents' responses. However, the school had made a real effort to collect in a large number of the questionnaires and I felt that it was still worthwhile to include the data collected from these in the final analysis.

5.4.4.4 Data coding and data entry

As soon as the questionnaires started to arrive back at university, the data organising and entry process began. Due to the closed nature of many of the questions, data coding was quite straightforward. Where parents had been asked to or chose to respond more openly, a coding strategy was also devised. Question 2, for example, asked parents ‘Which of these reasons was most important in influencing your decision to choose your child’s current school?’ Here most parents wrote in one or more of the factors that had been provided for them in Question 1. Each of these factors was therefore attributed a numerical code. Some parents opted to write in more than one factor, perhaps reflecting the difficulty of choosing just one main feature. In understanding this difficulty, it was decided to include all stated reasons when inputting the data rather than just using the first. In the rare instances where parents had written in a reason that was not directly related to any of those stated in Question 1, an additional ‘other’ code was used. A number of questionnaires contained some items with missing data. A ‘missing value’ code was created to address this (Swift, 2006).

Following coding, all data from the questionnaires were inputted in to the SPSS 21 statistical analysis programme. On entering the data, a Free School/non-Free School variable was also created to allow for responses from these different groups of parents to be easily compared. Responses to Question 18 ‘Any other comments you wish to make about any of the topics raised in this questionnaire’ were written out in full to refer to during analysis. Details of parents who had agreed to participate in an interview were also collated from the questionnaire and used to begin the next stage of the research.

5.4.4.5 Analysis of questionnaire data

A number of different data analysis methods were considered and explored prior to presenting and discussing the findings. For the first section of the questionnaire –which asked parents to report how important certain factors had been influencing their school choice decisions – I had initially planned to use factor analysis. Having run some examples of this with the data, however, I felt that a simpler approach using frequencies and percentages would yield very similar findings that would be more accessible to a wider audience.

Frequency data were collated for all appropriate variables. As I also wanted to explore whether there were similarities or differences between parents who had sent their child to a Free School and those who had not, cross tabulation with this background variable was carried out. Prior to the distribution of the questionnaire, I had also thought that it would be interesting to explore variation based on other demographic characteristics such as social, ethnic or religious background. The limited number of responses overall, and the particularly low number of responses from parents with FSM children, made it difficult to draw any meaningful conclusions based on this data.

In Sections A and B of the questionnaire, where factors or sources of information had been left blank, they were originally coded as 'missing'. Following this, the decision was made to recode them as 'Not important' as it was felt that when completing the questionnaire, parents had made it very clear which factors/sources of information were important to them and had left others blank, perhaps simply to save time. A small number expressed this explicitly on the questionnaire form. This recoding gave a more complete data set to work with and, in my view, retained the meaning of parents' responses.

The majority of parents did not respond to Question 18. However, where parents did write something, each comment was added verbatim to the data spreadsheet. I then coded these using appropriate terms or themes from earlier sections of the questionnaire and the relevant literature. Some of the codes used included: 'information', 'other local schools', 'fairness of choice process' and 'influence of school mix'. These data were collated and read in conjunction with the interview data (see below) and, where appropriate, were reported alongside the findings from the interviews.

5.4.5 The interviews

The final method to be discussed is the use of semi-structured telephone interviews. Cohen *et al.* (2011) note that there are three main types of interview that can be used as methods data collection. These are: the structured interview, the unstructured interview and the semi-structured interview. For the purposes of this part of the study, in-depth semi-structured interviews were the most appropriate choice as it was important to go beyond the relatively simplistic, quantifiable responses permitted in the tightly structured questionnaire. The aim

was to complement these findings with more insightful, detailed data based on the lived experiences of those involved (Mears, 2012). The semi-structured approach to the interviews also meant that I could develop and ask a series of open-ended questions, some of which would help to elucidate some of the responses which participants had previously included in their questionnaire. The flexibility of this method also meant that issues that were important to the participant, but which had perhaps not been fully considered by the researcher, could be explored and elaborated on in more depth.

Due to participants living in various locations across England it was decided that the interviews would be conducted by telephone. Whilst often associated with short, structured interviews (Fontana and Frey, 1994), for the purposes of this research telephone interviews were more practical in terms of both time and transport costs (Thomas and Purdon, 1994). Moreover, research has indicated that in-depth telephone interviews can yield as high quality data as face-to-face interviews (Sturges and Hanrahan, 2004). In addition, they provided increased flexibility for the parents involved. If, for example, they suddenly realised they could not do the interview on the agreed day/time, it was easier to reschedule a telephone call than it would have been to rearrange travel and transport and a suitable place to meet. The telephone interview meant that participants did not have to leave their house to take part. Equally, some parents found that they could fit the interview in whilst they were at work or commuting, making it a more convenient option. This convenience was important in ensuring that parents remained engaged and willing to participate with the study.

5.4.5.1 The participants

In total, 20 interviews were carried out with parents of children attending nine different Free Schools. Parents identified themselves as being willing to participate in an interview following completion of the questionnaire described above. A total of 44 respondents to the questionnaire included their details in order to be contacted about an interview. Unfortunately, it was not possible to interview all of the parents who had volunteered. In addition, a small number who were contacted changed their mind about willingness to participate, usually due to time pressures. It was felt that 20 interviews would be sufficient for an initial study exploring the experiences and attitudes of parents who had chosen Free Schools. This number

would allow for some breadth across a number of different Free Schools, as well as learning about the potentially varied experiences of those applying to the same schools.

The method of recruiting participants via the questionnaire meant that they were self-selected and in no way necessarily representative of Free School parents as a whole. Their reasons for choosing to participate may have been particularly connected to their desire to want to share either positive or negative experiences of the choice process and attitudes towards their child's school. Awareness of this was important both during the interview and analysis stages. Despite this potential for bias, the parents' views were nevertheless valid and relevant to the objectives of this part of the study. Whatever their motivations for being involved in the project, their experiences and opinions on the role of parents in relation to Free Schools contributed to an area of study which, to date, has only received very limited attention (see for example, Higham, 2014).

Of the 20 parents who agreed to be interviewed, most (19) were mothers. Further demographic details of each participant and the dates and length of each interview are included in the appendices.

5.4.5.2 Developing the interview schedule

The interview schedule, or guide, is required to provide some structure (where required) to the interview and outline key topics that the interviewer wishes to address (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009). The research questions linked to this phase of the study influenced the themes and questions that were included on the interview schedule. Due to the semi-structured, open nature of the interviews, it was not deemed necessary to write a heavily-structured script. Instead, the topics and questions included allowed for some spontaneity and diversion, meaning that there was more flexibility in the direction that parents wanted to take with their responses.

Four main themes were used to frame the focus for discussions about school choice and specifically the decision to choose a Free School. These were: attitudes, awareness, action and outcomes. These topics provided prompts for more detailed questioning, conceptualised in relation to the *why* and the *how* of school choice. As Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) note it is

important to differentiate between the research questions and the actual questions that are asked during the interview. They suggest that theoretical language should be avoided and instead interview questions should be expressed using everyday language that is familiar and accessible to all participants. This was kept in mind when creating the interview schedule and when conducting the interviews.

5.4.5.3 Coding and analysis of data

Following transcription of the interviews, a period of ‘immersive’ reading (Braun and Clarke, 2006) took place. This involved repeatedly reading the transcripts and actively searching for meaning, themes and patterns. Initial codes were then attached to the data, summarising the different (and similar) ideas and topics that were being discussed by each participant. These initial codes had often been defined *a priori* (Flick, 2002) as they were based on findings from previous school choice literature. The new context of the research (focused on parents choosing brand new schools for their child), however, meant that some flexibility was required and that some new codes were added where required. This method also allowed for comparisons between the current study and the findings from earlier studies. As Miles and Huberman state, “coding is analysis” (Miles and Huberman, 1994, p. 56) and this early reviewing of the data certainly began to make clear some of the overarching themes that would be relevant when moving beyond the simple identification of content. Pattern coding provided a tool for more inferential analysis, allowing for the data to be reduced in to more manageable and focused sections. The development of the pattern codes was an iterative process (Miles and Huberman, 1994), however, and as more data were collected and analysed, some codes were combined or revised and new ones introduced.

5.5 Ethical considerations

When planning and conducting the data collection and analysis for this study, every effort was made to ensure that the research adhered to the ethical guidelines described by the British Educational Research Association (2011). This section briefly outlines some of the issues that were considered and how they were dealt with as part of the research process.

As described above, some of the data used in this study is publicly available via the internet. This includes both the admissions policies used and the Census Data which is available from

the DfE website. In addition, the DfE *Compare Schools* tool means that anybody can identify the six closest schools to a Free School. As a result it would be possible and acceptable to report the names of the schools when reporting and analysing the findings. But the purpose of this study was not to highlight what individual schools were doing in relation to their admissions and allocation procedures, but more to establish the overall picture since the introduction of Free Schools in to the system. Whilst it would be perfectly possible for an interested and determined investigator to identify some of the schools, their oversubscription criteria and proportions of FSM children for each year, it adds nothing to the findings or conclusions to know this information for individual schools. Furthermore, in light of the ongoing controversy and sensitivity that surrounds the Free Schools policy, the researcher did not wish to be perceived as denigrating or celebrating the behaviour of particular schools. As a result of this, names were replaced with ID codes.

Seeking consent from the schools to distribute the questionnaire to Year 7 parents was not always straightforward as many of the schools did not want to participate in the study, meaning that parents at these schools had no awareness of the project and no opportunity to get involved. This did lead me to consider other methods of contacting parents such as via social media sites (Twitter, Facebook and web forums e.g. 'Mumsnet') or in person outside of the schools. This may have raised the numbers of parents participating in the study. These methods, however, were not considered appropriate for a number of reasons. First, the schools may have viewed this as quite an antagonistic move, particularly if they had already refused to participate. Second, an internet-based approach would not be of any use to parents who did not have access to the internet and there may have been issues with security. For example, it could be possible for anybody to access the questionnaire and complete it, potentially jeopardising the findings. Finally, approaching parents and/or children outside of schools would also perhaps not be received very well by the schools (or parents) but also could be difficult in terms of identifying suitable participants (i.e. parents of Year 7 children).

In the questionnaire and interview stages of the study, anonymity was offered (and accepted) by the parents and schools involved. When liaising with the schools it was agreed that in the reporting of the findings, minimal details would be provided about their location, size, specialisms or other potentially identifiable characteristics. As Kelly (2008) and Walford

(2005) both argue, however, it is often possible for research locations to be quite easily identified even where pseudonyms and limited information about them is provided. This could almost certainly be the case with secondary Free Schools where their number across the country is relatively small. Even, for example, describing a Free School in vague terms such as “situated in a city in the North East of England” would make the school fairly straightforward to identify.

When completing the questionnaire, parents’ names were not required unless they wished to participate in the interview stage. This allowed for an increased level of anonymity. This was also helped by the fact that the Freepost envelopes meant that parents did not have to return their questionnaire to the school and so did not risk identification there either. When participating in the interviews, parents were reassured both verbally and in writing that their responses would be anonymised in the reporting of the data. Pseudonyms would be used for them and identifying information would be removed.

Both voluntary consent to participate and the right to withdraw from the project were also considered. An information sheet attached to the questionnaire informed parents that they were not obliged to complete it and that they could leave out any questions that they did not want to answer. Written and verbal consent was gained from interview participants and details about the study and its aims were shared too. Participants were also assured that they could stop the interview at any point and that they could withdraw from the study without having to give a reason.

This chapter has outlined features of research design that have been relevant to this study. It has also described methodological choices, the creation of data collection instruments and ethical considerations. The next section goes on to report the findings from the different phases of data collection

CHAPTER 6

PRIORITISING PLACES: THE ADMISSIONS CRITERIA OF SECONDARY FREE SCHOOLS

This chapter presents the findings from the analysis of the admissions policies used by Free Schools. It particularly focuses on the oversubscription criteria and allocation methods that schools state that they will use in order to prioritise places. The range of criteria being used by schools that opened between 2011-2014 and the potential implications that could have on schools' intakes are also discussed. With this in mind, the admissions policies have been analysed with a particular focus on issues of social justice and the extent to which the schools might be accessible for pupils from different backgrounds.

The chapter is split into three main sections. First, I present an overview of the numbers of Free Schools using banding as a method of allocation and different oversubscription criteria. These figures are compared to those from the LAs where Free Schools are located. Second, I look more closely at the oversubscription criteria being used and the different ways that they are interpreted and expressed by Free Schools. A final section discusses the findings in light of the research and policy literature. It considers the extent to which issues of social justice appear to be a consideration of Free Schools during the admissions process and the potential for the allocation procedures to have an impact on school intakes.

6.1 Use of oversubscription criteria in admissions policies

This section presents the findings relating to the different oversubscription criteria that Free Schools have included in their admissions policies. The focus is on the type and frequency with which different types of criteria are used and how this compares with the Local Authorities where Free Schools are situated. The categories for the types of criteria are based on those used by White *et al.* (2001) although additional categories have been added to reflect other allocation methods that have been identified. The second part of the section also looks at the 'top three' criteria used by Free Schools in order to explore more closely not just which measures are being used by the schools but how much priority they are being given in the ranking of criteria.

6.1.1 Number of criteria used

The number of criteria to be used in determining oversubscription arrangements is at the discretion of the admissions authorities (these could be individual schools, academy trusts or LAs). Table 6.1 shows the number of criteria used by secondary Free Schools and the LAs.

Table 6.1: Number of oversubscription criteria used by Free Schools and LAs

	No. Free Schools	% Free Schools	No. LAs	% LAs
2-3 criteria	19	18.3	5	7.8
4-5 criteria	57	54.8	35	54.7
6+ criteria	28	26.9	24	37.5
Total	104	100.0	64	100.0

Nearly a fifth of Free Schools use just 2-3 oversubscription criteria (including the compulsory criterion for Looked After children) compared with just 7.8% of LAs. Just over half of both Free Schools and LAs use either four or five oversubscription criteria. Around a quarter of Free Schools and just over a third of LAs use six or more criteria in their admissions policies. The average number of criteria used by secondary Free Schools was 4.7 compared with 4.9 for the LAs. These figures do not include the use of banding as a method for selecting pupils.

6.1.2 Frequency of criteria use

A range of admissions criteria were used by Free Schools. Table 6.2 shows the number and percentage of schools that used each criterion. The rank of each criterion is not taken in to consideration at this point.

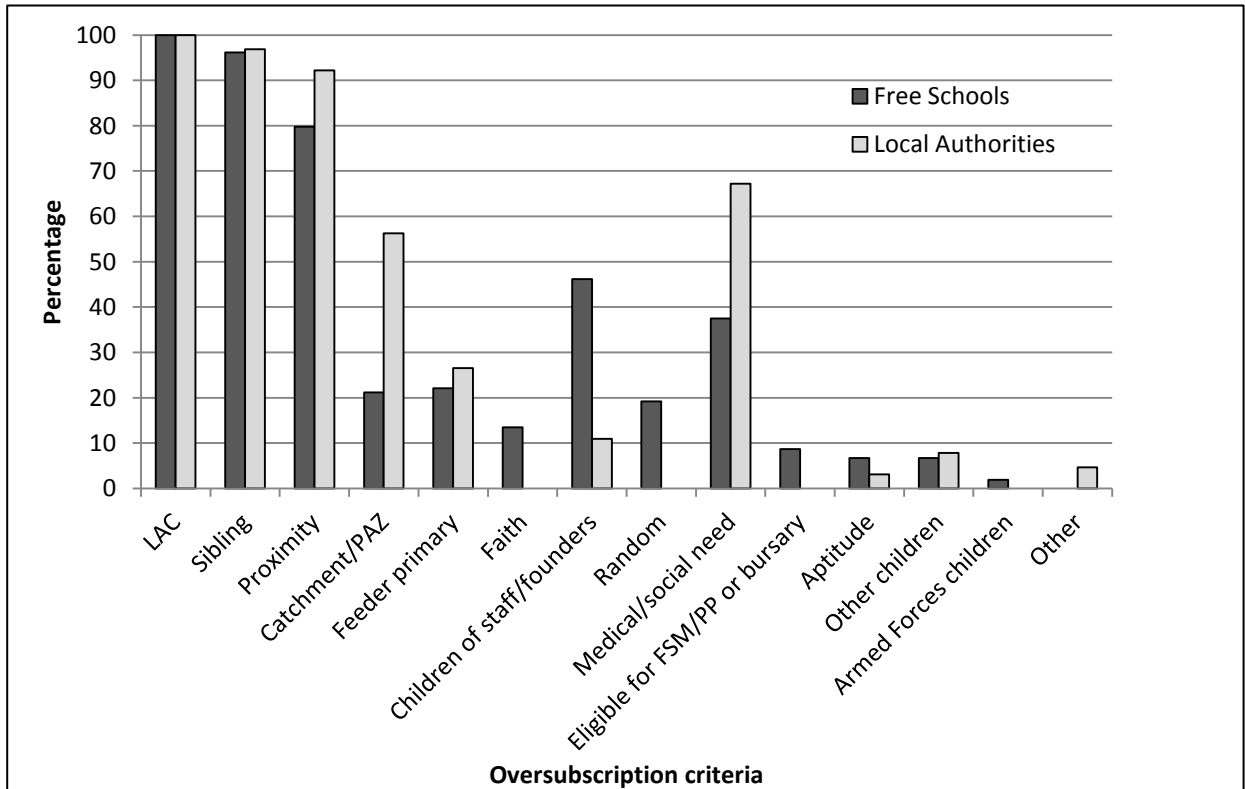
High proportions of the schools state that they use sibling and/or proximity criteria within their admissions criteria. Over four out of ten schools use a criterion prioritising entry to children of current staff or founders of the school. A child's medical or social needs were mentioned by just over a third of secondary Free Schools. A number of other criteria were also used by smaller proportions of schools.

Table 6.2: Oversubscription criteria used by secondary Free Schools

Criterion	No. of Free Schools (n=104)	% of Free Schools
Looked After Children	104	100.00
Sibling	100	96.2
Proximity	80	79.8
Children of staff/founders	48	46.2
Medical/social need	39	37.5
Feeder primary	23	22.1
Catchment/PAZ	22	21.2
Random	20	19.2
Faith	14	13.5
Other children	14	13.5
Eligible for FSM/PP or bursary	9	8.7
Aptitude	7	6.7
Armed Forces children	2	1.9

A simple comparison with the Local Authorities where Free Schools are situated allows us to explore whether there are any substantial differences between the oversubscription criteria used by the different admissions authorities (Figure 6.1).

Figure 6.1: Percentage of Free Schools and Local Authorities using different criteria



The most frequently used criteria for Free Schools (i.e. siblings and proximity) are also the most frequently used by the LAs. There is some difference with the proximity criterion, however, with over 90% of LAs using this to prioritise places compared to nearly 80% of Free Schools. The graph shows that LAs are also more likely to use ‘catchment’ areas but fewer of them use designated feeder schools. This difference can be linked to the all-through schools included within the Free School group, and the fact that the majority of them state the primary phase of their school as a designated feeder school and give priority based on attendance there. A more substantial difference is with the use of ‘medical or social need’ as a criterion. Just over a third (37.5%) of Free Schools include this in their admissions policy compared to 67.2% of LAs. The graph also shows that no LAs used faith criteria as a means of prioritising places compared with 13.5% of secondary Free Schools.

Use of criteria relating the children of current staff and founders (in the case of Free Schools) was used by 10.9% of LAs and 46.2% of Free Schools. This reflects the derogation from the Admissions Code which allows Free Schools to prioritise founders’ children. All admissions authorities are allowed to give priority to children of staff who have worked at the school for “two or more years... [or have been] recruited to fill a vacant post for which there is a demonstrable skill shortage” (DfE, 2014a, p.16).

As per the Admissions Code, LAs are prohibited from using random allocation “as the principal oversubscription criterion for allocating places at all the schools” (DfE, 2014a, p. 15) and as such this does not feature within LA policies. Recent changes to the Admissions Code will permit all admissions authorities to prioritise children based on Pupil Premium eligibility from 2016 (Gorard and Morris, 2014). Due to the date of these changes, no LAs within the current sample were able to include this in their policy. Two Free Schools give priority to children of armed forces service personnel. One of these is required to do so due to its boarding school status (DfE, 2014a) while the other is located close to a large army base and perhaps wished to reflect this local population.

6.2.3 Ranking of oversubscription criteria

Whilst the comparison in the previous section provides useful indicators of the different types of criteria that Free Schools and LAs are using at present, it does not demonstrate the priority

attached to each criterion by the schools. The Admissions Code states that all schools must place priority for Looked After children as the first criterion for admission but after that it is up to admissions authorities how they rank their allocation criteria. The rankings of criteria discussed here all refer to their priority *after* the mandatory highest ranking for Looked After children.

Figures 6.2 and 6.3 show the percentage of Free Schools and LAs and their ‘top three’ (after Looked After children) ranked criteria. There are some interesting differences here. First, the graphs again reiterate the wider range of criteria that Free Schools have available to them and are using in their highest ranked allocation methods. A small proportion of Free Schools, for example, are opting to use random allocation, faith, aptitude or eligibility for pupil premium within their ‘top three’ criteria. In relation to the first criteria used after the priority for Looked After children, half of LAs prioritise medical and social needs compared to just over a quarter of Free Schools. The criteria for children of staff or founders has been shown above to be more frequently used by Free Schools but also appears to be more highly ranked when it is employed. Geographical criteria (proximity and/or catchment areas) are used by the majority of Free Schools and LAs although tend to be used less frequently as a first or second criteria. While the ranking of the criteria is important and interesting it is also limited. Examining the order of criteria used does not necessarily allow us to examine where the majority of school places are actually being prioritised and allocated (White *et al.*, 2001). This is an issue which is kept in mind in subsequent sections.

Figure 6.2: Percentage of Free Schools and their ranking of each oversubscription criteria

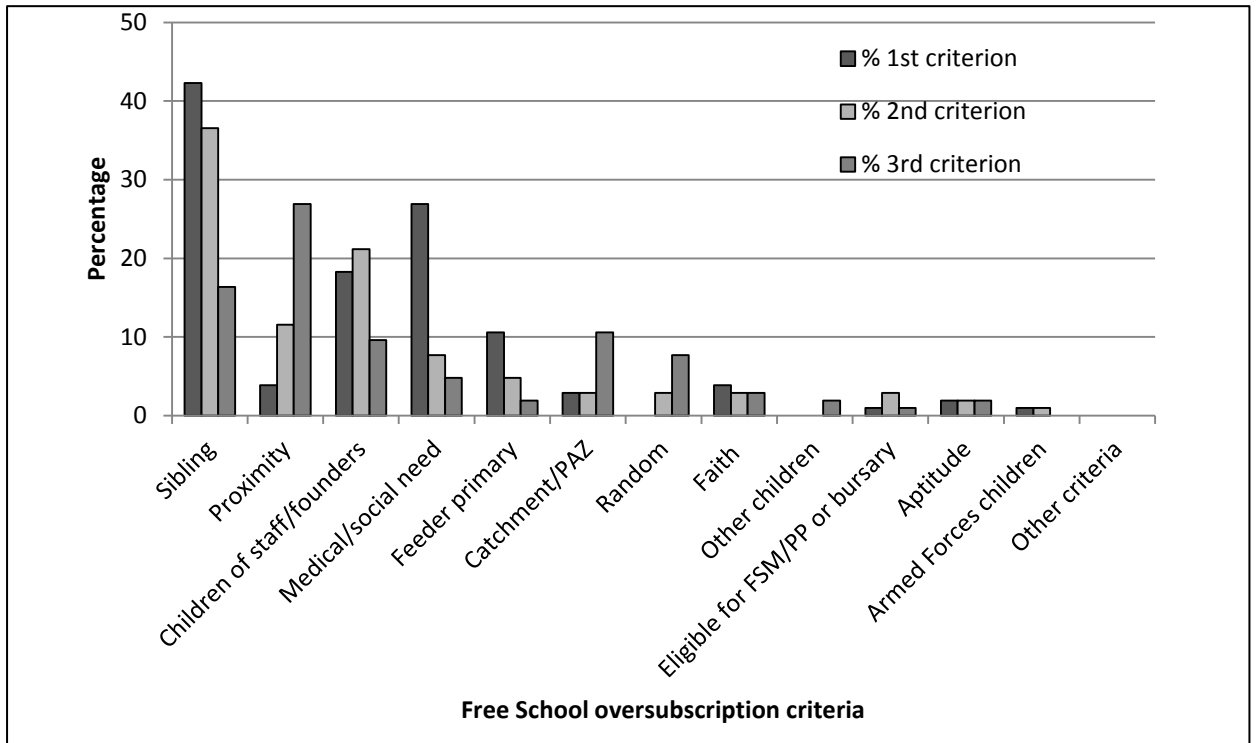
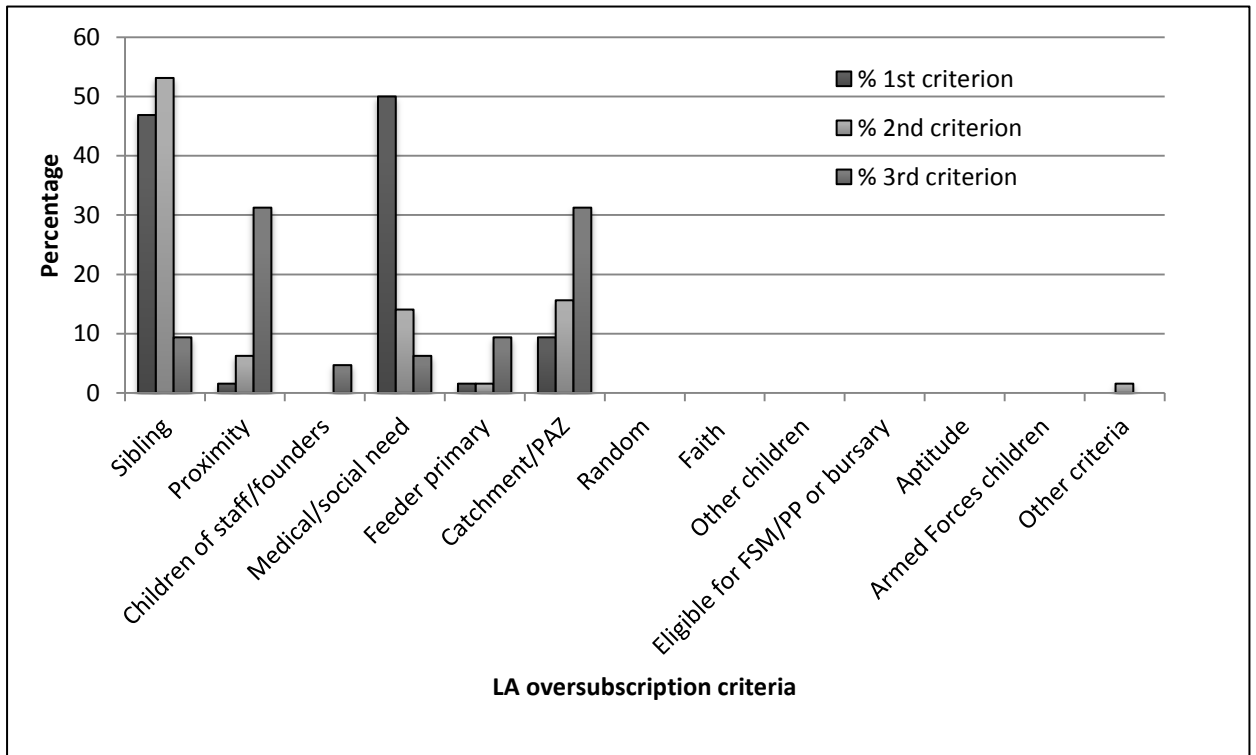


Figure 6.3: Percentage of LAs and their ranking of each oversubscription criteria



6.2 Allocation methods and oversubscription criteria

The following section goes on to explore the admissions criteria in more detail, considering how Free Schools have interpreted them and stated how they will be used. As with the above section, comparisons with LAs are made where appropriate. The presentation of findings here follows some of the important analyses by West and colleagues (West *et al.*, 2004; West, 2006; West *et al.*, 2009) and White *et al.* (2001) by considering the criteria in light of their potential to overtly or covertly ‘select’ pupils with certain characteristics and the impact that this may have on school intakes.

6.2.1 Priority for SEN and Looked After children

All secondary Free Schools include their arrangements for children with Statements of Special Needs and Looked After children in their admissions policies. The Education Act 1996 made it an obligation that any child with a statement of SEN who names a particular school must be admitted. This legislation has been part of all Admissions Codes since 1996 and is not considered to be criteria for oversubscription. Since 2007 the law has stated that Looked After children or those in public care (including those who have previously been classed as ‘Looked After’ or who have been ‘Looked After’ and are now adopted) are required by all schools to be given the highest priority in admissions (DfE, 2014a). All of the secondary Free Schools stated priority for Looked After children as their first oversubscription criteria.

In both instances there have been issues with a small number of Free Schools not making their prioritisation of ‘statemented’ and Looked After children clear enough. These have been referred to the Office of the Schools Adjudicator with those schools where complaints have been upheld being required to amend their admissions policies (see for example, OSA, 2014; OSA, 2015b)

6.2.2 Criteria relating to ability or aptitude

6.2.2.1 Banding

Banding is often used with intention of gaining balanced, comprehensive intakes across each year group. Applicants to schools are assigned to different ability bands (usually based on the results of a written test) and then places are allocated within each band. Banding is therefore

not seen as a method of allocating places when schools are oversubscribed. Instead oversubscription criteria are used within each band. If a school is undersubscribed, then it is required to take all pupils who wish to attend, whatever ability band they might be in. The current Admissions Code states that banding can be used to produce an intake that is representative of: the full range of ability of applicants for the school, the range of ability of children in the local area; or the national ability range (DfE, 2014a). These different approaches to banding are important as it is argued that area-wide banding is more equitable and more likely to reduce segregation (West, 2005).

The analysis here focuses on two different types of banding that are evident from the Free School data. The first is authority-wide banding. Historically this is where all schools within a Local Authority would participate in the banding of pupils and the banding would be representative of the abilities spread across the LA. This method was considered to provide a fair distribution of pupils across schools within a particular local area (West, 2005). Currently just four London LAs use area-wide banding to allocate places. These are Greenwich, Hackney, Lewisham and Tower Hamlets. Banding is used by community schools in these areas. However, faith schools, academies and Free Schools are able to opt out of authority-wide banding and employ other admissions arrangements. This has the potential to result in less balanced intakes for the individual schools that opt-out but potentially skews the overall spread of children across other schools in the authority as well.

Banding on an individual school level is also considered within this study. This is where schools opt for a banding approach to allocating places but where the distribution of pupils within each band is based on the ability of those who have applied to the school rather than the spread of ability across the wider local area. This means that if the applicants to a particular school are skewed towards being of higher or lower ability then even with a banding approach, their overall intakes will be skewed in this direction too.

Authority-wide banding

In an attempt to achieve a comprehensive range of abilities within a school or group of schools, some admissions authorities use a system of banding. In the past a number of LEAs organised this on an authority wide basis (West, 2005) although there are currently only four

London boroughs which continue to do so. Students within the authority are required to take a standard test and their scores are then used to allocate them to one of a number of attainment bands. Following the 2003 School Admissions Code these bands must allow for an equal proportion of children from each ability group to be awarded places whereas previously banding could allow for more children to be admitted to the higher bands, thus skewing the overall intake of the school. Such ‘fair banding’ procedures have been shown to produce less segregated school intakes (Gorard *et al.*, 2003) and perhaps offer an alternative to stratified school compositions based largely on proximity or catchment areas (West, 2005).

In 2015, two of the mainstream secondary Free Schools used authority-wide banding. These were the Hackney New School in Tower Hamlets and The Greenwich Free School in Greenwich. As a Local Authority, Greenwich has a long history of area-wide banding (White *et al.*, 2001) and it is significant that the Free School has opted-in to this since their opening in 2012. Hackney is slightly different in that as an LA, they stopped using banding in 2004 (Noden *et al.*, 2014). It has since been reintroduced and is used across all of the borough’s community schools, academies (including the Free School) and two faith schools.

Two other schools, Wapping High School and the London Enterprise Academy, both in Tower Hamlets, opted not to be part of the borough’s authority wide banding system for secondary admissions. Instead of banding, these schools outline oversubscription criteria that would be used in the event of having more applicants than places. Both schools use geographical criteria (either ‘catchment’ area or proximity) as the method of allocating the majority of places. Interestingly, nearby community schools also use similar criteria although they do this after the LA-wide banding system has been applied. With just the policy documentation, it is impossible to know the reasons why the Free Schools have chosen not to be part of the LA-wide banding.

Individual school banding

In 2015, 11 Free Schools used school-level banding. Seven of these were secondary schools (including one 14-19 school) and four were the secondary phase of all-through schools. Four of the schools are based in the same LA (Bradford) with three of these run by the Dixons academy chain. Two other schools are run by Harris academies. Three of the four all-through schools using school-level banding in their secondary phase were previously private schools.

There is some variation in the tests used to band applicants to the school. The majority of the schools state that they will place children in to one of nine bands. The three ex-private schools use five bands and one school uses three. Most schools state that their banding will be based on the spread of ability of those applying while just one reports that it will “admit an intake that is representative of the national ability range” (Corby Technical School, 2014-2015).

The Admissions Code (DfE, 2014a) prevents schools from favouring high ability children during the banding process. All but one of the schools state that each band will represent an even proportion of pupils according to ability. This school, however, provides a higher proportion of places to middle-ability pupils:

....all applicants will be placed in one of three bands: Band 1 (top 25%), Band 2 (middle 50%) and Band 3 (bottom 25%), with the banding determined by that year’s group of applicants.

(Fulham Boys School, 2014-2015)

This arrangement does not contravene the requirements of the Admissions Code (DfE, 2014a). However, the fact that the banding is based on applicants to the school does not necessarily mean that the emphasis on middle ability pupils (as understood in terms of national or local attainment) will be realised. If the school has disproportionate numbers of higher or lower ability applicants then it is possible that the ‘middle ability’ band could be distorted towards that end of the spectrum. In addition, in the case where the middle band does not get filled, those from other bands can be used to fill the places.

6.2.2.2 Aptitude

Selection by aptitude has been permitted in England since 1994 and the introduction of the specialist schools programme. The 1998 SSFA allowed selection by aptitude of up to 10% of the school intake and new selection on this basis was restricted to the following subject areas: Physical Education or a Sport, the Performing and/or Visual Arts, Languages, Design and Technology, Information Technology and Music. Since then the specialist schools programme has been abandoned but admissions authorities are still permitted to use aptitude as a criterion for allocating places. The data above show that just a small proportion of secondary Free

Schools (6.7%) are choosing to use aptitude as a means of selection. This is in line with recent figures indicating that nationally 6% of schools select by aptitude (Noden *et al.*, 2014). In addition, two LAs within the sample also had community schools that selected by aptitude or ability.

Of the seven Free Schools employing aptitude criteria, four are selecting based on musical aptitude, one for the creative arts, one for art and/or sport and one for languages. Another school states that it will begin to use language aptitude selection from 2017. Examples of the criterion from schools' admissions policies include:

Assisted music programme. Up to 12 pupils each year will be selected on their musical aptitude. This will be determined by an assessment. More details of the assessment can be found here.

(The Island Free School, 2015-2016)

19 places within William Perkin CofE High School will be made available each year for students applying for a place in Year 7 and with an identified natural aptitude for Language.

(William Perkin CoE School, 2015-2016)

There has been ongoing concern that there is a lack of clarity between selection by aptitude and selection by ability (Coldron *et al.*, 2006; West *et al.*, 2003). Whilst the Free Schools here report that they are not looking for a child's prior knowledge or proficiency in a certain area, it seems difficult to say that this would not influence their decision. Moreover, it is quite likely that children who do possess aptitude or ability in these designated subjects are more likely to be from higher socioeconomic families (see for example, Bates, 2012; Phillips, 2013) where resources to support them have been more readily available. If so, the selected 10% of students could potentially contribute towards an imbalance in the characteristics of the school intake overall.

6.2.3 Criteria relating to medical and/or social needs

Four out of ten secondary Free Schools include at least one criterion relating to a child's medical or social need. As shown in Figure 6.1, however, Free Schools are less likely to use this criterion than the LAs. Where the criterion does feature it is often placed highly within the rank order of allocation methods (Figures 6.2 and 6.3). As stated by the Admissions Code, those wishing to use this criterion to gain a place must have their application supported by a letter from a professional. The following is indicative of how this criterion is worded in Free School admissions policies.

Children with special medical circumstances affecting the child where these needs can only be met at this school will be admitted.

Professional supporting evidence from a professional, e.g. a doctor, psychologist, is essential if admission is to be made under the criterion for special medical, and such evidence must set out the particular reasons why The Ingleby Manor School and Sixth Form is the most suitable school and the difficulties which would be caused if the child had to attend another school.

(Ingleby Manor School, 2015-2016)

Two schools take a slightly different approach to this criterion, focusing it more specifically on those with additional learning needs, physical disabilities or access requirements. The schools do not make specific reference to the child's psychological or social needs.

Children who have been assessed by Newham Council's Special Educational Needs Service as requiring a particular named school to meet their special educational needs and/or physical access. In addition the child must be on the Special Educational Needs Code of Practice and be in receipt of 'high needs funding' and/ or have physical access difficulties.

(Oasis Academy Silvertown, 2015-2016)

6.2.4 Criteria relating to children of founders or current staff

All admissions authorities are permitted to prioritise entry to the children of staff providing they meet the conditions outlined in the Admissions Code. Free Schools are also allowed to

derogate from the Code by prioritising entry to children of the school's founders. As shown above, nearly half of secondary Free Schools opted to use one or both of these criteria.

Children whose parents are founders of the Archer Academy and who have been granted this provision by the Secretary of State for Education.

Children of staff (teaching or support) of the school, provided they have been directly employed for a minimum of two years at the time at which the application for a place is made, or have been recruited to fill a post where there is a demonstrable skills shortage.

(The Archer Academy, 2015-2016)

One school also states priority for children of school governors too. This is not something that is stated as permitted in the Admissions Code (2014) although the school has used this since opening.

Children of staff and governors at the school...This applies where a member of the Governing Body has been a Governor at SVCS for 12 or more months at the time at which the application for admission to the school is made.

(Stour Valley Community School, 2015-2016)

6.2.5 Faith criteria

Of the 104 Free Schools included in this analysis, 14 (13.5%) used some religious criteria to allocate 50% of their places in the event of being oversubscribed. The Admissions Code states that at least 50% of places must be allocated without reference to faith. The Free Schools policy has allowed founders from different faiths to open schools. Currently the number of schools using criteria relating to each religion are as follows: four Christian schools (Catholic and Church of England), four Muslim schools, three Sikh schools, one Jewish school and one Greek Orthodox school.

Most of the faith schools split their oversubscription criteria in to two groups or pathways, one for faith places and one for 'open' places. Within each group there are then a series of

criteria listed; for the religious places these generally relate to demonstrating commitment to the faith. Parents are required to complete Supplementary Information Forms (SIFs) which usually have to be verified by a representative from the faith community.

Sikh children whose parents demonstrate their commitment to the Sikh faith by completing the whole of Section 2 of the Admissions Form. The form will be assessed and places will be allocated based on the score achieved.

(Seva School, 2015-2016)

Up to 50% of the remaining places will be allocated to students from families attached to a Christian church (see note), ranked as follows:

- a) Students with siblings on roll at the time that the applicant will join the school
- b) Distance from the school with the closest homes being allocated first.

(Trinity School, 2015-2016)

Within the admissions policy of one Free School specific places of worship rather than just adherence to the religion generally are used. The following two oversubscription criteria are found after the Looked After children criterion in the faith 'priority group':

Boys whose parents are members of, or women, who receive the membership benefits of, Masjid-e-Tauheedul Islam.

Boys whose parents are members of, or women, who receive the membership benefits of, Masjid al Hidayah, Masjid-e-Irfan and Masjid-e-Anisul Islam.

(Tauheedul Islam Boys' High School, 2015-2016)

The four mosques mentioned here are located close to the school (all within about 1.5 miles). It is likely that those attending the specified mosques live locally to them and through these criteria the school are perhaps reinforcing their desire to serve a very local Muslim community with strong ties to nearby places of worship and the faith leaders who work there. It is worth noting here that in addition to the schools using religious criteria, there are also a small number of Free Schools that report having a particular faith ethos but that have opted

not to use such criteria to allocate places. Examples are William Perkin Church of England School in Ealing, The Durham Free School, Grindon Hall Christian School in Sunderland and Trinity Academy in Lambeth. A draft copy of the 2016 admissions documents for the three Eden Muslim-ethos schools (in Bolton, Coventry and Waltham Forest) also indicates that they may stop using religious criteria in the future.

6.2.6 Geographical criteria

There are two main forms of geographical criteria used within the admissions policies reviewed here. The first is ‘proximity’, usually referring to the distance between a child’s home and the school. The second is the use of ‘catchment’ areas or ‘priority admission zones’, as some schools call them. The vast majority of Free Schools (94.2%) use either or both of these methods of allocation within their admissions policies as do all of the LAs featured within this study.

Traditionally, proximity criteria have been used to prioritise places for those living closest to the school. The majority of Free Schools using the criterion adopt this method although some also alternatives.

Admission of pupils on the basis of distance lived, using straight line measurement from 4 nodal points to the centre of the child’s home (see map attached at Annex A)...The candidates living closest to their nearest nodal point will be given priority for the places available to that nodal point. The use of nodal points is to allow children who live in areas where it is difficult to get into a first choice of school, priority for places. The nodal points will be:

- The junction of Kensington Avenue and Norbury Avenue;
- The junction of Canterbury Road and Mitcham Road;
- The junction of Edith Road and Selhurst Road (near Selhurst Station);
- The junction of Queens Road and Windmill Road.

(Harris Invictus Academy, 2015-2016)

After places have been filled under the first five criteria, 50% of any remaining places will be offered to those children who live nearest to the school, measured by the straight-line distance from the school gate to the child's home...

After places have been filled under the first six criteria, two thirds of any remaining places will be offered to children living within a one-mile radius of the front gate of the school.

(West London Free School, 2015-2016)

Here we can see the use of nodal points from which to measure proximity to home. The second example also shows how proximity is not always used as a single criterion but can be broken down and used within other criteria. This is often the case when schools use 'catchment' areas as well.

A number of different types of 'catchment' areas are used by the secondary Free Schools. Some schools have devised their own areas for priority admission while others specify particular postcode districts or names of local towns or villages:

55% of places from the whole cohort will be offered to an inner catchment area, which will include all addresses in postcode zone BD7.

The remaining 45% of places will be offered to an outer catchment area, which will include all addresses in the postcode zones BD1-6, 8, 9, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15 and 18.

(Dixons Kings Academy, 2015-2016)

Children living nearest to the school measured as the crow flies, that is in a straight line from the child's home to the main entrance of the school (travel by private car or public transport is not taken into account) within each of three identified segments in the following proportions:

- a. Shinfield segment (30% of remaining PAN)
- b. Grazeley and Three Mile Cross segment (30% of remaining PAN)
- c. Spencer's Wood and Swallowfield segment (40% of remaining PAN)

(Oakbank School, 2015-2016)

Children who Live in Corby and the Named Linked Villages

The Corby Technical School is situated close to the centre of Corby and is intended primarily to serve the area "Corby" which means the town of Corby and the associated villages for Corby secondary schools, as defined in the Local Authority's Annual Information for Parents' booklet. The associated villages are currently: Brigstock, Cottingham, East Carlton, Great Oakley, Gretton, Harringworth, Little Oakley, Little Stanion, Lyveden, Middleton, Rockingham, Stanion and Weldon.

(Corby Technical School, 2015-2016)

As can be seen in the first and second examples here the schools are able to decide the proportion of places available for each catchment area that they decide. In the first example, the school appear to be designating the majority of places to children who live in the same postcode district as the school. The second example also has priority areas with different proportions of pupils allocated to them. It is not clear what the rationale for this is. The school's admissions map indicates that the segment with the largest proportion (40%) is also very rural in comparison with the first and second which include large parts of the town of Reading in them.

6.3.7 Feeder schools

Feeder primary schools are used by a similar proportion of LAs (26.6%) and secondary Free Schools (22.1%). The data from the Free Schools, however, are considerably influenced by the fact that half of the 25 all-through schools had stated that children from the primary phase of their school would be prioritised for entry to the secondary phase. This is unsurprising and it is probably the case that as the all-through schools add new cohorts annually, they will also promote within-school transition across the age groups.

For the other schools (i.e. not all-through schools), feeder primaries were also sometimes named. Frequently these were linked to primary schools run by the same academy trust, and sometimes on the same site, thus creating a kind of 'unofficial' all-through model.

Children on roll at the Cuckoo Hall Academies Trust (CHAT) feeder schools of Cuckoo Hall Academy, Woodpecker Hall Primary Academy or Kingfisher Hall Academy...

(Heron Hall Academy, 2015-2016)

Children in Nishkam Primary School.

(Nishkam High School, 2015-2016)

6.3.8 Pupil Premium

Since 2014 academies and Free Schools have been allowed to prioritise entry to children eligible for the Pupil Premium. Nine secondary Free Schools (8.7% of the total) have included Pupil Premium priority within their admissions policy compared with none of the LAs. The percentage of places available for this criterion varies, with one school reserving 27% (16/60 places) of its PAN while another states that it will prioritise 10% of its 120 places.

Some schools, such as the one below, do not specify a certain percentage and instead place the Pupil Premium priority after Looked After children, children of staff, sibling and both inside and outside 'catchment' area criteria.

1. Looked after children or a child who was previously looked (see definitions below)
2. Children of staff, specifically teaching or support staff, full or part-time, on the payroll of the Torch Academy Trust working at Nottingham Free School at the time of admission....
3. Children who live in the catchment area and who at the time of admission will have a sibling (see definition below) attending the school (applicable from September 2015 onwards);
4. Other children who live in the catchment area;
5. Children who live outside the catchment area and who, at the time of admission, will have a sibling (see definition below) attending the school (applicable from September 2015 onwards);
6. Children who are eligible for the pupil premium.

(Nottingham Free School, 2015-2016)

This raises the question of whether many (or indeed any) children would be able to enter the school on the Pupil Premium criterion as, if the school is oversubscribed, criteria 1-5, (particularly ‘sibling’ and ‘catchment areas’) are likely to fill the vast majority of the places.

One Free School, which had included priority for Free School Meals pupils when it opened, has since dropped this criterion following new sponsorship by a local MAT in 2014. The reasons for this are not clear although the decision is possibly linked to the fact that the school has consistently allocated places to more than 15% of FSM children every year since opening and therefore the criterion may be viewed as obsolete.

Children who are entitled to Free School Meals (FSM)...All the students who are entitled to FSM are grouped together in each Catchment Area and 15% are selected at random from each Catchment Area.

(Kings Science Academy, 2012-13)

6.2.9 Random assignment

Nearly a fifth of all secondary Free Schools use random assignment within their admissions policy. Local Authorities are prevented from using this as the principal way of allocating places within schools. As such, there are no LAs in this study using random assignment. Most schools using some form of random ballots also use it alongside some form of geographical criteria. For these schools, there often seems to be an aim of providing access to both local children and those from slightly further afield. The criteria below show this school combining proximity criteria with random assignment within a designated ‘priority’ area.

To fulfil the school’s role as a community hub, after places have been filled under the first four criteria, 60% of any remaining places will be offered to those children who live nearest to the school based on a straight line distance measurement.

To provide fair and open access to the wider community, after places have been filled under the first five criteria, any remaining places will be offered to children living within the East Sussex County Council Electoral Divisions of Eastbourne, Polegate, Willingdon and East Dean. Where the number of applicants in this category exceeds the number of places, offers will be determined by random allocation.

(Gildredge House School, 2015-2016)

Some schools report allocating higher proportions of their PAN randomly and reserve fewer or no places for those living closest to the school. The criteria below, for example, are applied after Looked After children, siblings and children of founders. All remaining places are allocated randomly with the school clearly stating the LAs to be included in the first round of allocation. In principle, this gives equal priority to children who live very near to the school and considerably further away.

- Remaining places will be ‘randomly allocated’. The ‘random allocation’ process will be supervised by someone independent of Discovery School. The system of random allocation will be clearly described to parents to ensure transparency. Every young person will be allocated a number and the successful candidates will be determined by computer generated random number until the full School roll is reached.

Places will be randomly allocated from all the Local Authorities listed below:

Newcastle
Gateshead
North Tyneside
Northumberland
South Tyneside
Sunderland
County Durham

- Children from outside the areas listed under Point 5 will be allocated a place by random allocation only if the School is not filled from the Local Authorities listed under Point 5.

(Discovery School, 2015-2016)

Whilst, like banding, random assignment is often used with the intention of achieving more balanced intakes, it is only utilised when the school is oversubscribed and is based only on

those who choose to apply to school. Transport cost and provision, and length of commute may still limit which families do so.

6.3 Discussion

This analysis has described the number and types of allocation methods that secondary Free Schools are using. It has also explored some of the different interpretations of the oversubscription criteria chosen by schools. The analysis takes in to account some of the most recent changes to the Admissions Codes (DfE, 2012b; 2014a) and seeks to extend our understanding of how autonomous schools are prioritising their places. This discussion considers these findings in light of recent policy developments and the existing literature, particularly focusing on the potential impact of the admissions and allocation methods in relation to issues of social justice and equity. It considers whether concerns about ‘cream-skimming’ appear justified and the extent to which Free Schools are using similar practices to other types of school. It also important to remember here that the allocation procedures and criteria discussed above are redundant if schools are undersubscribed. Nevertheless, it is still felt that, through their admissions policy choices, schools are giving an indication of the families that they wish to prioritise and perhaps also the ethos that they are aiming for.

The analysis of admissions policies being used by secondary Free Schools indicates that the vast majority of schools are complying with the regulation and legislation outlined in the most recent Admissions Code (DfE, 2014a). Whilst there have been some concerns in relation to a small number of schools, most appear to understand the need for fairness and transparency with their policies. A few Free Schools had criteria which may be considered to be unnecessarily extensive, complex or unclear but as previous research has indicated, this is sometimes an issue for other school types too (West *et al.*, 2009). It does become more problematic, however, if Free Schools are adding additional complexity to the school choice process, on top of what parents already have to consider in order to make their decisions and gain a place.

All of the Free Schools in this study gave priority to Looked After children as per the legislation in the Admissions Code. In addition, the schools outlined the procedure for allocating places for children with statements of SEN who name the school on their

application forms. Both of these findings are indicative of the tightening of the admissions process in recent years and the particular focus on ensuring priority access for these disadvantaged groups. Having these criteria within the admissions policy does not mean, however, that these pupils or those children with less severe SEN are necessarily attending the schools. In the first year of the Free Schools programme, initial analyses did indicate that the schools were underrepresenting the number of SEN children compared with other local schools (Gooch, 2011). There are a number of reasons why this might be though, and it does not suggest that the schools are discriminating against SEN pupils. It is quite possible at this early stage that the schools were perceived as an ‘unknown quantity’ in the local schools market with no proven track record of good support for children with special needs. As a result it is perhaps less likely that parents would opt for them until their reputation had been established. It is also possible that the temporary buildings which many Free Schools are first located in or lack of facilities are not deemed suitable for children with particular physical disabilities. There have been some notable cases where academies and Free Schools have rejected applications from pupils with statements of SEN with the schools stating that they did not have the resources to support the children (BBC, 2014b) or that admitting the pupils might have a detrimental effect on the learning of other students (Harris and Vasagar, 2012). Further research is needed to establish the extent to which different types of school are currently serving pupils with different SEN and those pupils who are or have been in care.

The ability for some schools to select pupils by their faith background has been a concern for those who argue that it can contribute towards school segregation by religion as well as sometimes by socioeconomic status and ethnicity too (Allen and West, 2011; Cattle, 2013). The Free Schools policy has allowed for additional faith schools representing a broader range of religions to be opened in England. Currently, just over one in ten secondary Free Schools are using religious criteria to prioritise places. This does not represent a very large number of schools or pupils nationally. The concern, however, is on a more local level and the potential impact that the schools might have on different types of segregation across a particular area. Another issue worthy of consideration is the decision by some Free Schools to adopt a religious ethos but to avoid the use of faith criteria in prioritising places. The data here do not make it clear what the rationale for this might be although it is possible that the schools are trying to appear ‘open’ to all students, irrespective of background. Whether this translates in

to balanced intakes, however, remains to be seen, as it is still possible that the religious ethos could influence whether these schools are viewed as viable choices by some families.

In line with previous research, the majority of admissions authorities in this study (both individual schools and LAs) used criteria relating to siblings and proximity (Pennell *et al.*, 2006). In both instances these criteria are also frequently highly ranked. The decision by most secondary Free Schools to adopt sibling criteria is not surprising and is clearly linked to practical issues such as transport and travel as well as perhaps students' wellbeing and security (White *et al.*, 2001). The use of proximity criteria by new schools is also perhaps to be expected. Prioritising pupils based on geography is a well-established part of the admissions and allocation process in England (Coldron *et al.*, 2008; Gorard *et al.*, 2003) and for many schools (irrespective of their type) serving a local population is a key objective.

For some Free Schools the desire to meet parental demand in a particular local area influenced their decisions about where to locate (Higham, 2014) and their choice of admissions criteria. Moreover, an emphasis by some schools on 'localism' may be linked to the initial policy focus on the 'Big Society' agenda with community and neighbourhood groups being encouraged to open schools (The Conservative Party, 2010). From the parents' perspective, research continues to show that distance and location are important considerations when choosing schools (Burgess *et al.*, 2006; Leroux, 2015). But they are also key constraints in the choice process, and have been shown to limit the options available to families, particularly to those who are from lower socioeconomic backgrounds (Burgess *et al.*, 2011). Patterns of local housing are often the most significant factor in determining levels of segregation in schools (Gorard *et al.*, 2003). This is compounded, however, by the use of proximity criteria which can drive up house prices in areas close to good schools and prioritises these more affluent families at the expense of those who cannot afford to live so nearby. But it must be remembered that this is not just a 'Free School' issue. Increasing the number of schools that use proximity criteria is certainly not likely to contribute to a reduction in the levels of stratification between schools but, if this is a desirable outcome, then the use of such allocation methods needs to be reviewed on a national scale, by all admissions authorities.

The current study shows that a number of Free Schools are adopting allocation methods which potentially could lead to more equitable access to schools and more balanced intakes. These include banding (on a school or area level) and random assignment. Recent research has shown a slight increase in the number of comprehensive schools using banding as well as the relative popularity of random assignment (or ballots) for Free Schools and sponsored academies (Noden *et al.*, 2014). The decisions by Free Schools to adopt these methods are positive. Nevertheless, the use of school-level banding needs to be considered with caution as the allocation of places tends to be based just on the ability levels of those who apply to the school meaning that the intake will not necessarily be representative of those across a particular area. Symbolically though, the use of any form of banding is significant and does have the potential to provide an alternative to less equitable methods. The data highlight the differences between the admissions freedoms of autonomous schools and LAs. While LAs are allowed to use banding, they are not permitted to use random assignment to allocate a majority of their places (DfE, 2014a). This ruling considerably restricts the use of random ballots on a national level with it being left to just individual schools or academy trusts to adopt it if they wish. The Free Schools that used random assignment within their oversubscription criteria tended to use it for a specific proportion of places (usually in addition to a proportion of proximity-based places) and/or in conjunction with identified catchment areas. Again, these are positive findings in terms of fairer allocation of places and offer a contrast to the complete absence of random assignment for the LA criteria. The reluctance by the government to permit ‘too much’ random allocation by LAs is presumably linked to a commitment to the provision of at least some local places for children. The issue now, however, is that we have a number of LAs with no LA-controlled community schools anyway, making this rationale fairly pointless. Having some schools allowed to use ballots for the majority of places and some not appears unfair. If the government are reluctant to permit all schools to use random allocation as a primary method of assignment, then there is instead still an argument for encouraging assignment based on a combination of both geographical and random criteria, particularly in urban areas where choice and competition between schools is more likely. This could have a substantial impact on widening access to good schools whilst also perhaps contributing to more balanced intakes across local areas.

Amendments to the Admissions Code (DfE, 2014a) allowed LAs (in addition to academies and Free Schools) to prioritise access to children eligible for the Pupil Premium. The DfE (2014b) have stated that this can be used for September 2016 entry onwards and as such no LAs in this study have it within their admissions policy. A small proportion of the secondary Free Schools (8.7%) included some provision for Pupil Premium eligible students in their admissions policy. This is positive and demonstrates, on paper at least, some commitment to ensuring access for those from disadvantaged backgrounds. As shown in the findings, however, the schools do need to make it clear what proportion of pupils they wish to reserve Pupil Premium places for. In addition, admissions authorities need to make it clear what evidence of Pupil Premium eligibility is required from parents and ensure that this is used only for the purpose for which it is intended (DfE, 2014c) rather than for further determining whether a pupil should be awarded a place. But more also needs to be done to ensure that more schools consider adopting this type of criteria, particularly in areas where there is substantial imbalance between the socioeconomic background of school intakes. Whilst Pupil Premium pupils come with additional funding attached to them, it would seem that many schools still need further incentives to commit to some degree of prioritisation for these children. Research in to what might work to encourage schools and LAs to adopt this practice has, as far as I know has not been conducted yet, but may prove very valuable in considering one way of ensuring that children from poorer backgrounds have better opportunities to access good schools.

The findings in this study show that overall Free Schools are using a wider range of admissions criteria yet individually are using, on average, a similar number of criteria to the LAs. As well as studying the choices of which criteria are or are not included, it is also important to consider how allocation methods operate together to form the overall picture. It is too simplistic, for example, to conclude that schools which use any amount of random assignment are aiming for equity and balance in their admissions. The combination of allocation methods needs to be explored further. This is particularly of interest where schools are opting to use criteria which are often viewed as more socially inclusive (i.e. banding or random assignment) alongside those which are sometimes seen as more selective (i.e. aptitude or faith criteria). This is the case for a number of Free Schools and allowing them to make these decisions is a key part of the policy initiative which promotes autonomy and freedom.

The impact on parents' decisions during the application process and on school intakes remains to be seen.

6.4 Conclusion

The findings here raise questions about the varying purposes that admissions policies are expected to fulfil, and the extent to which we can and should expect them to contribute towards fairness within the school choice process. The vast majority of Free Schools appear to have admissions and allocation procedures that are in line with the regulation and legislation outlined by the government. That does not mean, however, that the schools (and indeed their corresponding LAs) are necessarily using methods which might be the most effective in terms of promoting equity and reducing stratification. Nor does it mean that there have not been issues with stated policies or practices that have had to be rectified by the government's regulatory body (see for example, OSA, 2012; OSA, 2014; OSA, 2015b) with schools having to amend their documentation accordingly. The overall picture though is that in most cases the Free Schools are not doing anything significantly different to what is being reported by the Local Authorities. Most admissions policies are still made up of criteria relating to siblings and geographical criteria.

There are some instances of Free Schools using criteria which select by aptitude, faith or children of school staff or founders. However, these methods of allocation are not just used by Free Schools but are found in many other schools across the country (Allen and West, 2011; Noden *et al.*, 2014). If there is genuine concern about their use and their influence on student composition then this needs to be tackled on a national level, not just in relation to one type of school. It is clear that issues with fairness in admissions practices extend far beyond just Free School admissions. There are persistent systemic problems which could be addressed if there was political will to do so, and if the intention was to move towards more balanced intakes across schools. Coldron (2015) warns, however, that we should be careful about simply suggesting 'tweaks' to the admissions system as a way of reducing segregation. Strong regulation and fair procedures are, he argues, important but inequity in the school choice process is about much more than just the admissions and allocation arrangements that different schools use.

There is also perhaps reason for optimism. While opponents of the Free Schools policy have predominantly focused on the schools' freedoms to opt for 'selective' methods of allocating places, their potential to use methods which signal an inclusive environment and a desire for balanced school intakes has largely been ignored. Secondary Free Schools have not yet widely adopted these allocation and admissions procedures yet the fact that some schools have begun to include them should be seen as a positive step. This could be further encouraged during the proposal stage for new Free Schools. Policymakers and school leaders could also do more to ensure that equitable access for disadvantaged pupils via the admissions process is promoted and viewed as 'best practice'. Changes to the Admissions Code which now allow all admissions authorities (not just academies) to prioritise Pupil Premium-eligible students are potentially useful but the optional nature of the policy means that, in reality, many schools may choose to continue without making such provision for disadvantaged pupils. Much more valuable would be to make this prioritisation a requirement of all state-funded schools, linking the proportions of Pupil Premium pupils to be admitted to local levels of disadvantage. This would represent much more than a 'tweak' with admissions arrangements, would encourage fairer access to schools for all children and would be likely to have a substantial impact on reducing levels of segregation across the country.

CHAPTER 7

CHOOSING A FREE SCHOOL: REASONS, STRATEGIES AND THE ROLE OF PARENTS

A choice between two things you don't want is hardly a choice at all. Free Schools offer a genuine alternative - and they have the freedom to be different.

(Gove, 2011)

This chapter presents the findings relating to the factors and strategies influencing parents' choice of a Free School. It draws on data from both the parent questionnaire and the interviews with Free School parents. The data are presented together in order to provide a more complete picture of the choice process and to allow for corroboration or contradiction to be explored where relevant. The chapter essentially seeks to address the 'why' and the 'how' of choosing a Free School. It reports the findings from 346 questionnaire responses (139 from Free School parents and 207 from non-Free School parents, a response rate of 23.1%) and 20 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with Free School parents. The first section presents the key factors that influenced the choice of school and the second section goes on to discuss the information and strategies that parents employed during the choice process. A final section discusses the findings in light of the relevant policy and academic literature.

7.1 What were Free School parents looking for?

This section outlines the features that parents reported as influential in their eventual choice of school. In addition to the interview data, this section also draws on questionnaire responses provided both by Free School parents and non-Free School parents. This dataset provides an important point of comparison. It also reminds us that the choice of a Free School does not necessarily happen in isolation and calls in to question the notion of Free School choice being in some way 'different' to that of choosing other types of school.

Three main themes emerged: academic quality; a personalised and holistic approach to schooling; and finally, issues linked to convenience. That is not to say, of course, that all of the parents were looking for exactly the same combination of factors in their choice of school. Similarly, there was variation in how parents interpreted or emphasised these factors. Parents did not always perceive features of the school as independent of each other, and so where

appropriate, there is acknowledgment of the interaction between them. Unsurprisingly, the local and social contexts in which parents were making their decisions also appeared to be significant, often informing their impressions of what a ‘good’ school choice was.

It is also important to note that the findings here are based on the features that parents have reported as influential in their choice of school, either through the questionnaire or in the interviews. Parents’ responses were retrospective and tended to be clearly articulated and usually suggestive of a rational approach to the process of choosing a school. The data, therefore, perhaps do not sufficiently capture the significant role that intuition is likely to have played in the process. This is an issue that is considered in more depth in both the findings and discussion sections of this chapter.

7.1.1 Academic quality and performance

The majority of parents involved in this study reported that academic quality and/or performance was an important factor in their choice of school. As an indicator of this, when all responses from the questionnaire were combined, the factors ‘overall quality’ and ‘quality of teaching’ were reported most frequently as ‘very important’ by 75.3% and 73.3% (respectively) of parents. ‘Examination results’ were highly valued by 60.7% of respondents whilst a broader indicator of quality, ‘overall reputation’ was noted as ‘very important’ by 69.9% of parents. These figures suggest that academic quality formed a central role in informing parents’ choice irrespective of whether parents eventually chose a Free School or not.

Table 7.1 shows the proportion of parents citing each factor as ‘very important’. Whilst each of the four features mentioned above have a majority of parents valuing them, there is some difference between the two groups of parents. For Free School parents, for example, the ‘quality of teaching’ factor was reported as ‘very important’ by 86.0% whereas the figure for non-Free School parents was 65.7%. Examination results, however, were ‘very important’ for 56.6% of Free School parents and 63.3% of non-Free School parents. Although fairly similar proportions, what is interesting is the fact that for Free School parents there are nine other factors that feature more highly whereas for non-Free School parents there are just four. This suggests that while a proven track record of performance is important to both groups, it may

be that the Free School parents were less concerned about examination performance yet were still attaching value to academic quality more generally. This is perhaps not surprising when we remember that these parents did eventually choose a school that's novelty meant that it had a very limited academic reputation. The post-hoc nature of the data here, however, makes it difficult to know whether parents had their child's current school in mind when responding or whether they were considering the factors that influenced their decisions about schools more generally, as the question asked.

Table 7.1: Percentage of parents reporting each factor as 'very important'

Factor	% of Free School parents (n = 139)	% of non-Free School parents (n = 207)
Quality of teaching	86.0	65.7
Discipline	81.6	59.5
Overall quality	80.9	72.4
Safe	77.9	68.6
Ethos	76.5	59.0
Reputation	72.8	68.1
Traditional approach	61.0	34.3
Size	61.0	24.3
Facilities	58.8	55.5
Exam results	56.6	63.3
Future	52.9	56.7
Extra-curricular	52.9	34.3
Care	41.2	45.2
Not like other schools	39.7	25.7
Child's preference	38.2	56.7
Ofsted	38.2	44.3
Transport	30.9	38.1
Location/near home	30.9	36.7
New/different approach	30.1	7.6
Likelihood of gaining place	29.4	34.3
Specialist curriculum area	25.7	19.5
Support for SEN	24.3	21.4
Ethnic Mix	20.6	16.7
Sibling attendance	19.9	33.8
Religion	14.7	17.6
Friends attend	5.1	25.2
Single sex	0.7	6.2

Ofsted inspection reports, which are intended to provide an independent overview of school quality, were reported as ‘very important’ by approximately four in ten parents from each group (38.2% of Free School parents and 44.3% of non-Free School parents). Indeed 23.5% of Free School parents stated that Ofsted reports were ‘not important’ compared with 13.8% of non-Free School parents. These figures are perhaps reflective of the fact that there were not inspection reports available at the time for the Free Schools chosen by these parents. This appears not to have prevented them from applying, perhaps because of their perceptions of the alternatives or because other features of the Free School had convinced them of its quality

7.1.2 Academic quality and social distinction

The questionnaire data discussed above indicate how many parents reported valuing academic quality and performance when considering schools for their child. What is not always clear from that data, however, is whether their understanding of school quality is rooted in perception or more objective measures of performance (i.e. examination results or inspection reports). The interviews with Free School parents did shed more light on this issue, though and also suggest that for many of the parents, academic quality was often linked to the potential social mix at the Free School or opinions of the existing student composition at other local schools. For some parents, this provided a useful framework within which to positively view the new school and compare it with others. These issues are dealt with below.

7.1.2.1 Avoiding other schools

In line with previous research, a high proportion of parents reported that their dissatisfaction with other schools was an important factor in influencing the choice process (Bagley *et al.*, 2001). In this study, 80.1% of Free School parents reported this as an ‘important’ or ‘very important’ factor compared to 62.4% of non-Free School parents. One Free School parent commented in the open section of the survey that “other state schools were a frightening option” due to their narrow curricula and didactic teaching approaches. As the statistics indicate, however, the avoidance of other schools was also a concern for some non-Free School parents too with one stating that “I was concerned my daughter would be offered a place at the other local secondary school, I didn’t want – this.”

These views were supported and extended by a number of Free School parents in the interviews. The avoidance of schools known (or perceived) to be academically poor or mediocre was a persistent theme. In several cases, Ofsted reports or performance data were cited as informing awareness of academic quality but more frequently, local reputation and personal experience of the schools influenced parents' understanding of the choices available.

[Closest school] was satisfactory, I think actually, I'm lying now, big [other local school] did get a good Ofsted, however, their results have been poor and I think [county] generally doesn't perform very well.

(FD, School 2)

I mean we can send our children to [school], which we tend to do, but the other schools are [school], [school], which is at [town] on the way to [town], [school] which I wouldn't send a child to, 'cause my daughter went there for her first year before she moved up to [town] with her half-sister and it used to be called something else and they've changed the uniform, they've tried to revamp it but it's not performing basically.

(BH, School 9)

The extracts above both indicate the significance of school location and the implications that this has for interpreting the quality of provision on offer. Irrespective of concrete measures of performance, the parents' instinct is that it is best to avoid schools located in certain areas. They are, however, less explicit in commenting on how this might influence the social mix of the school and their negative choice of it. Some were more open about this issue.

It's quite far away for us...it's probably about 10 miles...she gets a bus that goes to the school, so it's not for the public ...they [other local schools] all have reputations and the area that they're in, I'm not trying to be snobby or anything but I just didn't like that for her...the behaviour, yeah, the areas that they're in...it's what I've heard and what you see in the papers.

(SG, School 9)

...the other schools which are in a town near to us, one's a Catholic school and one is an academy but they've both had quite bad Ofsted reports and it's a very different profile of students, it's more of a socially and financially deprived area that they're in and then that's the snob in me, if nothing else. I used to work in [town], as you know there's certain people you'll do your best to sort of delay your child engaging with them, but yes I chose the schools on the results and pastoral care.

(TL, School 6)

Here the notion of 'otherness' comes to the fore. These parents are aware of the 'types' of children that they would prefer to keep their own child separate from, essentially children that are from poorer or socially disadvantaged backgrounds. Rather than just avoiding particular schools because of measured poor performance, there also appears a desire to avoid particular groups of people. Indeed, the parent in the first extract is also perhaps reassured that her child does not have to travel to school with those from outside of her own school community. There appears a muddled distinction between school performance and student composition with parents, in some cases, understanding them synonymously. For the parents here, the choice of the Free School is described as a way of avoiding the negative qualities which they perceived to be existent at alternative options. This could, in part, have been due to the Free School's 'newness' (and therefore its lack of a negative social or academic reputation) as well as perhaps an attempt by the school to actively provide this alternative that some parents appeared to be looking for. The actuality of whether the Free School would be 'better' than other schools was almost impossible to know. But the 'vision' of it offering a superior alternative appeared enough to convince many parents to choose it. The following sections consider some of the indicators that parents reported as important in forming that view.

7.1.2.2 An 'effective' school environment

The desire for a 'better' alternative to the provision on offer elsewhere was important for parents and, as discussed above, the opening of a Free School in the local area was received favourably by some who were dissatisfied with other possible options. The opportunity for children to reach their potential academically was a significant consideration during the choice process, but for this to happen, parents seemed to feel that the 'right' conditions and

environment must be created. They interpreted certain information from the school as being an indicator of high quality academic standards, using this to contribute to their decision where more concrete details of performance were missing.

A number of interlinked features helped to form this perception. These included a combination of some or all of the following: the promotion of traditional values; an academic curriculum; a 'smart', traditional-style school uniform; and well-managed behaviour and strict discipline. The data suggest that the promise of these features by the schools was important in gaining parents' initial interest in the Free School. They were used to provide a picture of distinction and a clear comparison with other local schools, embedding an impression of quality despite a lack of evidence to support this.

In this study 61.0% of Free School parents compared with just 34.3% of non-Free School parents reported that a traditional approach to schooling was very important to them. Previous research in to private school choice (Gorard, 1997) and CTCs (Whitty *et al.*, 1993) has suggested that some parents were attracted to these types of schools by their traditional ethos. It would seem that this is also the case in relation to some of the Free Schools that participated in this study. Parents' understanding of what exactly a traditional approach might entail was primarily linked to strict discipline, uniform and curriculum. Further elaboration was given during some of the interviews in relation to a number of the schools being discussed. Again, comparisons with other local schools were often used to justify the decisions and highlight the dissimilarities between them. Comments such as this, regarding the uniform and appearance of pupils were fairly typical:

...a fairly no nonsense, old fashioned school, that it would be a hard hitting, going for academia kind of thing, that in [Local School], you know, you have your polo shirt, well they were going to have a collar and tie and blazer and we quite liked that they were going to for, to be fairly academic and they were going to push the children and that they were going to be strict on discipline and quite rigorous and I like that approach.

(IR, School 5)

The polo shirt appeared to act as a symbol of underperformance and disadvantage. By contrast, the smart uniform and firm approach to discipline promised by the Free School were interpreted as indicative of the rigorous approach being offered. The blazer and tie appear to be suggestive of success and affluence, and perhaps reinforce the feeling of quality and exclusivity. These signals are important to the Free School too; without a proven reputation for quality, they must find alternative ways of suggesting it in order to attract parents and convince them that the school is able to deliver on its promises of high standards. Communicating this message is likely to have formed a significant part of their marketing and recruitment campaigns.

This desire for a positive working environment where their child could succeed academically was a recurring theme for some parents. This was often referred to initially as ‘ethos’ but was then sometimes further defined in terms of behaviour and discipline. Unsurprisingly, the opportunity to potentially avoid or distance themselves from the negative behaviour of ‘other’ children was seen as an attractive option. In the questionnaire, ‘discipline’ was rated as ‘very important’ by 81.6% of Free School parents compared with 59.5% of non-Free School parents. This suggests some difference perhaps in the approach or ethos that the two groups were looking for when considering schools, and possibly in what was being vocalised by the schools that they were viewing. The extent to which parents perceived discipline as being intertwined with quality and performance may also have contributed to this variation. With a new Free School, it was impossible to know or see how behaviour is being managed and therefore, prior to applying, parents had to again rely on what they were being told.

It's just like the whole ethos, it was kind of going back to basics for me, which was discipline, you know, like they don't take any messing around and I find these days, a lot of schools give more attention to naughty children, rather than the children that just get on with it but could do with some extra help.

(XP, School 3)

An interest in a ‘traditional’ or ‘back to basics’ curriculum was also reported by a number of parents as a ‘selling point’ of the Free Schools. This perhaps reflects some recent policy and discourse shifts in relation to subjects, qualifications and standards (DfE, 2010; Lupton and

Thomson, 2015). An emphasis on rigour and the value of a core academic curriculum has underpinned much Conservative party education policy and has been viewed as a route to improving standards within schools. This message appears to have been reinforced by some of the Free Schools discussed in this study with many parents commenting favourably. Again, comparisons with other local schools were made, with parents tending to favour the 'less is more' approach in relation to curriculum subjects on offer.

They're quite a traditional school...they have a low offer I suppose of choice than the larger schools have and when I speak to other colleagues who go to a school in [Town], they get the opportunity to do Engineering and things like that, where my children haven't got that but, you know, the triple Science, English, maths, obviously they do get a chance to do computing, hospitality and catering so there are those vocational GCSEs available for them, but no, I think it's quite a traditional school, which I quite like.

(RS, School 2)

The perceived status of a traditional curriculum and the academic (as opposed to vocational) qualifications on offer were viewed positively by this parent, both in terms of an indication of high academic standards at the school but also in relation to potential longer term benefits, such as attendance at university. Schools' decisions to exclude certain practical or vocational subjects or qualifications were not perceived as a negative factor for the Free School parents in this study. The parent below, for example, described how the 'different' provision at the Free School contributed to a feeling of choice for some families. It is also perhaps possible to see how this provision may appear more attractive to some families than others, potentially acting as a sorting mechanism across schools.

I've never called myself middle class before in my life, but I think that is what the rural, middle class parents are looking for.... Yeah, horses for courses, you know, maybe your child does want to get on a bus every day and go to a bigger school that has got a wider curriculum and whatever, that's fine, that's absolutely fine, I'm not judging that at all, but it's all about utilising what we've got here in the community...

(DF, School 2)

Interestingly, an emphasis on an academic curriculum and traditional values was often seen by the parents at the Free School offering something ‘new’ or innovative, therefore providing additional choice in the area. What is not known from the data, however, is the extent to which this ‘difference’ between the Free School and other local schools was a reality, or was actually used as more of a marketing tool to help establish parents’ interest.

7.1.2.3 Comparisons with other school types

Where some parents had described negative choices away from other local state schools as a reason for choosing the Free School, some also drew positive comparisons with private or grammar schools, models that they perceived to be more successful and desirable. This was an area that predominantly emerged from the interviews as there had been no prompt within the questionnaire. Despite this, a small number of Free School parents did reference private or grammar schools in the open section of the questionnaire which asked parents to comment on the most important factors that influenced their school choice.

I wanted my son to have the best education possible. The Free School is the closest thing to a private education.

[The Free] School is modelled on grammar and private school educational system which is better than the average state school...Good sports facilities are an important factor and at [Free School] are almost on a par with the Local Preps.

It should be reiterated here that references to private or selective schooling were usually reported in very general terms, and were based on (perhaps outdated) perceptions of what this *type* of schooling was like. The ‘traditional’ features described in the section above were also linked with ideas of what independent or grammar school education was like. The parents’ reports suggest that the schools tended to make links to these other high-status school types explicit to parents.

[Free School] is part of the [academies trust] and [they] have got a private school in[town], so they were very much, when they were talking about, look, we've got a private school here, we can borrow teachers, we can borrow resources, we can swap

over, so that was always quite nice...

(SG, School 9)

Parents who felt that the Free School could be compared with private or grammar education tended to focus on a combination of issues linked to academic attainment and rigour, ethos and behaviour. There was little overt acknowledgement of the fact that an economically and/or socially advantaged intake (as one would expect to find in a private or grammar school) would also be desirable. However, the parent's comment below suggests that this may have been a consideration.

...other secondary school children, more often than not, you're coming home from work, you see children walking around in their school uniform and it just looks bad. I've always been asking myself, do parents know where these children are, some of them are getting up to no good, so for me the idea that it will be a longer day at school appeals to me...another thing is I wanted [child] to go to grammar school actually, but she'd need her 11 plus...I really wanted her to have a high level of education. She went for the 11 plus, she missed by about five marks which was really frustrating, but at the same time, I put her name down for [Free School].

(AB, School 1)

By contrast though, another parent choosing the same Free School found the lack of a selective admissions system and ethos appealing.

Well, the main reason was lack of choice, I think, initially. I was allocated a school for my child that was, I don't believe in selection, I didn't put my kids through 11 plus and the comprehensive that I was allocated has a kind of covert selective system...then I decided to apply to a free school, quite complicated, I think a lot of academies are wrong, I think the whole idea's wrong, but I was trying to do what's best for my child and that sounds awful, doesn't it...I spoke to this woman who started it [the Free School], she's the deputy head and she's a really lovely, egalitarian, really lovely woman, and she said we're not going to stream, we're not going to set, you know, celebrating success and academic success and just not labelling children and not singling out clever kids, it was all lovely and that's why really.

These two different perspectives give not only an interesting comparison of what parents were looking for in a school, but also of what the same school was apparently able to offer the parents. Both saw the Free School as an appropriate alternative to a socially selective school; in the first statement this was because of perceived similarities to grammar school provision and for the second parent because of its difference from another local school and the desire for a “properly comprehensive” intake and ethos. Either way, the school has managed to present itself as being a good option to both families. Its lack of established reputation has perhaps helped to make this possible, allowing it to adopt a more flexible and personalised approach to promoting the school without parents being able to make additional judgements based on performance or intake characteristics.

7.1.3 Personalisation and holistic education

The desire for a high quality education was prevalent for both groups of parents but it is also clear from the data that other factors had a significant influence during the school choice process too. The child being treated and supported as an individual was a recurring theme in the open section of the questionnaire which asked about other important factors influencing school choice. The comments below are indicative of the views expressed:

It was very important for us to find a school that cared for my child as an individual.

[Child] has learning and behaviour difficulties, and wanted a school that would be more than just Ofsted important.

Even though we advise our child on what we feel will be a good school to attend our child's choice was paramount as he has to attend the school for 8 years and his happiness is far more important than league tables (which are not a true reflection of a school anyway).

About the education philosophy of the school. Pupil centred / peer collaboration. Does the school set high expectations appropriate to the individual? Sport in curriculum. Not enough sport [in other schools] generally.

My child was bullied at her primary school so I wanted somewhere that catered for her as a quirky individual.

A personalised approach has been interpreted in different ways in these comments. Some parents focus on the individual learning needs of their child while others comment on social/care needs or the interests of the child. A process of ‘child-matching’ (Gewirtz *et al.*, 1995) appears to emerge whereby skilled choosers attempt to select a school which they feel best fits with the personality, needs, aspirations or interests of their child. The questionnaire data suggest some similarities and differences placed on these factors by Free School and non-Free School parents. ‘Care/pastoral support’, for example, was reported as important/very important by three quarters of both groups of parents (75.2% of Free School parents and 76.2% of non-Free School parents). School or class size, which parents often equate with both ‘better’ academic performance and improved opportunities for personalised learning and care was reported as ‘very important’ by 61.0% of Free School parents and just 24.3% of non-Free School parents. Extra-curricular activities offered were reported as ‘very important’ by 52.9% of Free School parents compared with 34.3% of non-Free School parents. Whilst these features are likely to be ones that parents did consider generally when choosing schools, it is also almost certainly the case that the value placed on them was influenced by knowledge of their availability in local school options as well as parents’ understanding of the benefits that they may provide. The schools also play a substantial role in communicating these messages. These issues are considered further in the sections below, drawing on the interview data to provide a more detailed picture of how these factors influenced the choice of a new Free School.

7.1.3.1 School and class size

The promise of a smaller school and smaller class sizes (in comparison to other local secondary schools) was reported as an important factor in influencing the choice of a Free School for a number of parents in this study. This factor seemed particularly significant in initially gaining parents’ interest in the school; it was a clear and tangible way of marking the Free School out as ‘different’ and a strategy that they felt would be beneficial in supporting

the individual needs and interests of their child. A small number of parents of children with mild-moderate learning needs were particularly attracted by this.

The schools in the area were quite big, I think we had [School] and [School], so they were very large schools and we felt that with his literacy problem, we thought that he would be lost, forgotten. So, when we went to [Free School], we were very interested because they were talking about the class sizes being quite small and each of the children would be treated as individuals and their strengths would be identified quite quickly.

(RS, School 2)

The concern about children ‘getting lost’ in larger schools was voiced by several parents who cited that school size was important to them. This was linked to an interest in the amount of personalised support that their children would get and about the potential for them to ‘fit in’ socially too. Parents believed that it would be easier for their children to make friends and know others in their year group with smaller classes and a smaller intake. The fact that the Free Schools only had one or two year groups in the school at the time of these children attending was also important, contributing to the feeling of a safer, more secure environment. While parents offered reasons rationalising why a smaller school/class was preferred, it is also quite possible that intuition played a role here. Hearing that the Free School would be smaller than other local schools seemed to be a key early indicator of the school being ‘better.’

Tied closely to the issue of a smaller school and a personalised approach to education was a desire by parents for children to be ‘known’ by their teachers. The perception of children being ‘just another child’ or even a ‘number’ (both terms used by participants) in larger schools was viewed as problematic. They wanted their children’s skills and needs to be recognised and for them to receive personalised attention in relation to these. It appears that some of the schools also emphasised this issue, perhaps reinforcing and confirming the positive impression that these parents had.

It was their [the teachers] enthusiasm, they were just so passionate about the children and when we took [child] up there to their first meeting, they talked to him and not so much to us. I really liked that, I thought, you know, yes it is all about him...it was like

tell us what you're good at and not any other school spoke to him...it wasn't really anything to do with Ofsted results or anything like that, I was looking at an environment that was going to be best for [child]

(XP, School 3)

The head teacher made a point at one of the presentations that we want to say that every member of staff will know you, you know, they have an aim to know every child's name, every member of staff will know every child's name by half term and I believe that they do.

(FD, School 2)

These parents are not simply concerned with whether the teachers are going to be good at teaching (although they indicate that this is important too) but are interested in their children being individually recognised and nurtured. In the absence of any form of reputation, the parents reported that the teachers' interactions and interest in the children were important indicators of how their child would be treated and their child's potential feelings of happiness and security at the school. The comments here are reflective of one of the aims of the Free Schools initiative: to create more "smaller schools with smaller class sizes with teachers who know the children's names" (The Conservative Party, 2010, p.51). Smaller schools and classes appeared to act as proxies for more supportive learning environments where a number of the parents felt that their children were more likely to thrive and achieve. It is also a feature with which other, established schools cannot easily compete, contributing to the sense of difference and exclusivity at the Free School.

7.1.3.2 Enrichment and extra-curricular provision

The desire for a personalised approach to schooling was complemented by a recurring interest in enrichment or extra-curricular programmes that were described by the schools as a way of supplementing the academic curriculum on offer. As the questionnaire data indicated, extra-curricular provision was an important/very important factor for 93.4% of Free School parents and 79.5% of non-Free School parents. Most Free School parents interviewed in this study made some reference to enrichment time or extra-curricular activities and the notion that the school could be instrumental in contributing to the development of a 'well-rounded' child.

Academic achievement, whilst being an important outcome, was viewed as just one outcome of schooling. Parents felt that an engaging programme of extra-curricular activities could contribute to their child's enjoyment of school, their physical and emotional wellbeing and the learning of non-academic skills that could be useful later in life.

Every Friday they do a drop down day, so they take them out of the school environment and they take them to museums or they do some sort of like business enterprise with them. It's very much sort of like the whole round person as it were, rather than just focussing solely on academia the whole time.

(EM, School 1)

There's so much, they can do something different each term, it can be sort of academic things, like they've been doing German, it can be things like student council, making a year book and then you've got like sports, hockey, cricket, football, it can be crafts...it's quite nice that it's not, it's not heavy going, it's not marked or anything, you know, it's taken seriously but it's sort, you know, a little bit extra.

(SG, School 9)

The parents commenting on enrichment and extra-curricular features were predominantly interested in activities that they felt would be academically, socially or culturally beneficial to their child. In addition, they wanted their children to enjoy themselves but within a structured, safe and supervised environment. Formalising activities as part of the school timetable, particularly as part of an extended school day, proved to be very popular too although it is also possible that this was linked to some of the issues of convenience discussed below.

7.1.4 Convenience

Practical issues linked to travel and transport were reported as being influential in parents' choice of schools. This is unsurprising when considered alongside the literature which, despite parents theoretically being able to choose schools in any area, still shows that proximity and transport are key factors during the choice process (Coldron *et al.*, 2008; Leroux, 2015). Data from both the questionnaires and interviews supports these findings, and

the interviews also reveal some Free School parents’ interest and preference for extended school days.

The majority of parents from both groups suggested that proximity or transport were important factors although very few parents reported them as the *most* important. Table 7.2 indicates the proportion of parents who reported that ‘proximity’ and ‘transport’ were important or very important factors.

Table 7.2: Percentage of parents who reported convenience factors as ‘important’ or ‘very important’

	% Free School parents	% Non-Free School parents
Proximity	63.9	77.3
Cost/ease of transport	61.8	66.2

Fewer Free School parents stated that proximity and transport were important features when considering and choosing schools. The differences between the groups are not great although it does seem that more non-Free School parents were concerned about the school being close to their home. The interviews gave more detail on these issues from some Free School parents’ perspectives, indicating that distance and transport factors were not simply just about convenience and cost, but also sometimes about a desire to support a new public service in the local community.

7.1.4.1 Distance and Transport

The distance of potential schools away from home was a factor that nearly all parents referred to at some point during the interviews. The specific geographical contexts of the school and area where families lived were important in determining the emphasis that was placed on this factor. Where the Free School was close to home, parents were pleased that they now had what they perceived to be a “good, local school” (Morgan, 2014). Although not the most significant factor, a shorter home-school distance was interpreted as a ‘bonus’ feature of the Free School and something that parents were grateful for. For those who felt slightly uneasy about the possibility of opting away from the local school, the opening of a nearby Free School was a welcome addition to the choice set.

...you apply for a place, we applied for a place online, you put in your postcode and [Free School] was the one that came up for our postcode, so we just actually, you know, we've chosen the closest school, which is for our kind of like morals, we were quite lucky and I think I'd have felt, I'm being totally honest here, would have felt uncomfortable, and it would have gone against my principles to send him not to my closest local school. Had [next nearest school] been my local closest school, I probably wouldn't have sent him there, even though that is kind of against my principles...

(IR, School, 5)

Closely linked to the issue of distance to school was the cost and access of transport. In urban areas, parents felt that the provision of designated school buses was useful in helping their child to get to school quickly and safely. But it was for rural families that transport provision made more of a difference in terms of whether the Free School could even be considered an option. Parents were content to send their child to a school that was not their nearest so long as they could conveniently and safely access it.

Public transport is very intermittent, we do have it, but if you like, sort of they'll have it for six months and then you don't know if you're going to get it again, so there was that issue for us as well. Albeit we thought [Free School] was a really good school and we liked how it was presented to us, we had a worry with the transport, but [Free School] sorted it out and they provided a minibus to collect children from this area...

(OW, School 6)

The Free School's decision to provide and fund a bus made the school a viable option for this family. This was particularly important following an unsuccessful appeal at their initial school of choice and their determination to avoid other schools that were underperforming but easier to access.

Even where parents did have to pay for a school bus, there was still a feeling of satisfaction that the transport provision was there and that this went some way to extending their feasible choice set of schools.

[Child] having to get the bus, we pay for the bus, going out of catchment, getting up early, that wasn't really an issue, we just felt that the most important thing was that [Child] felt comfortable at a school. I mean, she could walk to [alternative local school], but it just wasn't right for her.

(KF, School 2)

A parent with a child at the same Free School commented, however, on the potential for transport costs to dissuade less affluent parents from choosing the school.

Something I will say about [Free School] actually is because you have to pay a fee for the bus, I do think you're going to end up actually with, it's quite a rural area round here and it's not a poor area by any means, but I think you're going to sort of get a little bit of a, the core group of students are definitely going to be middle class, 'cause people can't afford to pay for the bus...the bus is quite an expense and especially if you have more than one child going there...

(FD, School 2)

7.1.4.2 Extended school day

Several of the Free Schools discussed by participants were operating a longer school day. Where this was the case, parents reported that it was an attractive feature and a clear point of difference from other schools that they might have considered. This was not a factor that had been included in the questionnaire and no respondent mentioned it in the 'open sections' where parents were invited to note down additional influential choice factors. However, when discussing the provision that Free Schools were offering in the interviews, the attractiveness of an extended school day was a recurring theme. There were two main reasons for parents' interest in a longer school day. The first related to the school's provision of extra-curricular or enrichment activities as described above or the inclusion of independent study time at the end of the day. Second, a longer school day for the child often tended to fit in more conveniently with parents' work commitments or family arrangements.

My husband drops them off, they have to go to breakfast club in the morning and then they have after school clubs every day, except for one day which they have to walk home. ...they don't have any choice, either that or they have to walk to school, so they'd rather get there early by car and just have breakfast there, which is easier rather than walking there.

(HL, School 4)

By contrast, another parent described how popular the extended school day was with *other* parents but for her, personally, it had not been a factor that influenced her choice. Instead she reflected on the potentially negative outcomes for her daughter.

I think everybody loves it, all the parents love it, it's really, really popular, it might be to do with work, but my partner said 'it won't kill him', my first one, because, you know he'd only be at home doing nothing, but I said, 'sitting around doing nothing is quite a nice thing to do, isn't it?' So I don't know, so my second kid, the daughter, I think that's partly why she stresses, because it's such a long day, it takes up all her life, like she gets little down time...

(LB, School 1)

For parents, a longer school day is generally understood to be a positive feature, providing extra teaching and learning time, the opportunity for involvement in extra-curricular activities and free, supervised care in a safe environment. The schools are likely to be acutely aware of the popularity of extended school days, marketing them to aspirant parents as an opportunity for their children to achieve more and as a very practical and tangible point of distinction from other local competitors.

7.2 Information and choice strategies

This section describes the approaches to the school choice process that the parents in this study took. First, it reports the findings from the questionnaire regarding the types of information and amount of information that parents used and found valuable. It also reports the data on parents' experiences of the choice process. The next section uses the interview data to develop some of the survey findings and describe the differences in how parents came to send their child to a Free School in more depth. Three groups of parents were identified:

the ‘initiators’, the ‘active choosers’ of the Free School and the ‘reluctant choosers’. This analysis explores the varying routes that these respondents took to gain a place at a Free School and the differing roles that they assumed during the choice process.

7.2.1 Information used during the choice process

The questionnaire data indicate that the majority of both Free School and non-Free School parents used and valued a range of information during the school choice process. On average, Free School parents reported finding 9.4 (out of 20 specified options) sources of information ‘important’ or ‘very important’ in influencing the choice of their current school. For non-Free School parents, the average was 9.9 sources. What is perhaps more interesting, however, is the types of information that parents were using and how this differed for those opting for a Free School. Table 7.3 shows the percentage of parents from each group who reported that they found each source of information either ‘important’ or ‘very important’.

Table 7.3: Percentage of parents reporting sources of information as ‘important’ or ‘very important’

Source of Information	Free School parents %	Non-Free School parents %
Adverts	37.5	24.9
School staff	10.3	14.8
Contacts at the school	30.1	34.9
Performance tables	47.1	66.2
Faith group/place of worship	15.4	23.9
Information from child	56.6	75.1
Other adults	75.7	83.3
Child’s primary school	50.0	67.0
Head teacher and/or governors	61.8	46.9
Local Authority	41.2	45.5
Ofsted	55.9	80.5
Child’s siblings	25.0	52.6
Open events	91.9	85.6
Other family members	16.9	38.8
Posters	41.9	27.3
Social media	16.9	15.3
Public meetings	73.5	43.5
School prospectus	89.0	75.6
School website	83.1	68.4

Overall, it is possible to see that in relation to many sources of information, there are only limited differences between the Free School and non-Free School parents. Some sources, such

as open events at the school were clearly valued highly by the majority of parents from both groups. On the other hand, promotion of the school via social media was reported as ‘not important’ by over 80% of both Free School and non-Free School parents.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, there were more substantial differences in the importance attached to external, independent sources of information such as performance tables and Ofsted reports. The simplest and most likely explanation for this is that for the new schools, these sources did not exist at the time when they were considering application to the Free School. In relation to the use of performance tables, 47.1% of Free School parents stated that they were important compared to 66.2% of non-Free School parents. In addition, 80.5% of non-Free School parents reported valuing Ofsted inspection reports compared to 55.9% of Free School parents. Bearing in mind that these sources of information did not exist for the Free Schools that parents were considering, it is perhaps surprising that any parents reported using them in relation to their child’s current school. There is a methodological issue here; perhaps an issue with the question means that it is not clear and parents have reported their use of information generally and for the whole choice process rather than in relation to an individual school. Whilst potentially problematic for the reliability of the results, it is felt that there is some value in the data and the comparisons that have emerged. It is also perhaps the case, that as a number of the Free Schools discussed here are sponsored by other schools or form part of multi-academy trusts, that parents did consult the available performance information for these schools in order to inform their decision to choose the Free School.

Information received directly from the school (e.g. through a school website, school prospectus, head teacher correspondence or from open events) was reported as ‘important’ or ‘very important’ by many respondents from both groups. Higher proportions of Free School parents tended to value this type of information though, possibly because they were having to use it as a substitute for the unavailable independent sources of performance data and the ‘hot’ knowledge (Ball and Vincent, 1998) that would ordinarily be available from local, social networks. Having said this, contact with other adults and parents was reported as ‘important’ or ‘very important’ by 75.7% of Free School parents, so there is still a sense that many of them were using their social networks to inform or perhaps confirm their choice of a new school. Information about schools from their own children, including siblings and other

family members, was substantially less frequent for Free School parents than non-Free School parents. Again, this is likely to be linked to the fact that no other family members could have attended the Free School due to its very recent introduction.

Open evenings were reported as the most popular (and probably the most frequently offered) type of open event. There were also a proportion of both Free School and non-Free School parents who attended public events during the day as well though. There is some difference in the percentage of parents who attended a private visit to the school with 27.2% of Free School parents doing this compared with just 9.0% of non-Free School parents. The data do not give us any clear idea of why this difference might exist although it is possible that the Free Schools were more likely to offer the private appointments as way of encouraging more parents to find out about the school, and as a way of promoting the ‘personalised’ approach discussed above. Also, some of the Free School parents may have wanted to have a private visit in addition to attending a public event.

Contact with head teachers and governors recurred as an influential source of information. This was particularly the case for Free School parents with 61.8% of them reporting that this as ‘important’ or ‘very important’. A number of Free School parents opted to reiterate this further via the open sections of the questionnaire. The following are indicative of wider positive comments about those running the school. There were no similar comments from non-Free School parents.

Headmaster at the time made a very good impression.

One of the key influences was the personable/approachable attitude of the Head and school staff which was a good indicator of how my child would be treated.

This is a newly set-up Free School...the school has not been tested yet but we believed in the people who set it up.

As well as appealing to the interests of parents, another respondent also commented on how the:

[Free School] head teacher visited primary schools in the area, selling the senior school to them.

The data suggest that headteachers, other staff and sometimes governors often played an important role in providing information about the school and transferring the positive ‘vision’ of what the school could offer. Those representing the school are described as both a source of information *and* a reason to choose the school. This is not necessarily exclusive to the Free School context as previous research has highlighted the influence of leadership and staff on school choice (Wespieser *et al.*, 2015). However, it is perhaps the case that the head teacher of a brand new school must make considerable efforts to create a favourable impression of the institution in order to attract parents in the first instance and work towards building a positive reputation.

7.2.2 Experience of the choice process

Table 7.4 show how parents reported their experience of the application process for their child’s current school. There is almost no difference between the Free School and non-Free School groups.

Table 7.4: Parents’ views of the application process

	% Free School parents	% Non-Free School parents
Easy	64.7	65.2
Neither easy nor difficult	31.6	31.0
Difficult	2.9	2.9

It is pleasing that the majority of parents reported finding the process straightforward. The questionnaire did not ask for extensive detail on respondents’ experiences and so unfortunately it is not possible to know whether difficulties with the process were specifically in relation to the choices (or lack of choices) available, the collection and use of information or the administration of the process.

Parents were also asked whether they found the admissions procedure fair and objective. Again, there was no substantive difference between the Free School and non-Free School parents. Moreover, the vast majority of parents responded positively. Only one parent

commented further on the questionnaire about her perceptions of unfairness in the process. She stated that:

LA constantly dismissed any fault. Complained. Received some ridiculous answers. Went through appeals process. Waited approx 6 weeks for result of appeal. Took case to LGO, upheld delay in response and they questioned place planning suggesting 584 applications for 235 places needed addressing. But not on this occasion.

This parent had clearly had a frustrating time going through the appeals process, resulting in her accepting a place at a Free School despite it not being one of her original choices. This 'route' to attending a Free School is dealt with in more detail in the section below.

7.2.3 Three 'types' of chooser

7.2.3.1 Initiators

Two of the parents interviewed for this study reported that they had played active roles in helping to initiate the creation of their local Free School. These parents had started thinking about the secondary school that their child might attend long before the official process began in the child's final year of primary school. The local schools context was an important factor in determining these parents' interest in the development of a new school. Parent DF's personal and professional awareness of the local schools system contributed to her belief that existing local provision was not a viable option and encouraged her to feel that something 'better' could be created. This, combined with a county reorganisation from a three to a two tier system and a community group that wanted to take an active role in developing a secondary school for their local area, resulted in the proposal for the school being drawn up.

The school that I worked at was not the most successful of schools in terms of Ofsted and results and leadership and that kind of thing...two of the schools that were on offer were not performing particularly strongly...there was a community resource [old school building] there that was going to be vacant and we just felt that we had to put it forward as one of the options in the consultation process and we lobbied the council...

(DF, School 2)

The other parent in this group had not been involved in the creation of the Free School from its inception but opted to join the set-up group following an unsuccessful attempt to gain a scholarship place for her daughter at a private school and a lack of grammar school provision in the area.

I wanted [child] to go to grammar school actually...but we don't have any grammar schools within [area], so I really wanted her to have a high level of education...I put her name for [Free School] because I thought she's going to get quite a good level of education, quite high standard education, close to grammar school, but because we don't have any grammar schools within [area], the Free School for me was the next best thing.

(AB, School 1)

Local networks of other parents were key in terms of involvement in driving the proposal for the Free School. However, there was also a sense of independence from the parents in this group. The perceptions that they had gathered about other local schools were not based on 'word of mouth' or the views of other parents. Their individual belief in what constituted an effective school and the education that they wanted for their child appeared to be the most important factors. As a result, limited information about schools was not sought or used, and aside from the grammar and private schools discussed by Parent AB above, no other schools were considered by the parents in this group. Once committed to the Free School project, they were confident in the school's potential and their ability to gain a place at the school.

In addition to a personal interest in finding a school for her son, Parent DF emphasised the community focus which contributed to the development of the new local school. The dual issues of both parental responsibility and localism were raised here; on the one hand the parents starting School 2 wanted to do something positive for their own local community yet this collectivist approach only reached so far, with a view that those outside of the area could and should be responsible for the quality and provision of schooling where they lived.

So it was very much about the community having a say in having a resource that was there and fit for purpose...you see a lot of our children used to go to the schools in

[local town] and so we felt, as [local area] parents, we felt, well, our children are kind of, you know boosting the numbers in [local town] and actually it's [local town's] problem, for want of a better word, to deal with how they educate their kids.

(DF, School 2)

7.2.3.2 Active choosers

This is the largest group within the participants in this study. It includes parents who opted for the Free School as a first or only preference during the application process. Whilst these parents could all be described as active choosers in the sense that they willingly engaged with the choice process, they could not all be described as 'informed' choosers (Francis and Hutchings, 2013). There were differences in the types and amount of information that parents had available to them or sought out, the number of schools that they decided to include within their potential choice set, and of course, their reported reasons for choosing the Free School. This section deals with two main issues that were highlighted by this group of parents: how they first learned about the new school in their area and their attendance at open events.

Parents reported first hearing about the Free School in their area through a number of different channels. These included primary schools, faith groups, social media, through the local press or from other parents. For this parent, being a governor at a local, competing school gave her an early insight into the development of the Free School and allowed her to make valuable comparisons with the school which she was involved with, and others in the area too.

I knew that a lot of money had been given to [Free School] and I just felt that, with what little I knew of the situation, that it wasn't going to be allowed to fail...I knew about the [Free] school from having been a governor at [alternative school]. I knew about the school and [alternative school] was concerned obviously because they were essentially going to take children from their school and their funding...I didn't want him to go to [alternative school] because I didn't believe the teaching was good enough. I felt that [Free School] seemed to be the one that everybody was talking about...

(FD, School 2)

This parent on the one hand acknowledges the lack of detailed information that she had about the creation of the Free School but at the same time concludes that she knew enough about the alternative school to know that it was not her preferred choice. Her awareness of the funding that the Free School was receiving and its status as one of the first Free Schools in the country led her to believe that it ‘wouldn’t be allowed to fail’. This appears to demonstrate her faith in the school but also in the ‘system’ as acting as some sort of ‘safety net’ for the school. The parent here also highlights the combination of information sources that were described by several of the participants in this group. In addition to the knowledge gained from her governor role, she describes the interest of other local parents. This appears to have acted in a positive way, perhaps confirming her views about the new school and reassuring her that her judgements of its potential success were correct.

This existence of a network of other people involved in the school choice process at a similar time emerged as an important factor in both informing parents about the Free School and galvanising interest in it.

First of all my friend told me about it and I had a look and then I found out that there was a professor on the team that started the school up...I thought blimey they’ve got a professor on there and my friend had said, you know, they’ve got a professor on this and I thought, this is going to be something special.

(BH, School 9)

Well I followed the school when it was in consultation, but I suppose the other schools in [area], there was one that was very good and the others were kind of improving, so I was quite interested in the Free School... it was in our local paper, advertised a consultation evening...so I headed on up and spread the word amongst our friends at the [primary] school, you know, was anyone interested and a couple of people came, so there was three of us, no, four of us that chose the school...

(TP, School 1)

Local friends who were also parents to children of a similar age appeared to be particularly influential, probably due to the fact that they were going through the same process at the same time. Without the ‘inside’ knowledge that the school governor (Parent FD) above comments on, the parents here seek other sources of reassurance to try and confirm the viability of the new school. The professor mentioned in the first extract acts as a signal for potential status and success for the school while in the second extract the parent engages the interest and support of friends before attending the information evening at the school. Of course, it is quite possible that she would have gone on her own if her parent friends had not been interested, but their presence is likely to have made the decision to learn more about the school, and eventually apply for it, appear less daunting and risky.

All of the parents in this group attended an open event for the Free School, and often for other schools too. These open events were described by participants as very important in galvanising their interest in the school and informing them of what it could offer their child. Parents’ enthusiasm for the Free School, however, was not just in response to *what* the school could provide but also about *how* the open event was conducted, the messages that this gave and how it provided comparisons with other local schools. Opportunities to listen to and meet staff and governors were particularly influential in securing parents’ confidence in the school.

I also was very impressed with the Head, ‘cause I think that’s the key to a good school and she came across as very inspirational, she was so passionate about the school.

(FD, School 2)

Basically it was a brand new school, there was nothing there...so it was literally we went from the talk that we got. When the governor was giving a talk, they had no funding from the DfE at that time, they had no agreement, all the community was against it...they were really enthusiastic during this talk...

(SG, School 9)

The apparent enthusiasm and passion of those running the Free School was cited a number of times as an important factor in encouraging parents to believe that the school could offer something that was both effective and supportive for their children. For parents, these messages were an essential way of encouraging them to believe that the proposers had the ability and drive to make the school a success. But for the school, it was also vital that parents' interest and support was harnessed at an early stage, and that they could provide parents with enough of the 'vision' that they would eventually choose the school. This often required them having to compensate for limited facilities, funding or track record, with personnel appearing to be an important method for doing this.

Comparisons with other schools' open evenings were also contributing factors to the preference for the Free School.

As soon as we went there [local school], this might sound daft, but the colour scheme of the whole school left us cold and I can't even remember, it's purple, and I can't even remember what it was, but [son] and I, well, we all went as a family anyway and we came out and it's a very good school, academically, it's very good, if you're good at Maths and computers, it's an academy for that. We came out to that and it just left me cold, the Headmaster's speech was all about, look, we're fantastic and I just thought, well, you're not actually.

(XP, School 3)

Despite the school's academic success, this parent felt that it was not the best school for her child who she described as "not academic". As a result, both the academic specialisms of the school and the focus on performance by the headteacher were not received positively. In contrast she described the ethos of the open event at the Free School and the emphasis on personalised learning and extra-curricular activities as suggestive of a better way of meeting the needs of her child.

Whilst open events were frequently referred to as an important way to learn more about the new school, some parents did not view them as a 'complete' source of information. This

parent, for example, acknowledged the lack of independent data as a way of measuring performance and understanding the reputation of the school.

...my wife went in, you know, to look around and had a chat with like parents and staff and got an ideas based on that, to be honest with you. With a new school you don't really know, you know, there's no data out there.

(XP, School 3)

Another participant takes this further, suggesting that parents never really have sufficient knowledge of what a school is like, even where there is a variety of information available.

Thinking about the building and all that stuff, building, uniform, all that crap, I'm not interested, it was a huge gamble ...but then it's no more of a gamble than an established school, as far as I see it, because all you can look at when you go round them, you can look at the results, which is obviously indicative of, you know, how well they do academically, but for me it is about much more than that, it's about keeping my child happy and about a lovely environment and you just can't tell, you've got no idea. Of course they put on their best face on the day you go there and they get these lovely kids to show you round and go on about how great it is and you're just clueless, you're totally clueless and people seem to, I don't know if it's like desperation, they seem to focus on school uniforms and school dinners and teachers.

(LB, School 1)

Whilst the decision to attend the Free School is described by this parent as a risk, the lack of information, or more specifically the lack of information that she wants and can believe in, suggests that she feels any choice of school is a risk. Approaching school choice in a calculated way and expressing preferences based on performance exclusively is not perceived as a sufficient way for finding a school that meets the needs and interests of individual children. This parent's focus on happiness for her child and a positive school environment meant that a lack of performance information for the Free School was not something that dissuaded her from choosing it. Instead she had been convinced at open events that the

school's ethos, staff and holistic approach to learning would be able to provide the type of education she wanted for her daughter.

7.3.3.3 Reluctant choosers

The third group of participants to emerge from the data consisted of three parents who had a child attending a Free School but who did not state a high preference for it, or had stated no preference for it at the time of application. The experiences of these parents are particularly interesting as they challenge the notion of Free Schools being 'choice' schools. Three main issues arise in relation to how the different parents in this group came to send their child to the Free School. First, a lack of engagement with sourcing and processing information about schools and prioritising location/proximity meant that the Free School was chosen by one parent as it was the third closest school. Secondly, the oversubscription of preferred schools meant that for all three parents, access to their chosen school was not possible. Finally, the Free School emerged for two parents as the 'least worst' choice following failed appeals and attempts by the Local Authority to place their children elsewhere.

For one parent, the decision-making process was not an easy one. A lack of knowledge about the procedure, and difficulty in navigating available information resulted in choices based predominantly on convenience. Her son's allocation to the Free School was as a result of her son missing out on a place at two closer schools that also operated a random ballot system when oversubscribed.

[First and second choice schools] are nearest but [they] don't, they don't do, you know, catchment areas like primary schools. In secondary schools it's bit different because [first and second choice schools] choose by lucky dip and stuff like that, which wasn't the case for my son...he didn't get any offer to [those schools] that were closer to us.

(HL, School 4)

Whereas this parent had chosen these two high-performing schools based on both convenience and local reputation, the fact that proximity was not prioritised in the

oversubscription criteria meant that she had a more limited chance of gaining a place due to their popularity across the city where she lived.

This parent reports using just ‘word of mouth’ rather than inspection reports or school visits to find out about schools.

There was lots of information there, but obviously, you know, to me, I mean, I wasn't born here, I was born in India, so it's difficult to choose which school because my secondary education and obviously here it might be different. I'm not sure, so I just had to, you know, like sort of lucky guess...I know people go around and look at the school and they find out about Ofsted reports and all that, which I didn't do unfortunately, so I just chose it, I think word of mouth and I thought, yeah, that will be a good school.

(HL, School 4)

Whilst she is aware that there are a range of sources of information available, she has chosen not to engage with most of these. But even if she had used more formal channels of information to find out about school performance, based on this, it is still quite likely that she would have stated her top two choices of schools, and still would not have received a place at them. Despite only gaining a place at her final choice of school (the Free School), this parent was less disappointed with the eventual allocation of a Free School than the other two parents in this group, partly because she had actually specified it as a final preference but also perhaps because she had not invested large amounts of time and effort in to trying to find out which school was ‘best’ and pinning her hopes on gaining a place there. Instead there is a sense of the decision being ‘taken out of her hands’; the ballot for places at her first choices might have also contributed to this, creating a feeling of randomness and perhaps fairness.

The other two parents in this group were also unable to access their preferred schools due to oversubscription. Both appealed unsuccessfully but following alternative suggestions by the LA that the parents did not believe to be satisfactory, the Free School began to be considered. One of the parents, a teacher at her first choice school, had been aware of the Free School opening but had made a conscious decision not to choose it.

In [borough] we've got, well our better schools fill up very, very quickly and the second choice school that we had, it's five miles away from our house and our first choice is just less than a mile, 0.8 miles...and we didn't get in and I work there and we didn't get into it. Our second choice school by that time was full, so they were unable to offer us a place anywhere that was accessible for my son...we were offered two schools which were about five miles away and the other one was about seven miles away, no support with transport....Obviously I was aware that the free school was opening and being a very staunch state school teacher, I was a little opposed to it....it all sounded a little bit flaky.

(TL, School 6)

This mother's concern that the Free School proposals sounded 'flaky' was presented as a contrast to the strong reputation for academic and pastoral care that her initial choices of schools offered. The Free School's newness made it seem a risky, untested option which to begin with she was not prepared to choose. This first impression of the school coupled with her originally clear idea of which schools she wanted for her son meant that she did not seek further information on the school. She also reports a tension between her own job teaching in an academy and her child attending a Free School. The use of the term 'state school teacher' is particularly notable here as it perhaps implies that this parent perceived the Free School to be in some way not belonging to the state. This perception also seemed to contribute to her original decision not to consider the Free School although altered when the need to find a school for her son became more urgent.

The parents in this group have also highlighted the role of Free Schools in offering additional school places, and therefore an additional choice when their preferred schools were full. For two parents the Free School provided an alternative option when appeals to access their preferred schools failed. Parent TL above describes her lack of satisfaction with the possible school options selected by the LA and the need to approach the Free School. Another parent at the school also criticised the LA but this was in relation to planning for places across the area.

I think the thing that certainly upset us was the fact that the Council, looking at the numbers, could quite easily see that there wasn't going to be enough spaces for the children for that year and in hindsight have sort of, you know, it's come to light that they should have looked at it before and put planning in place and I think sort of that, in conjunction with how do they include a free school...I think council and local authorities don't really know how to bring them in to the areas. I think because there was such opposition to the free school opening by the council, as I said before, it had gone on for a long time. I think it was mainly the fact that people weren't aware of what a demand there was going to be...it would have been advantageous if parents realised at the time...at [first choice] school there was 235 places and 584 applications.

(OW, School 6)

It is important to reiterate here that this is the parent's reporting of *her* experience of the choice process. It is impossible to know whether it is a wholly accurate account of the situation in the local area and the role that the LA played in that. Nevertheless, there is clearly an issue of perceptions here, perhaps echoed by the lack of awareness of a Free School being a state-funded school as indicated by Parent TL in the extract above. The criticisms of the LAs highlight the tensions that currently exist within the 'mixed economy' schools system and the challenges that different stakeholders face in cooperating with each other. The autonomy of some schools in relation to their admissions and allocation procedures now plays an important role within the choice and appeals process but it is the LA who must step-in if parents' preferences cannot be accommodated at their chosen schools. This intervention perhaps demonstrates the limits of autonomy, the necessity for cooperation by relevant parties and the continued need for some form of local oversight.

7.3 Discussion

The purpose of this study was to extend our current understanding of school choice by examining parents' motivations and strategies within a new context – the choice of a Free School. This section discusses the findings, first considering them in light of the original policy aims, and then situating them within the wider research literature on parental choice.

7.3.1 Parent choice and the aims of the Free Schools policy

When first introducing Free Schools in England, policymakers outlined a number of key objectives that they believed the initiative would fulfil. These included: improving standards through increased competition, the provision of additional choice for parents and a focus on extending diversity within the system in order to help provide this choice (The Conservative Party, 2010; Cameron, 2011; Gove, 2011). My findings indicate that from the perspectives of the parents involved in this part of the study, these policy aims, to some extent are being addressed. They also suggest, however, that the Free Schools policy should not be examined purely in isolation, but can actually be understood more clearly when considered alongside wider developments in education policy that have occurred since 2010.

7.3.1.1 Choice

A central rationale for the Free Schools policy was the extension of choice to parents (Gove, 2011). Since the 1988 ERA the development of choice policies has played an important role in English education policy (see Chapter 2). This has primarily involved the introduction of different forms of diversity within existing schools (e.g. specialist schools) or the devolution of financial and managerial resources (Whitty *et al.*, 1998) to encourage schools to become more responsive to parental demand. The Free Schools policy continues both of these features but significantly also introduces new schools in to the market as well. For the parents involved in this study, the Free School did provide an additional choice, one that had obviously not been there prior to the school's opening. However, this 'choice' was viewed in different ways depending on the routes that parents had taken to gaining a place. For the majority of parents from the interview stage, the 'active choosers', a Free School was viewed as a positive option and was stated by all of these parents as the first (and in some cases, only) preference when applying. These parents were clearly successful in being allocated a place at their preferred school but their responses suggest that they very much believed that it was fulfilling a demand that they had. In comparison, the 'reluctant choosers' reported how in the first instance, the Free School was not necessarily a serious choice, and was either not mentioned as a preference when completing the application process or was noted as the third out of three stated preferences. Importantly though the Free School still represented a 'choice' to some degree, and was still viewed as preferable to some other local options. Nevertheless, the new school being perceived as the 'least worst' option is unlikely to be what the

government had in mind when suggesting that the Free Schools policy would give parents greater choice.

The findings from the small ‘initiators’ group are also important in extending our understanding of how the choice agenda is operating in relation to Free Schools. This group, existing of parents who were also involved in the set-up of a new school, point towards an interesting dual consumer-provider role. Not only were these parents instrumental in steering the development of the Free School, they had also made a conscious decision that this school would be the one that their child would attend. As such, they did not seriously consider others, particularly once their commitment to being involved in the school’s set-up was cemented. Allowing parents to be involved in the provision of education formed part of the coalition government’s ‘Big Society’ agenda, “designed to empower communities to come together to address local issues” (The Conservative Party, 2010, p. 38). In this sense, the Free Schools policy encourages parents to take on additional responsibility, not just in terms of making the ‘right’ choice for their child’s school but also in playing some role in the provision of this schooling.

Higham (2014) has shown though, that parental willingness to set-up a school is frequently limited by the demographics of those proposing the new schools or an apparent lack of conformity with the government’s vision of what a Free School should be like. This reminds of us the constraints that exist within the policy and the potential tensions between parental demand and state control. Only a small proportion of Free School proposers are parent groups (Garner, 2014) and this is reflected in the small group of ‘initiators’ within this study. Nevertheless, this blurring of the consumer/provider division is an interesting finding and one that has not been specifically highlighted before. It appears to represent both a personal and collective interest in education yet frequently operates within a very localised context. The parent proposers report a sense of responsibility for their children and also often an interest in the schooling of others that they know or who live nearby, but there is no incentive for them to be interested in the education of those outside of this network and from the wider community. Parent DF’s view that “It’s [nearby town’s] problem, for want of a better word, to deal with how they educate their kids” summarises this effectively. The government discourse of responsibilisation and competition (Bowe *et al.*, 1994) tends to emerge, adopted by parents as a way of explaining and justifying their decisions. It highlights a shift from perceptions of

education provision being the responsibility of the state or LA to the involvement of parents or other stakeholders. In including some though, questions arise about who is being excluded.

7.3.1.2 Diversity

The Free Schools policy was very clearly not just introduced to address demand-side issues though. The initiative also sees the development of the supply-side through the opening of new schools and a commitment to extending diversity within the system. Policymakers argued that this in turn would encourage further choice and competition in the market (Gove, 2010; 2011). The findings in this study show how the new schools were viewed by parents in their initial years, and particularly how they were frequently perceived as offering ‘something different.’ An interest in a ‘new or different kind of education’ was reported by a number of parents in the questionnaire and the language of comparison pervaded through many of the interviews. These comparisons clearly echoed some of the policy announcements linked to the Free Schools, and continue to develop a theme of not just difference, but of superiority too.

These schools offer small class sizes, tougher discipline, longer days and higher standards. They give parents more choice. And they force existing schools to raise their game.

(DfE, 2011b)

The perceived distinctiveness of the Free Schools was used by parents as a way of situating the schools firmly within a competitive marketplace. Those involved in setting-up the school had a clear vision that it would operate more in line with private or selective models than other state-funded options in their local area. The ‘active choosers’ present a different perspective on the same phenomenon, reporting how their interest in the ‘difference’ that the Free School would offer was important in influencing their choice. These perceived differences were not always necessarily used to inform the choice of the school but sometimes seemed to be used to justify or confirm an initial inclination towards it too.

A key argument for diversity within the system is that schools are better placed to adapt to meet the interests, aspirations and needs of their pupils and families. This was a message that many parents had heard from their chosen Free Schools and reported being convinced by. Their views were often framed in relation to their knowledge or perceptions of alternative

school options, and at the time of choosing schools, they felt that the Free School would be the best available choice to foster these specific learning or social needs. Gewirtz *et al.*, (1995) use the concept of ‘child-matching’ to describe this process. The parents use a “blend of factors specific to the needs of their child” (Gewirtz *et al.*, 1995, p. 29) to find the ‘best’ match. This goes some way to explaining why the lack of academic reputation was rarely seen as problematic and how the more tangible and apparently distinctive features of the school were foregrounded instead. Those parents who had children with minor learning difficulties or social issues, for example, foregrounded the importance of other features. These are discussed in more detail in the section below.

Without further in-depth comparative work, it is impossible to know just how ‘different’ the new schools really were (or were intending to be), or whether the reports of distinctiveness were perceptions based on how the schools had chosen to market themselves to parents. A recent government report suggested that some Free Schools reported using what they believed were innovative operational, curricular or pedagogical practices (Cirin, 2014). However, the limited number of schools included and the self-reported comparisons by just Free School head teachers means that it does not actually provide a very clear picture of the *actual* diversity being offered by the schools, and the extent to which it is, in reality, that different to the provision available elsewhere. The findings from Cirin (2014) and my findings, however, do provide some insight in to the direction of the so-called diversity. The features reported seem to reflect a move towards a broader state-endorsed desire for traditionalism, rigour in relation to curriculum and qualifications and extended school days (DfE, 2010; DfE, 2013; Lupton and Thomson, 2015). The Free Schools, whilst only forming a part of this shift in policy and practice, appear to be leading the way in its implementation. This is not necessarily problematic in itself although if it is being viewed as the ‘right’ or ‘best’ way, and supported as such by central government, then there is concern that it will further reinforce a hierarchy of status between schools. For schools to respond, they may choose to align themselves with this approach, calling in to question how sustainable alternative or diverse methods really are.

7.3.1.3 Standards

The final key policy objective that the Free Schools initiative intended to address was that of improving standards, particularly for those children from disadvantaged backgrounds (The Conservative Party, 2010; Gove 2011). The government argued that the introduction of Free

Schools would provide high quality education for those that attended them as well as boosting standards in other local competitor schools (DfE, 2011b, DfE, 2012c). The current study did not seek to examine the academic outcomes of pupils attending Free Schools, yet it is worth noting the emphasis on educational ‘quality’ that emerged from many parents’ responses. The Free School was frequently cited as the first (and often only) option but as described above, this was not informed by the prior performance of the school but by a belief that the school would provide the ‘right’ conditions for success and high quality teaching to take place. The findings have shown the important role that the school had in promoting this impression and how certain factors worked to influence parents’ views.

In relation to providing high-performing schools for those from deprived backgrounds, the findings from this part of the study give only a limited picture of the extent to which this might be the case. Some parents commented on issues linked to whether poorer families might be attracted to the school but without clearer performance measures of school quality, it is impossible to comment on whether or not the Free School could be described as high-performing in relation to other schools nearby. Individual performance was mainly discussed by parents in relation to their belief that the Free School would be able to maximise their child’s potential; for a number of parents, that did not mean that their child would be attaining the highest grades but that they would be supported in making progress. These parents reported their desire to escape the ‘exam factory’ environment of other schools where they perceived that pressures to achieve meant that children’s other interests and happiness were being neglected. At the time of opening, there was perhaps a sense that the Free Schools were indeed ‘free’ from the demands of the standards and accountability systems in place. This may alter, however, as the schools become more established and performance is reported in concretely and used for comparison.

7.3.2 Free School choice: more of the same?

The findings from this study suggest that Free School and non-Free School parents appear to be navigating the choice process in similar ways. A number of the findings are also consistent with previous work on school choice, particularly in relation to the factors that parents reported looking for and the important role of school-provided information (e.g. prospectuses and open events) and social networks in influencing choice of schools (Ball and Vincent,

1998; Coldron *et al.*, 2008). Methodologically, the data from this study also show that in line with previous research (Bagley *et al.*, 2001), the interviews (as opposed to the questionnaire responses) were particularly important for revealing the role of social mix in influencing school choice (Ball, 2003; Benson *et al.*, 2014; Reay *et al.*, 2011).

Both datasets indicate a clear focus on academic quality during the choice process. This was the case for both Free School and non-Free School parents and is consistent with a number of recent studies which have examined the factors influencing parents' rationales for choosing schools (Altenhofen, 2016; Burgess *et al.*, 2014b; Leroux, 2015). What is perhaps most interesting here is that for the parents choosing a Free School, there was a very limited amount of information about academic quality available. The schools were either going to be in their first or second year of existence meaning that there was no performance information (examination data or Ofsted reports) available, and they had a fairly limited reputation locally. Theory would suggest that if parents were focused on selecting a school based on academic quality then this lack of objective information would potentially hinder their ability to make the most rational comparisons and choices, and would make the unknown Free School a less viable option. For parents in both the 'initiator' and 'active choosers' groups, information about the quality that the Free School would offer was sought from other sources. Two main intertwined strategies emerged. First, as shown in other studies, there was a reliance on a combination of information supplied by the school (i.e. prospectuses and talks at open events) and that received from parents' social networks (Altenhofen, 2015; Ball and Vincent, 1998; Coldron *et al.*, 2008; Lareau, 2014). Second, parents used particular factors/features of the Free School as proxies for academic quality and potential performance (Schneider *et al.*, 1999; Benson *et al.*, 2014). As well as providing information, both strategies here were also being used to confirm and justify the choices being made.

The factors reportedly valued by parents in both the questionnaire and interviews suggest that both Free School and non-Free School parents were interested in a wider set of criteria than just academic performance. These included social factors, school ethos, the child's potential happiness and wider non-academic experiences that the schools could provide, and links to the findings of Maddaus (1990) who argued that parents view school choice through a more holistic lens. Walford (1994) describes these features as 'process' criteria, contrasting them

with the ‘product’ criteria associated with attainment outcomes (Walford, 1994). What began to emerge from the interview data, however, was how interconnected the process and product factors seemed to be in relation to Free School choice. Features such as smaller school size, the promise of strong discipline, an extended school day and in some instances, extra-curricular provision were reported favourably but crucially were viewed as important indicators of the overall quality that the school was offering and its likely future success in terms of performance.

In a number of instances, the features being described as influential when choosing were also linked to the (potential) school mix of the Free School and the (perceptions of the) school mix in alternative local schools. While factors were linked to academic quality, many parents in turn associated this with the need to achieve the ‘right’ school environment with the ‘right’ school mix. Again, this is not a new finding but instead sits alongside earlier work that has highlighted the inextricable link between school composition and perceptions of quality (Bagley *et al.*, 2001; Ball, 2003; Benson *et al.*, 2014).

Interpretations of the Free School being aligned with private or selective schooling models formed an important part of this. In the interviews parents’ views of what this kind of education might entail were fairly standard and stereotypical, and involved high academic standards, traditional approaches to teaching, learning and discipline. Previous literature has highlighted how more advantaged parents are more likely to associate school quality with a traditional, academic approach reminiscent of that embedded in historic images of English public schools (Edwards and Whitty, 1997). Some autonomous school structures such as grant-maintained schools (Halpin *et al.*, 1997) and CTCs (Edwards and Whitty, 1997) have indicated a trend towards this approach and a recent government White Paper signalled a desire for more traditional approaches to teaching, learning and behaviour to be adopted in the classroom (DfE, 2010). A number of the features that parents described suggested that the Free Schools were attempting to establish their place within the market by offering some form of distinction from what was not on offer elsewhere. This was particularly the case for the ‘active choosers’ but also for one of the ‘initiators’ who had a very clear vision of what grammar school education involved and wanted to transfer this in to the school that she was helping to set-up. Links to private and selective models were not just about the standard of

education during the child's time there though. They revealed an interest in longer term goals and a perception that children who attend these type of schools 'do better' in life (Gorard, 1997). For those aiming to choose the 'best' school for their child, an option that appeared to have characteristics aligned with schooling that was usually only available to a privileged few was unsurprisingly viewed as very attractive.

Whether or not the provision would be like that offered in grammar or private schools did not appear to be the main issue; associations with the prestigious private sector provided enough of an illusion of quality to ensure that it became a positive choice. The previous section suggested that the schools' attempts to appear distinctive through the approaches described here might lead to a reinforcement or extension of the hierarchy between different school types in England. A number of the Free Schools are aiming to fulfil a vision of offering an 'elite' education although that does not necessarily mean that they are 'elitist'. They can offer a high quality education without needing to select children based on their ability and/or parents' income. But the concern is whether the schools will find ways to 'select in' certain groups and whether certain groups of parents will opt in or out of choosing the school depending on whether it suits the needs of their child. Of course, in relation to the provision of diversity, the latter is exactly what we would expect to happen, but this is potentially problematic if it leads to lower income families being further disadvantaged in their school choice options, and if it contributes to further clustering of pupils between schools. That is not to say that this approach is negative in any sense, but that schools should be encouraged to do what they can to communicate its value to parents and to ensure that those from different social backgrounds feel that they have the opportunity to apply for it.

The findings also highlight how important the local schools context was in encouraging parents to consider the Free School. Avoiding other schools formed a central narrative underpinning the rationale of many of the parents in this study. This supports the work of Bagley *et al.* (2001) who show how a process of 'negative reasoning' is often influential in helping parents to select which schools they view as feasible options. The reasons they found were linked to other pupils at the school, the ethnic composition of the school, the location and fears about bullying by other pupils, indicating that parents were not just concerned with avoiding particular schools but also particular students or groups of students (Bagley *et al.*,

2001). The avoidance of other schools in the area was reported as an important factor in influencing school choice by many Free School parents in the questionnaire, and the majority of the 'initiators' and 'active choosers' in the interviews. They felt that the number of good schools and school places available was heavily rationed (Butler and Hamnett, 2010). As a result, they sought to actively position the Free School as a favourable alternative. Their discussions of the poor or mediocre performance of other local schools were frequently linked to a school intake, and to an environment that they did not want their child to be part of. The parents in the 'reluctant choosers' group were also important here as they all had stated preferences for non-Free Schools at the time of application. These had been chosen based on their strong academic reputation although one of these parents was very clear that the Free School had been chosen because, even with no established reputation, she was sure that it would not have the socially deprived intake of the other remaining alternative.

Emerging as another key finding in influencing parents' choice of a Free Schools was the size of the school. The offer of a smaller school seemed to be received very positively. Parents reported a belief that the smaller size of the Free School would provide academic and social benefits for their child. This finding fits with previous research which has highlighted smaller school and class size as a key factor influencing parents' decisions to opt for private education (Gorard, 1999) as well as the popularity of the Small Schools Initiative in America (Kahne *et al.*, 2005). For parents with limited information about the Free School's performance, school size appeared to be an important and tangible selling point. It was something that other local schools could not compete with and, alongside the 'newness' of the Free School, perhaps also contributed to a sense of exclusivity. A small number of parents were aware of the opportunity costs of attending a small school, particularly in relation to a reduced offer of curriculum subjects and qualifications. This appeared to be spun in a positive way by the schools, however, with parents reported that they were satisfied with an emphasis on a smaller number of core, academic subjects. Despite the individual popularity of small schools, a tension within the market model arises here. Smaller schools and class sizes are less efficient (Adnett and Davies, 2002; NAO, 2015) and there is limited evidence that they offer academic benefits (Gershenson and Langbein, 2015). Nevertheless, as described in the section above, the government appear to view this as an acceptable trade-off although it is not clear how far parental demand for small schools would be allowed to go before the additional costs become

untenable. Free Schools operating within multi-academy trusts may off-set some of the inefficiencies of operating as smaller, individual schools although to date there is no evidence available on the extent to which this might be the case. In addition to the economic concern about small schools, it is also the case that an increase in the number of smaller schools may do little to help the levels of segregation across the country. Their smaller intakes, focus on serving a local community and the enduring use of geographical oversubscription criteria (Morris, 2014) mean that children are more likely to be drawn from a smaller, more homogenous residential area, potentially exacerbating the stratification issues that already exist.

7.4 Conclusion

The findings from this study provide some important and original insights in to the Free Schools policy from the perspective of parents. The initiative sought to inject further choice and diversity within the schools market, and the results suggest that many of the parents in this study believe that that has been the case. What also emerges though is an indication of the tensions within the policy. While providing schools with autonomy has been posited as a way of encouraging innovation and promoting diversity, in reality, Free Schools (and academies) are operating within a heavily regulated system. Added to this, is the Conservative party's interest in promoting more traditional pedagogy, ethos, curriculum and qualifications (DfE, 2010). This trend, plus constraints from performance measures and inspection criteria, mean that the extent to which innovation or diversity can or will occur is likely to be somewhat limited (Adnett and Davies, 2000). Furthermore, the findings here highlight another key tension - that between the desire for innovation and parental choice, and the practical need for school places to be made available in certain areas. Recently, this latter issue has become more central in the government's discussion of the Free School policy as critics have questioned why some new schools have been opened in areas of low demand while other areas remain under pressure to create more places (Mansell, 2013). The 'reluctant choosers' group highlight the important role that Free Schools can play, one that does not necessarily fit with the original aims of 'freeing up the market' but that could present a useful mechanism for easing the ongoing need for school places in some parts of the country.

The findings also show how, despite the new context of school choice, through the addition of a new school in the local area, the strategies and reasons used during the process remain in line with those identified in earlier research. The lack of performance information for the new Free School did not inhibit parents' efforts to choose on the basis of quality. But in rationalising their decision to opt for a new school, the role of intuition and proxies was also important. Without performance indicators or an established reputation to inform them about the Free School option, parents were reliant on the schools themselves to provide information. The data suggest that the schools used this opportunity to market themselves in a way which fitted with their objectives and ethos, and perhaps with the 'type' of parent that they were hoping to attract. Using features which made the Free School appear distinctive and/or superior to other local school options was key in ensuring that target parents viewed it as the 'best' option. Often these were associated with the mix of children that were likely to attend the school, reinforcing perceptions of school quality being linked to intake.

This part of the study attempted to examine parents' reasons and strategies for choosing a newly-established Free School. The interest in this topic area emerged amid concern that Free Schools would predominantly exist to satisfy the demands of more affluent, aspirant families (Hatcher, 2011; Vasagar and Shepherd, 2011). While the findings suggest that in some cases, the schools may have characteristics that make them particularly appealing to certain groups, the limited scope and comparisons in the data make it difficult to say whether this is in any way different to what is happening in other schools. More important perhaps is the extent to which Free Schools are being perceived as 'different but equal' to other school types and the impact that this has on parents' understanding of parity within the system. If they are persistently being viewed as 'better', then as has been shown in previous research, it is likely they will attract and admit more advantaged families. The implications for the intakes of other nearby schools and for the wider system as a whole remain to be seen.

CHAPTER 8

FREE SCHOOLS AND DISADVANTAGED INTAKES

This chapter presents the findings from the analysis of the student compositions of mainstream Free Schools in England. It focuses particularly on the school intakes in relation to the proportion of children eligible for Free School Meals (FSM) that are in attendance. The data and discussion here give an overview of the extent to which Free Schools are taking an equal share of poorer children in comparison to their Local Authorities and a set of alternative local schools. It is intended to provide a description of the most up-to-date situation regarding Free School intakes as well as considering, for the more established schools, whether the student compositions have altered in the period that they have been open. This chapter builds on the findings published in an earlier article (Morris, 2015), including updated data from the fourth year of the Free Schools initiative.

This chapter is formed of four main sections. First, I give an overview of the current picture of Free School intakes in England based on data from the most recent 2015 Annual Schools Census. Having this up-to-date analysis which draws together data concerning all of the mainstream Free Schools is important, and to my knowledge has not been published elsewhere. Second, I consider the data over time, considering whether intakes have altered in the period that the schools have been open. Next, I seek to exemplify some of the findings through closer consideration of six case study secondary schools. These move away from the ‘overview’ approach of previous sections, focusing on specific examples and highlighting the diverse nature of the Free Schools initiative in relation to their intakes. The case studies indicate some of the different characteristics of individual Free Schools and explore how they are situated within their local schools context. In the fourth main section, the data are also discussed in relation to the policy objectives of the Free Schools initiative and relevant literature which focuses on the student compositions of autonomous schools.

8.1 Free Schools and disadvantaged intakes in 2015

This section presents the findings in relation to Free School intakes in 2015, using the most up-to-date data available from the Annual Schools Census. In July 2015 there were 198 mainstream Free Schools open in England (from a total of 256 Free Schools altogether). According to the 2015 Annual Schools Census a total of 36,412 students were being educated

in a mainstream Free School that had opened between 2011 and 2014. Of these students, 5,681 were reported as being eligible for the receipt of Free School Meals, 15.6% of the Free School population. This slightly exceeds the most recent national figure for FSM eligibility which, according to government statistics, currently stands at 15.2 % of pupils (DfE, 2015c). Table 8.1 shows the FSM average and ranges for each wave of Free School in 2014-2015. The data presented here are in relation to the whole school cohort as of January 2015, meaning that for the schools that opened in 2011, the data refer to the last four years of intakes. By contrast the 2014 schools have just one year of students represented. Changes in student compositions over time are considered in more detail in section 2.

Table 8.1: Range of Free School FSM percentages for each wave (2014-2015)

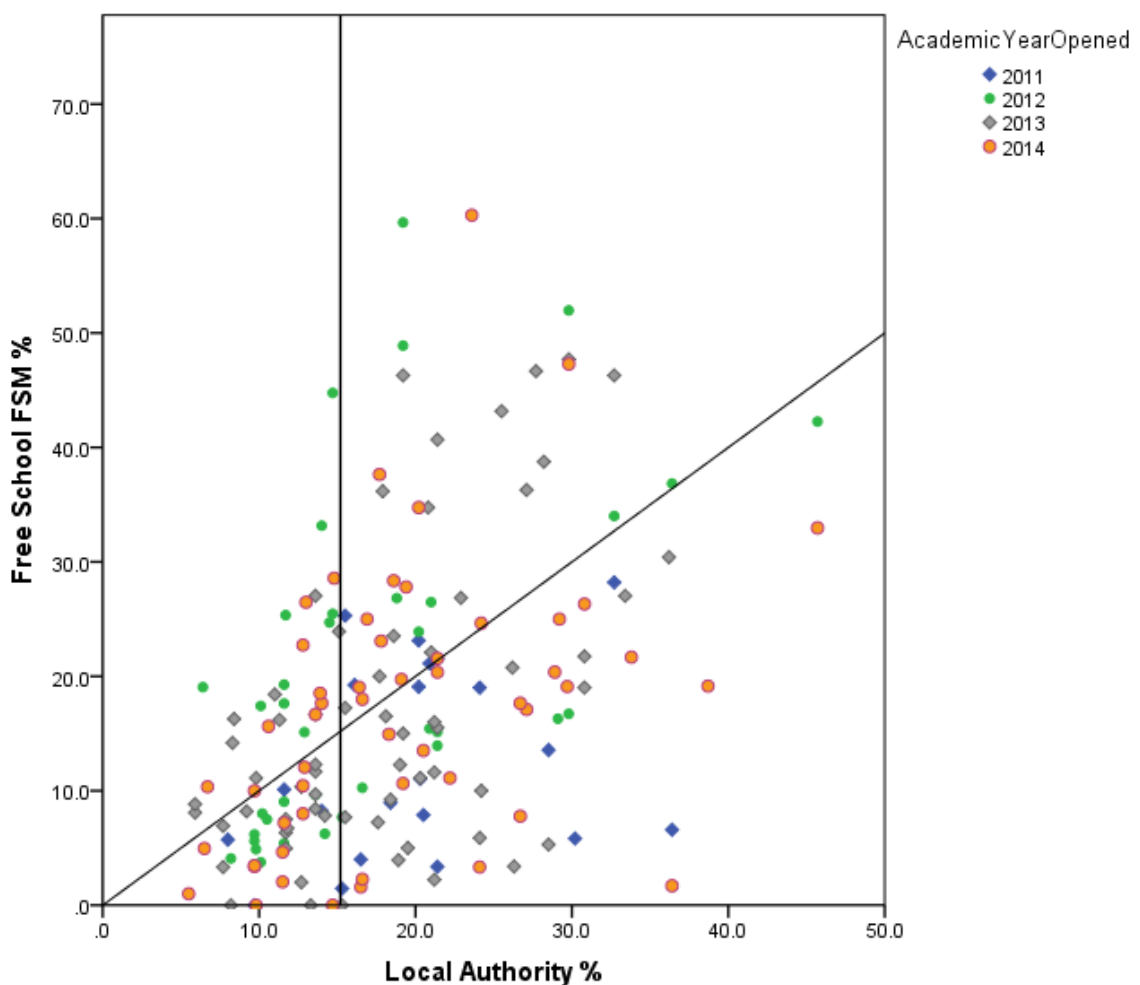
	Mean	Median	Std Dev	Min	Max	Range	n
Wave 1	12.3	9.7	8.1	0.0	28.2	28.2	23
Wave 2	18.9	15.9	14.4	2.4	59.6	57.2	46
Wave 3	16.3	11.8	12.7	0.0	47.7	47.7	71
Wave 4	16.3	16.9	12.2	0.0	60.3	60.3	58

The overall figure of 15.6% FSM children in Free Schools may suggest that the schools are taking their ‘fair share’ of disadvantaged pupils. Looking beyond the national figure though, it is possible to see differences between the waves (Table 8.1) and individual schools, and also how these compare with local and LA figures. The varied aims and types of Free Schools and the non-random nature of where they have been established means that we would expect substantial individual differences between the schools and their intakes. In relation to the research question, however, it is important that we attempt to build up a picture of the extent to which they are serving disadvantaged children compared to other schools in their local area. The aim is to explore whether groups of advantaged or disadvantaged children appear to be clustering within Free Schools and to consider the potential impact that this might have over time.

The Local Authority FSM percentage was used as the initial local comparator for the Free Schools. Figure 8.1 shows the FSM percentages at each of the 198 mainstream Free Schools compared with the FSM proportions for their corresponding Local Authorities in 2015. The wave or year of opening of each school is also indicated. Individual schools which are taking a smaller proportion of disadvantaged children than their LA fall below the sloped line

whereas Free Schools that are taking more sit above the line. The graph indicates the extent to which Free Schools' intakes are in line with those of the LA more broadly. It shows that, in 2015, 74 Free Schools (37.4%) had FSM proportions higher than those of their LA whereas 124 schools (62.6%) were below their LA percentage. It is important to reiterate here, however, that for some of the newest or smallest schools, the small numbers attending can mean that just a few children can alter the proportions considerably. This is taken in to account when discussing the findings.

Figure 8.1: Free School FSM proportions compared with corresponding LA (2014-2015)



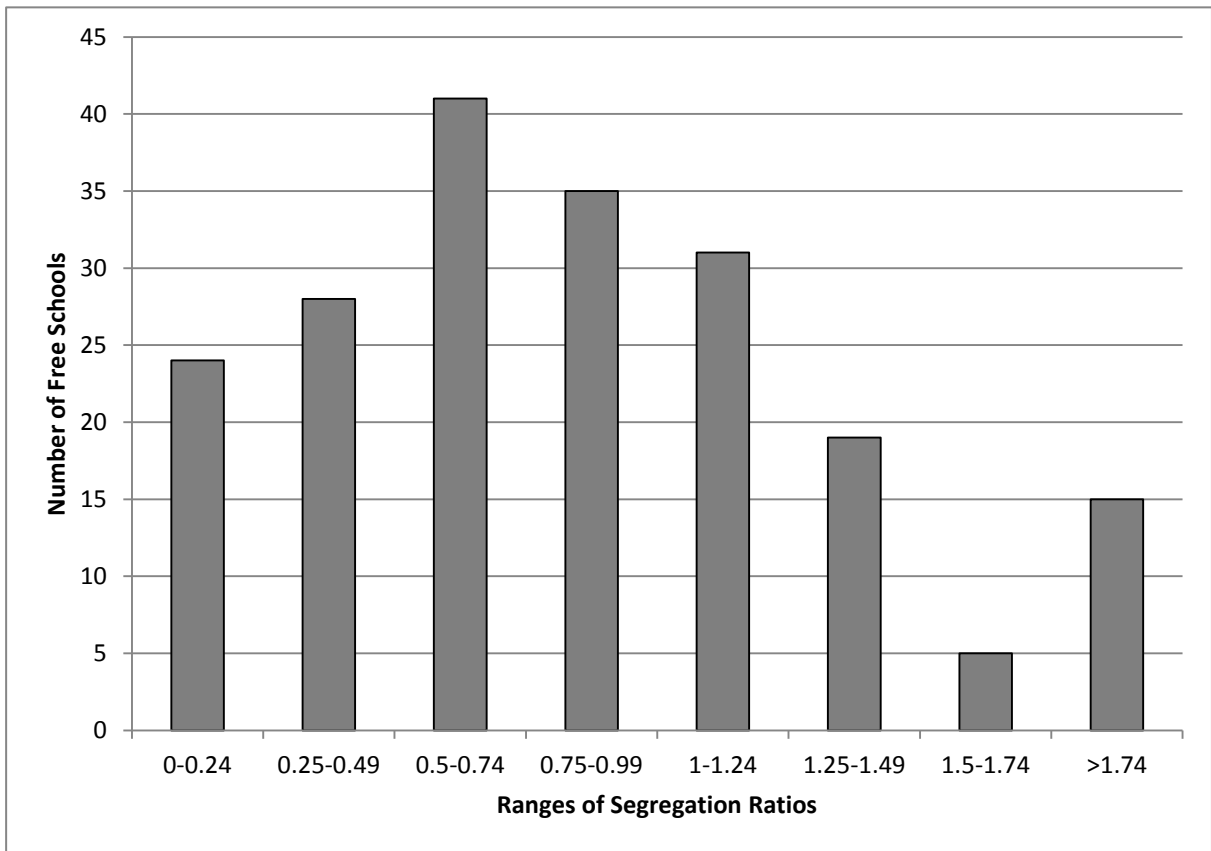
The graph shows that many of the Free Schools are opening in areas with high levels of poverty. The vertical line, for example, sits at 15.2%, the national FSM figure for 2014-15. Over half of the schools (57.3%) are situated in Local Authorities which have a FSM percentage that exceeds the national figure. However, 69 (60.5%) of these Free Schools have

FSM proportions lower than that of their LA. This suggests that whilst some Free Schools are locating in more disadvantaged areas, their intakes are not necessarily representative of the wider Local Authority population. This also appears to be the case for many of the schools opening in LAs that have a Free School percentage below the national average. Earlier on the first wave of schools indicate similar findings (Shepherd, 2012); the data here is important in showing that the issue persists and that it was not just a finding something that can be associated with the first Free Schools.

As has been discussed in previous chapters, comparison between individual schools and a Local Authority can be useful but is not ideal. The LA figure represents an average and provides an indication of poverty levels across what can often be a large and demographically varied geographical area. We would not necessarily expect individual schools to have FSM proportions completely in line with these figures as that could ignore the more localised approach to school choice that occurs in some areas and for some schools. A LA with a relatively low FSM average may still contain schools with much higher proportions of poorer children because of close proximity to more deprived neighbourhoods. The opposite is also true. As a result of this, comparison with a smaller set of the six geographically closest schools to the Free Schools was used. This provides a picture of whether the intakes of other local schools are similar or different to that of the Free School and also enables us to establish the extent to which the Free School is taking an 'equal share' of poorer children in relation to these schools. In some cases, these 'choice sets' help to explain some of the substantial differences seen between LAs and Free School intakes whilst in other cases, they continue to suggest a picture of clustering of advantaged or disadvantaged children. Segregation ratios have been used to explore the proportions of FSM children in the Free Schools and other local schools.

Figure 8.2 indicates the number of Free Schools within each range of SRs. As a reminder, a school with an SR of one is taking an exactly 'equal' share of disadvantaged students where as a school with an SR of 0.5 is taking half of an 'equal' based on the numbers of children across the schools set.

Figure 8.2: Frequency of segregation ratios (SRs) of all mainstream Free Schools (2014-2015)



- SR 0-0.49 Considerable under-representation of FSM children
- SR 0.5-0.74 Under-representation of FSM children
- SR 0.75-1.24 Moderate representation of FSM children
- SR 1.25-1.49 Over-representation of FSM children
- SR >1.5 Considerable over-representation of FSM children

These categories take in to account the fact that we do not expect a perfect distribution and a score of ‘1’ from any school. As a result it is too simplistic to just look at schools which have a SR of below 1 and those that have a SR of above 1 in order to establish whether they are taking an equal share of poorer children. Such an analysis would not address the considerable variation that can occur within these two groups.

As a result, the data from 2014-2015 show that 93 Free Schools (47.0%) were under-representing disadvantaged pupils. A third of Free Schools (33.3%) had a moderate representation of FSM children while nearly a fifth of schools (19.7%) were over-representing

disadvantaged children in relation to their local schools set. Table 8.2 shows a break-down of the figures in relation to the age groups that the schools serve.

Table 8.2: Representation of FSM children in mainstream Free Schools by school phase (age)

	Frequency	School phase		
		Primary	Secondary	All-through
Considerably under-representing	52 (26.3%)	33	9	10
Under-representing	41 (20.7%)	20	18	3
Moderate representation	66 (33.3%)	27	32	7
Over-representing	19 (9.6%)	9	9	1
Considerably over-representing	20 (10.1%)	6	14	0
Total	198	95	82	21

The data indicate that primary and all-through schools appear to be the most likely to under-represent poorer children. Over half (55.5%) of primary schools had segregation ratios of between 0-0.74 compared with 40.2% of the secondary schools. It is also the secondary schools which appear to be most likely to over-represent FSM children with 28.0% of them doing so compared with 15.8% of the primaries. Figure 8.3 summarises this finding using the three collapsed categories.

Figure 8.4 breaks down the SR data in relation to the year that the schools were opened. Each of the four waves in 2014-2015 had more schools under-representing FSM children than those moderately or over-representing them. Two thirds of the schools that opened in 2011 were under-representing disadvantaged pupils by 2014-2015, showing a continued trend of under-representation (Morris, 2015) and indicating that the development of cohorts over time is not necessarily going to lead to more balanced intakes. There is also perhaps an argument that the first wave of Free Schools are in some way ‘different’ to the other waves of Free Schools; they do not appear to have the same range of intakes that the 2012-2014 openers have although there are fewer of Wave 1 schools to begin with. These issues are considered in more depth in subsequent sections.

Figure 8.3: Percentage of primary, secondary and all-through Free Schools over or under-representing FSM children.

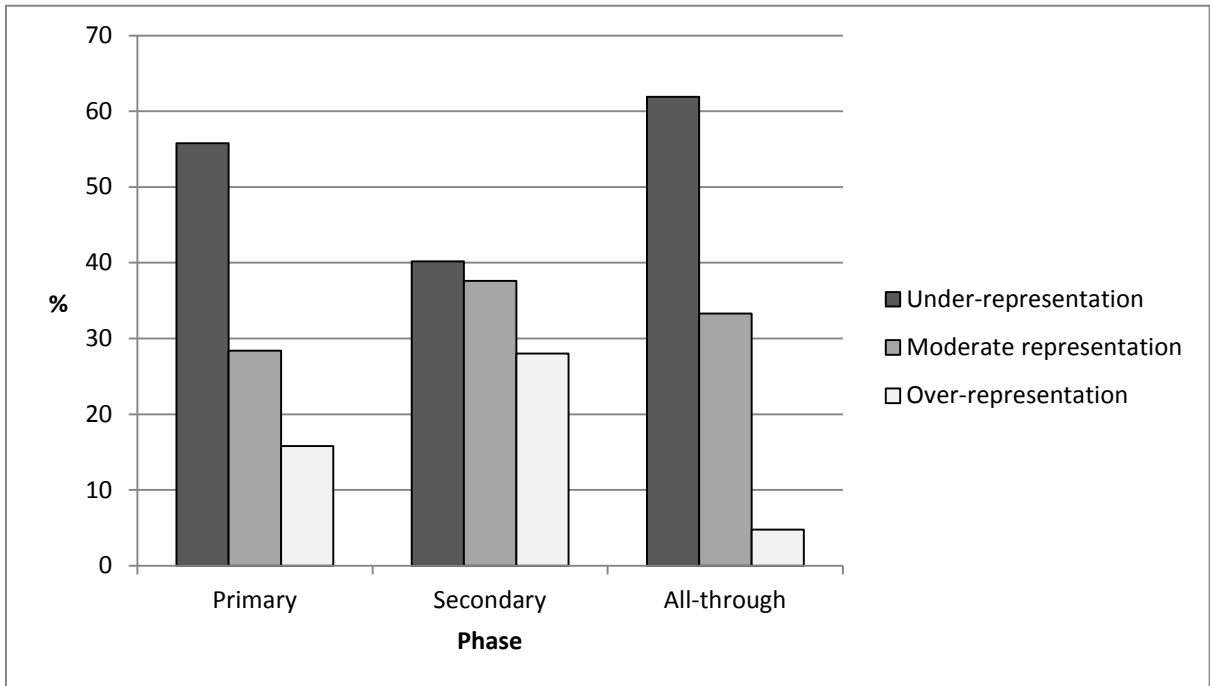
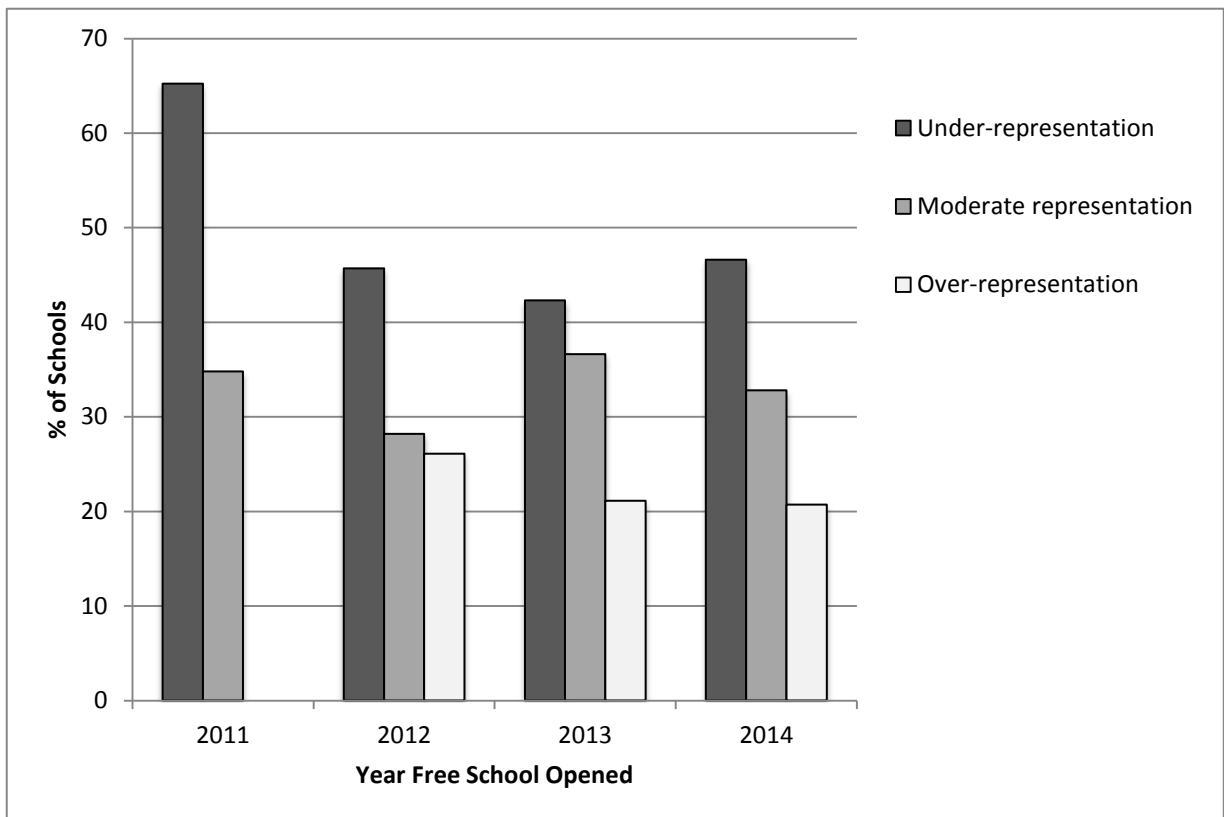


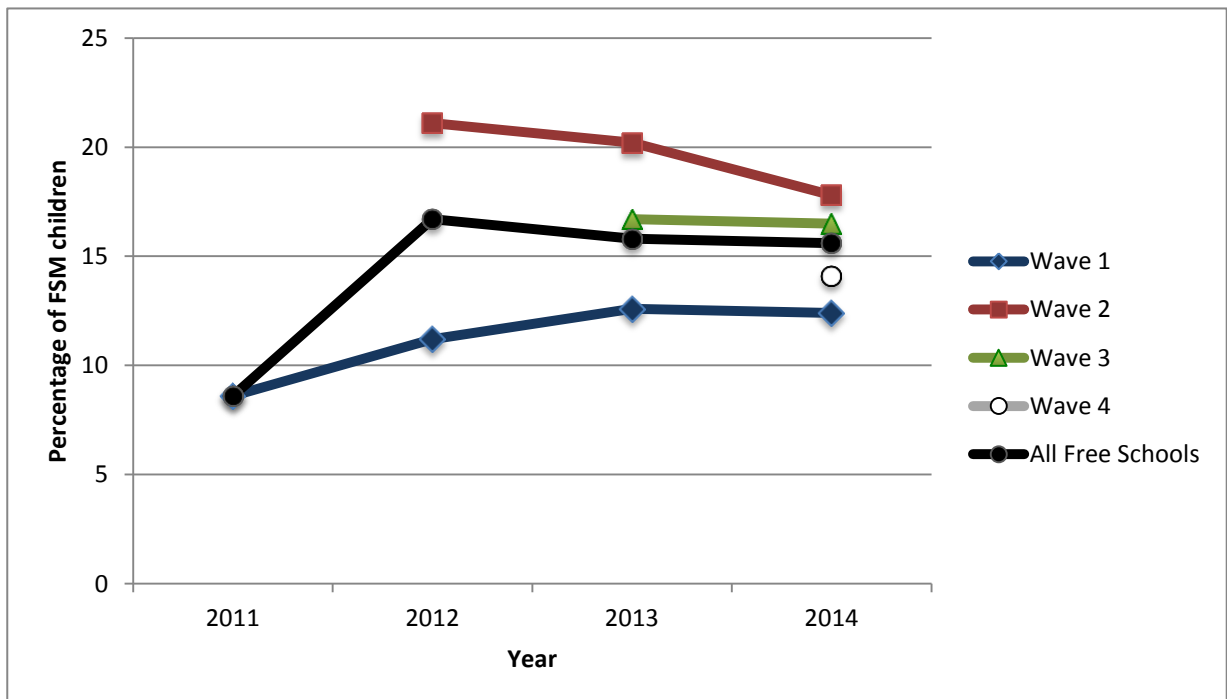
Figure 8.4: Percentage of Free Schools from each wave and their representation of FSM eligible children in 2014-2015



8.2 Free School intakes over time

This section uses some earlier data to examine whether there have been any changes in the representation of disadvantaged children in the different waves of schools since they have opened. Figure 8.5 shows the percentage of FSM children in each wave of Free School in each year of their existence. The graph indicates the compositional differences between the waves of schools. It also demonstrates where changes have occurred as new students have entered in to the Free Schools system each year. As mentioned above, there appear to be quite clear differences in the proportions of FSM children attending the Wave 1 and Wave 2 Free Schools. There is also an indication of some difference between the Wave 2 and Wave 3 schools although this is perhaps diminishing with the reduction in the Wave 2 FSM figure in 2014. The Wave 4 schools only have one cohort so far and thus are not considered further in this section. Overall, the figures show an increase in the proportions of FSM pupils attending Free Schools following the initial year of the policy and a levelling off in the past two years. Further description of the findings and discussion of their potential implication follows below.

Figure 8.5: Percentage of FSM children in each wave since opening



8.2.1 Wave 1 Free Schools

In 2011 the first 24 mainstream Free Schools opened. In their first year these schools educated 3,905 children, just 0.05% of all children attending state-funded mainstream schools in England in 2011-2012. Of these Free School students, 336 (8.6%) were eligible to claim FSM. This compares with a national FSM figure of 18.2% at the time (DfE, 2012d). The areas where the Free Schools are situated provide LA and local (using six nearest schools) averages of 23.8% and 23.9% respectively, signalling that the first 24 Free Schools were substantially underrepresenting disadvantaged children when they initially opened.

Table 8.3 shows the percentage of students eligible for FSM at each of the first 24 Free Schools, as well as the proportion of FSM children at the comparison set and in the LA as a whole. It is important to note that of the 24 first wave schools, four previously existed as private or independent schools. At the time of opening as a Free School, they therefore had intakes across the year groups that they served and accounted for 57.9% of the pupils across all of the Free Schools opening that year. In addition, their earlier fee-paying status meant that they had very low numbers of FSM children. This needs to be taken in to account when considering the 2011 schools as a whole as these established, generally advantaged intakes have the potential to skew the findings somewhat.

The data show that six of the Free Schools took no children eligible for FSM in their first year. All of these were primary schools with three of them having a faith designation. One was previously a private preparatory school. Five of the Free Schools with no FSM children were located in southern England in suburban or urban LAs with FSM levels at 20% or higher.

In September 2012 the Wave 1 schools admitted a further cohort of children and by January 2013 5,428 pupils attended these schools (0.07% of all children in English mainstream schools). Of these pupils, 609 were eligible to claim FSM, meaning that the overall percentage of disadvantaged pupils in Wave 1 schools had increased to 11.2%.

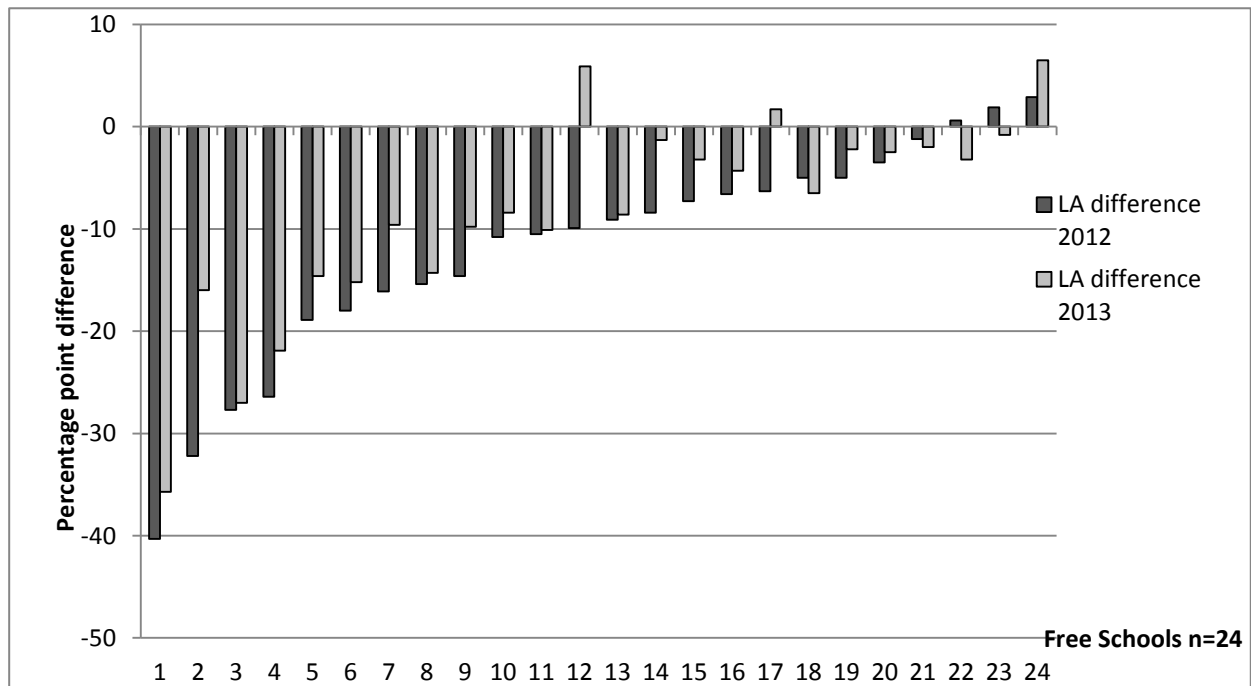
Table 8.3: Percentage of FSM-eligible pupils at each Wave 1 Free School in 2011 compared with local and LA averages

Free School FSM %	Local (six comparison schools) %	Local Authority %
0	19.9	20.6
0	22.1	22.7
0	10.0	30.0
0	21.9	20.4
0	26.7	37.7
0	4.3	12.3
1.7	40.4	44.4
5.2	20.7	17.6
6.3	12.8	9.0
7.1	13.2	18.3
7.3	45.1	34.1
8.1	16.3	13.8
8.3	20.8	10.6
8.6	20.5	25.5
9.7	8.9	9.8
11.9	16.0	22.2
13.3	47.3	37.3
13.3	39.9	29.4
14.7	21.0	16.1
23.1	31.6	32.0
23.6	20.3	23.6
24.3	18.7	20.5
26.1	24.2	23.3
33.9	45.4	38.3

This increase was potentially positive in terms of reducing pupil clustering within these schools. However, the overall picture was still very much one of underrepresentation with most of the Wave 1 Free Schools admitting proportionally fewer disadvantaged children than other schools in their local area. Despite this, 15 of the schools did increase their proportion of FSM pupils in their second year and only one school continued to take zero FSM students.

The data indicate that in both their second and third year of existence 21 of the 24 first wave of Free Schools had FSM proportions below that of their LA (Figure 8.6). Calculations show very similar results when the Free Schools are compared with the percentages from the local set of schools. Whilst some of the Free Schools appear to be moving closer to their LA figure by their third year (2013-2014) for some, there was still a considerable difference.

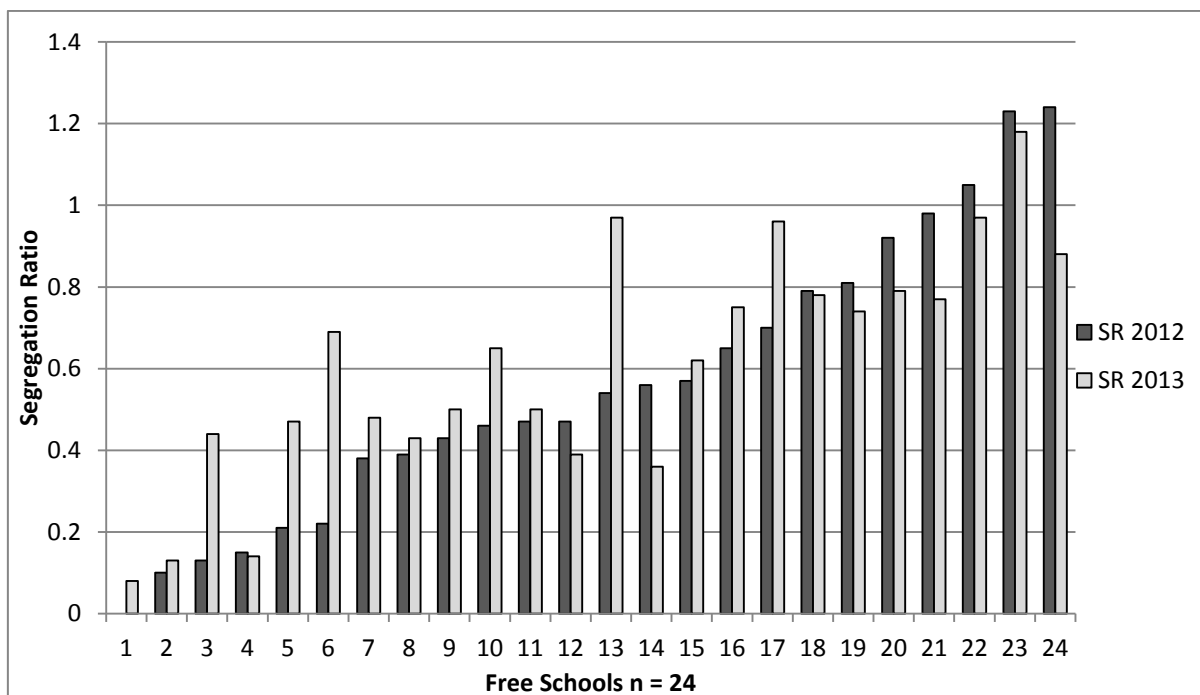
Figure 8.6: Differences between FSM proportions of Wave 1 Free Schools and LAs (2012 and 2013 intakes)



In the 2013-2014 academic year 12.6% of children attending the Wave 1 Free Schools were eligible for FSM. This small increase in the proportion of disadvantaged children in these schools again perhaps suggests that, as a whole, the schools were gradually becoming more representative of their local areas. Despite this, most still continued to take fewer poorer children than we might expect based on where they are located. The segregation ratios for this year further demonstrate this picture (Figure 8.7), highlighting the socioeconomically advantaged intakes of Wave 1 Free Schools in comparison to those in the most local area.

Whilst there were a minority of schools that took nearly an equal share of disadvantaged children, 11 of the 24 schools had SRs of 0.5 or lower and 16 had an SR of 0.75 or lower. Clearly, however, some of the schools were still working with relatively small numbers of pupils, meaning that just two or three additional FSM children could make a notable difference to the school’s overall percentage or SR. As was the case in the previous two years, the six faith schools, the four that converted from the private sector and the one that offered an ‘alternative’ curriculum all had SRs of below 0.75 in 2013-2014.

Figure 8.7 - SRs of Wave 1 Free Schools (2012 and 2013 intakes)



The most recent available data from the 2014-2015 ASC suggested that the proportion of disadvantaged children attending the first wave of schools perhaps appeared to be stabilising with an overall figure of 12.4%. A small primary Free School offering a Montessori education was closed down in April 2014 (BBC, 2014a), reducing the number of schools in this wave to 23. The 2014-2015 data showed that the average segregation ratio for the Wave 1 schools was 0.63. The schools which had previously been private schools and the six faith ethos schools all maintained their under-representation of FSM children with SRs of 0.7 or below.

8.2.2 Wave 2 Free Schools

In 2012 an additional 57 Free Schools opened in England. For the purposes of this analysis data for the 47 mainstream primary, secondary and all-through Free Schools are used. In the first year of these Free Schools opening a total of 1,004 of 4879 (21.1%) of pupils were eligible for FSM. By the following year 1,576 of 7,817 (20.2%) of children attending them were eligible for FSM. This proportion dipped to 17.8% in the 2014-2015 year.

A key finding, therefore, is the difference in the levels of disadvantage between the first two waves of Free Schools in their opening years. Whilst the majority of the first wave appeared to underrepresent disadvantaged students in their opening years, the Wave 2 schools seem to

show a much more mixed picture. Table 8.4 shows the number and proportion of schools in each range for FSM eligibility. In their first year over half of the Wave 2 schools had FSM intakes of 20% or higher and five of them had intakes of over 50% FSM children. By 2013 and 2014, frequencies for both measures had reduced. At the other end of the spectrum, by 2014, there were no schools with zero FSM pupils attending and the proportion of schools taking 0.1-20% of FSM children had increased, perhaps suggesting an overall regression to the mean since their opening year. These figures mean little, however, without some comparison with other schools in the local area.

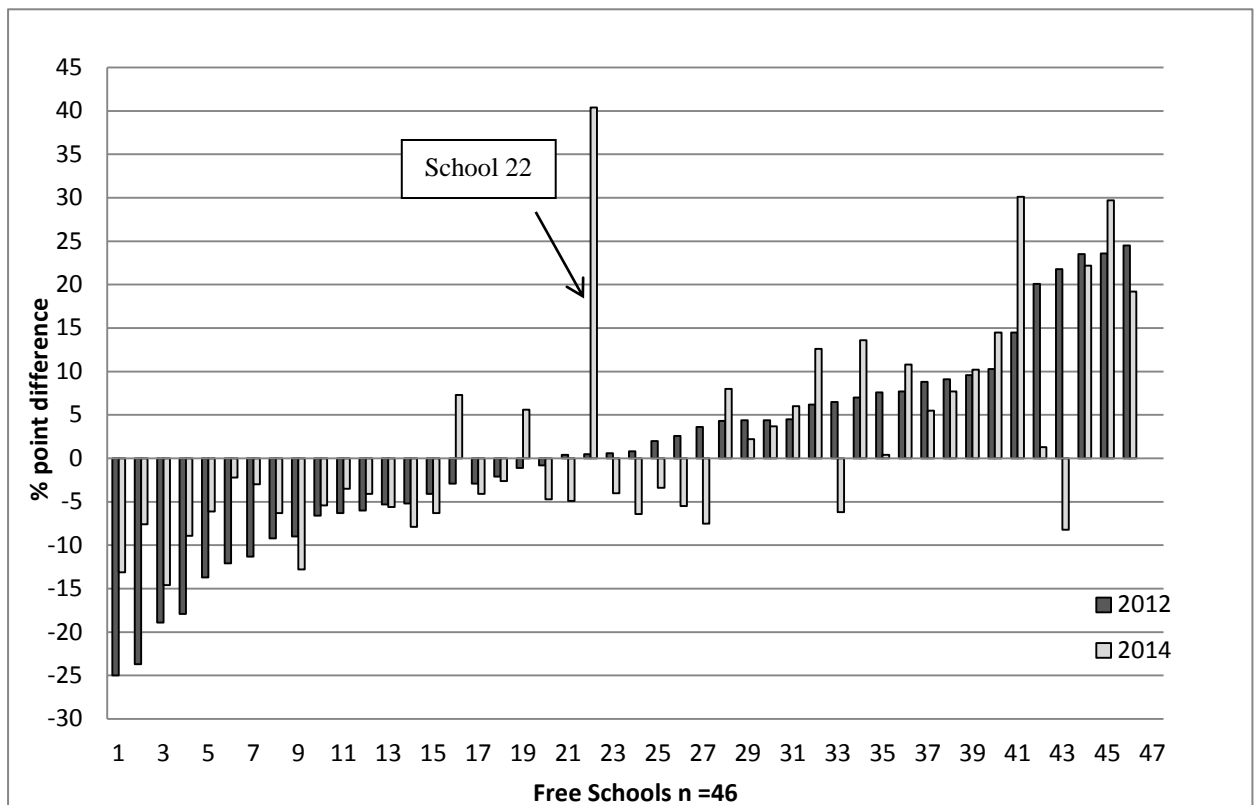
Table 8.4: Frequency and percentage of FSM-eligible children in Wave 2 Free Schools. 2012-2014

FSM %	Frequency 2012	2012 %	Frequency 2013	2013 %	Frequency 2014	2014 %
0	3	6.4	3	6.4	0	0
0.1-10.0	13	27.7	11	23.4	17	37.0
10.1-20.0	7	17.9	13	27.7	12	28.1
20.1-30.0	11	23.4	8	17.0	8	17.3
30.1-40.0	5	10.6	4	8.5	4	8.7
40.1-50.0	3	6.4	3	6.4	3	6.5
50.1-60.0	5	10.6	4	8.5	2	4.3
>60	0	0	1	2.1	0	0
Total	47	100	47	100	46	100

Figure 8.8 shows the percentage point difference between each Wave 2 Free School FSM proportion and that of the LA. The data for both the 2012 intake (the first year of the Wave 2 schools) and the 2014 intake (their third year of intake) are included to establish whether the picture has altered in the period that the schools had been open. In 2012, 26 of the 47 schools opened with FSM proportions above that of their LA and 21 below. By 2014, 20 of the 46 schools (one closed earlier that year) had FSM proportions above their LA and 26 had figures below. Figure 8.8 indicates there is also considerable range in the differences across the schools. By 2014, 14 of the schools were within five percentage points of their LA figure and 33 of the 46 schools had FSM proportions within 10 percentage points of their LA. It is the case that some of these results were not just linked to changes in the Free School intakes but were also partially linked to changes in the LA figures over the course of the three years. There was a national reduction in the percentage of children eligible for FSM (DfE, 2015c) and this has been reflected in some of the LAs discussed here. School 22 on Figure 8.8

demonstrates quite a clear example of this. The LA where this school is situated has seen FSM eligibility drop from 27.7% in 2012 to 19.2% in 2014. In those three years, the individual school had also seen their FSM proportion rise from 28.3% of pupils to 59.6% resulting in a school-LA difference of just over 40 percentage points according to the most recent data.

Figure 8.8: Percentage point difference between Free School and LA FSM proportions: 2012 and 2014 intakes



Placing the Free Schools within the context of their six nearest schools presents a broadly similar picture, suggesting that nearly half of the Wave 2 Free Schools are currently underrepresenting disadvantaged children. Table 8.5 shows the number of schools within each segregation ratio range for the three years that the Wave 2 schools had been open up to 2014-2015. Over the three years there was a decrease in the number of schools with the lowest SRs (below 0.24) but also an increase in those taking between a quarter and a half of their ‘equal’ share of FSM children. The number of the schools with SRs over 1.24 has remained the same

over the period (n=12) although only seven of the same schools have remained in this category since 2012.

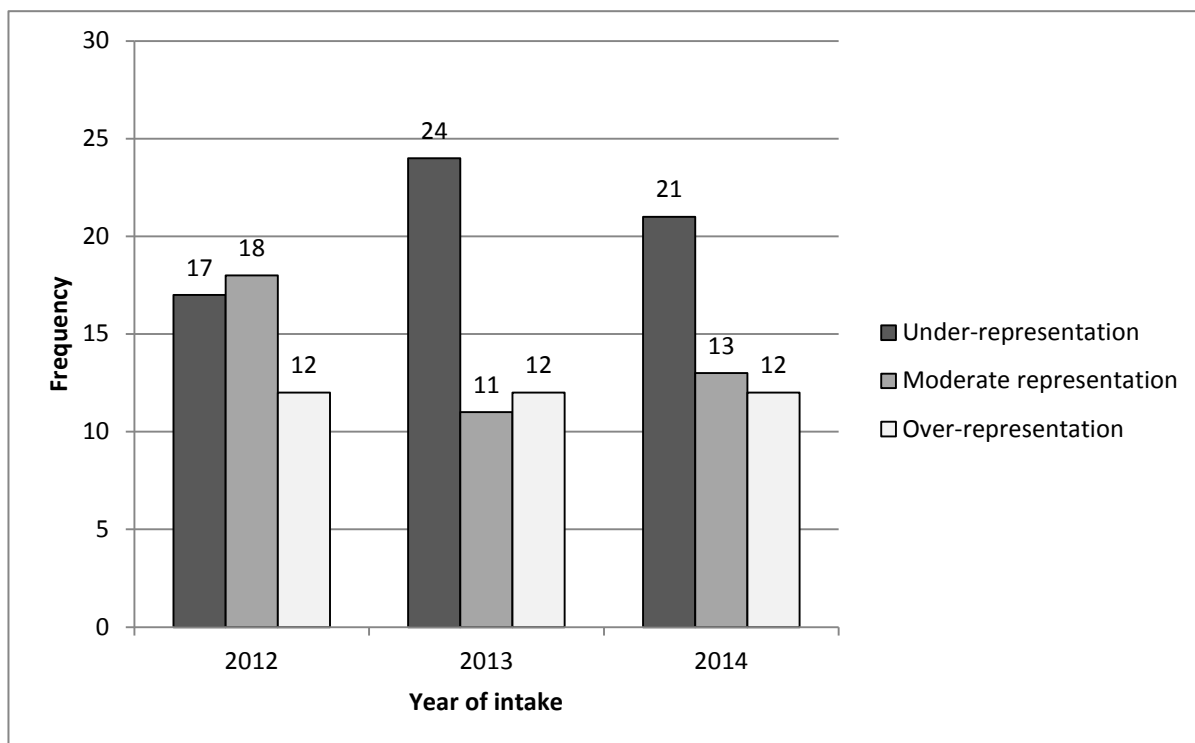
The 21 schools with SRs of below 0.75 include six of the seven ‘alternative’ or ‘specialist’ curriculum schools, seven of the twelve faith or faith-ethos schools and the one school which had converted from private status. Four of the five remaining faith or faith-ethos schools had SRs of between 1.4 and 2. Where religious schools in Wave 1 all appeared to be under-representing poorer children, in the second wave the picture is somewhat different with some of these schools appearing to substantially over-represent disadvantaged children. This finding could be linked to the wider number of religions represented in the 2012 faith-ethos Free Schools (Jewish, Christian, Muslim, Sikh and Hindu) and the variation in wealth associated with these faith groups (Rowlingson, 2012).

Table 8.5: Frequencies of Free Schools in different SR ranges: 2012-2014

SR	No. Wave 2 Schools 2012		No. Wave 2 Schools 2013		No. Wave 2 Schools 2014	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
0-0.24	8	17.0	6	12.8	0	0
0.25-0.49	4	8.5	8	17.0	14	30.4
0.5-0.74	5	10.6	10	21.3	7	15.2
0.75-0.99	8	17.0	9	19.1	8	17.4
1-1.24	10	21.3	2	4.3	5	10.9
1.25-1.49	6	12.8	6	12.8	4	8.7
1.5-2	2	4.3	1	2.1	1	2.2
>2	4	8.5	5	10.6	7	15.2
Total	47	100	47	100	46	100

Using the three broad categories described in the first section of this analysis, Figure 8.9 gives an overview of the extent to which Wave 2 Free School intakes have altered over the three years of their existence. The graph shows a broadly stable picture although there was a small overall rise between 2012-2014 of those under-representing FSM children and a decrease in the number of schools with moderate representation.

Figure 8.9: Number of Wave 2 Free Schools under or over representing FSM children.



8.2.3 Wave 3 Free Schools

This section focuses on the 71 mainstream Free Schools that opened in 2013-2014. At the time of writing, these schools had taken just two cohorts of children meaning that comments on changes to their intakes are more limited. In their first year a total of 16.7% of children attending these schools were FSM eligible. In the following year, the figure remained fairly stable at 16.5%. As with the Wave 2 schools, these overall figures appear almost in line with national averages but neglect some of the considerable differences between the schools themselves and between the schools and their local counterparts. Table 8.6 shows the number of Wave 3 Free Schools within each FSM percentage range for their first and second year intakes.

In their first year four of the primary Free Schools took zero FSM children. Three of these were located in large urban areas with LA FSM percentages of 16% or higher; the fourth is a very small infant school located in a rural area with a LA percentage of 8.6%. In their second year two of these schools continued to take zero FSM pupils and a further school reduced its FSM intake to zero.

Table 8.6: Frequency and percentage of Wave 3 schools FSM proportions

% FSM pupils	Frequency 2013	2013 %	Frequency 2014	2014 %
0	4	5.6	3	4.2
0.1-10.0	25	35.2	26	36.6
10.1-20.0	20	28.2	21	29.6
20.1-30.0	8	11.2	10	14.1
30.1-40.0	7	9.9	5	7
40.1-50.0	5	7	6	8.5
50.1-60.0	0	0	0	0
>60	2	2.8	0	0
Total	71	100	71	100

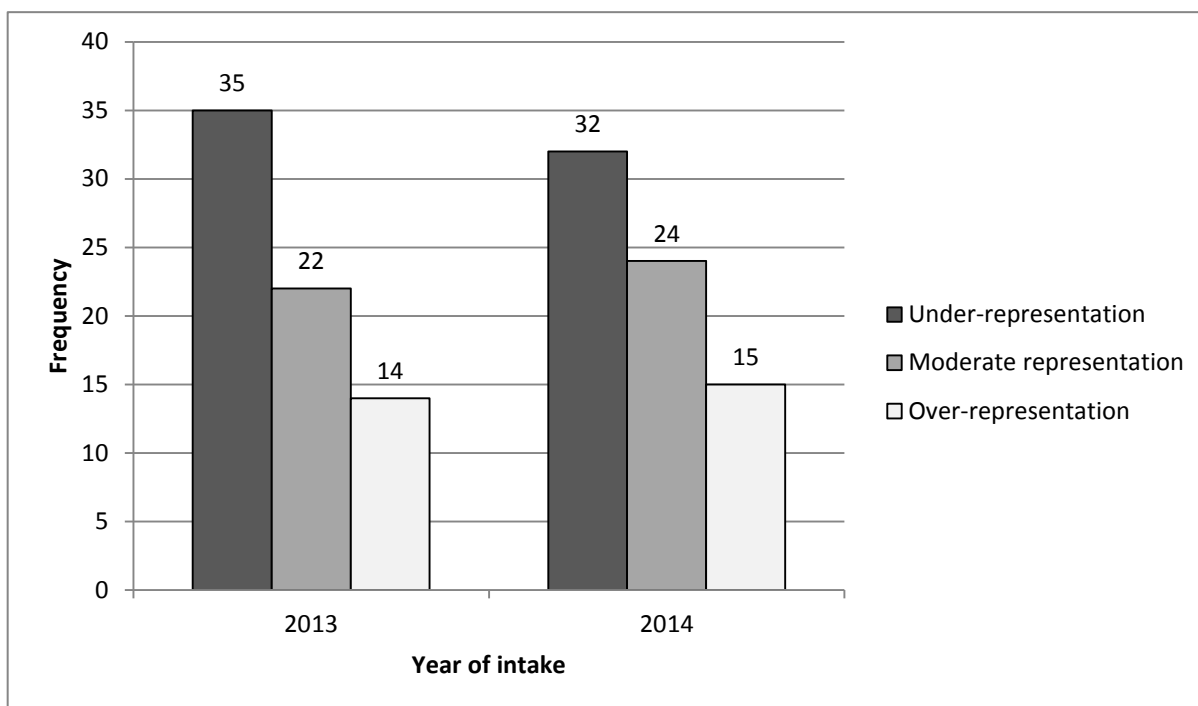
Conversely, in 2013, seven of the Free Schools (five secondaries and two primaries) had FSM percentages of 40% or higher. All of these were located in urban areas with high levels of deprivation although in all cases the school percentage is still somewhat higher than the figure for the LA and the local set of schools. The data, however, particularly for one of the primary schools (with an FSM percentage of 61.5% and an intake of just 26 children), must of course be viewed with caution due to the low numbers in attendance. By 2014, all seven schools had shown some decrease in their FSM percentage although they were still taking proportionally more FSM children than their LA average.

Figure 8.10 shows the number of Wave 3 Free Schools and their representation of FSM children in relation to their segregation ratios. As with previous waves, a substantial proportion of the schools appear to be under-representing poorer pupils when compared with their six nearest schools (49.3% of the schools in 2013 and 45.1% in 2014). Approximately a third of the schools had moderate representation of disadvantaged children whilst a fifth (19.7% in 2013 and 21.1% in 2014) were over-representing this group.

In 2014 all of the Wave 3 schools with SRs of 0.25 or below were primary schools. Of the 26 schools with SRs of above 1.0, 18 were secondary schools. In this wave there are 29 schools that can be classed as faith/faith ethos, offering an ‘alternative’ curriculum/pedagogical approach or were ex-independent/private; in both 2013 and 2014, 16 of these schools had SRs of below 0.75. At the other end of the spectrum, however, three of the schools had SRs of

1.95 or higher. Two were 14-19 vocational Free Schools and the other a secondary Christian faith-ethos school.

Figure 8.10: Number of Wave 3 Free Schools under or over-representing FSM children.



8.3 Case Study Schools

This section looks in more depth at some of the individual schools which have formed part of the analysis above. It presents a description of a series of case study Free Schools, exploring their student compositions and those of other surrounding schools. The case studies aim to highlight the considerable differences between some Free Schools as well as examining some of the potential factors that may be influencing their student compositions. As a result, some additional publicly-available information about the schools including admissions policies, DfE impact assessments and performance data is considered. The case studies are not being used to suggest causal links between the representation of FSM children and the characteristics of the individual schools but they do indicate some of the issues that schools and policymakers may wish to be aware of if their intention is to provide equal opportunity and access to disadvantaged pupils. The section is split in to three subsections, each discussing two Free Schools, and exemplifying some of the differences that have emerged from the data. For the purpose of this analysis, secondary schools (and one all-through school)

are focused upon due to them having larger cohorts of pupils than the majority of the primary schools.

8.3.1 Schools that are under-representing FSM children

School A

School A is a mixed-sex faith secondary school based in an inner city area of a large urban centre in the Midlands. It opened in September 2012 and forms part of a multi-academy trust (MAT). The school is smaller than other secondary schools in the area and has been oversubscribed every year that it has been open. In a recent Ofsted inspection, the school received an ‘Outstanding’ grade.

The school uses faith criteria to allocate 50% of its places. These places are prioritised in terms of a set of criteria linked to the demonstration of commitment to the faith. Supplementary information forms (SIFs) completed by families and a representative from a place of worship are required as evidence of this. Children who also attend the nearby faith primary school (part of the same MAT and the only named feeder school) are also prioritised as part of the faith criteria. The remaining 50% of places are available as ‘open places’. Within this section, however, are three criteria: Looked After Children, siblings and children who attend the linked faith feeder school. The majority of ‘open’ places are therefore available for children who are already in attendance at a faith primary school which uses faith criteria to admit its pupils. This is likely to mean that the majority of children entering the secondary school belong to the designated faith of the school, potentially raising concerns about the homogenous nature of the student composition in relation to ethnic and religious characteristics. For both the ‘faith’ and ‘open’ places, no proximity criteria is used; instead random allocation is the final method used to assign any remaining places.

An OSA investigation (published in September 2015) addressed numerous issues with the school’s recent admissions policies. These included the fact that the admissions arrangements had not been published on the school’s website at the proper time; there was a requirement to fill in a SIF for both faith places and ‘open’ places; prior to 2015 the school had suggested that there were designated feeder schools but had not named these in the admissions documentation; a lack of clarity in the priority given to Looked After Children; a lack of

objectivity in the use of faith criteria; and a general lack of clarity in how places would be allocated. It is unlikely that these issues would have had any significant impact on the overall composition of the school in the last three years. However, the OSA report does state that the school's admissions policy does not conform to all of the admissions arrangements required and that the lack of clarity could lead to some parents feeling that their application may be treated more favourably if they respond to the SIF in a particular way.

The year-on-year intakes of School A indicate a persistent under-representation of FSM-eligible children in relation to other schools and the LA. In 2014, the school had a FSM percentage of 16.7%, substantially below the 29.8% LA figure. The six nearest schools suggest further deprivation in the local area with an average FSM percentage of 42.6%. School A had a segregation ratio of 0.41 based on the 2014-2015 data. The difference in composition in relation to FSM between the Free School and other nearby schools is quite stark. There are a number of potential contributing factors. It is likely that much of the difference is due to a lack of geographical criteria in the allocation of places meaning that the high levels of local deprivation are not reflected in the school intake. It may also be the case that the school is not attracting local parents or is not targeting itself at them either. The use of both the faith criteria and the designation of a single feeder school from the same MAT and of the same faith ethos suggest that the school are instead targeting parents with a particular religious affiliation as rather than those who happen to live nearby to the school. While the use of random allocation may sometimes be suggested as a way of preventing school intakes that mirror the stratification seen in a local area, it can only be used to allocate places to families who actually apply to the school. If, for whatever reason, it is a more homogenous group of families applying (in terms of social, ethnic or religious characteristics) then it is that which will be reflected in the overall student composition, even with the use of random allocation. This is not to say that random allocation is not a useful method for attempting to balance intakes. It is. But as with all allocation criteria it is limited to being used only for those that apply to the school.

School B

School B is a mixed-sex all-through school which opened in 2013. It is located in an affluent part of a town in the south of England. The school was graded 'Outstanding' by Ofsted in

2015. The school website promises smaller class sizes, an extended school day and continuity of education for children aged 4-19. The school is oversubscribed. In 2015 School B opened its sixth form centre.

The all-through structure of the school means that a number of the secondary places will eventually be set-aside for children who wish to directly transfer from the primary phase. Since opening, however, this has not happened as the school has been filling year-on-year taking pupils in Reception and Year 7 in 2013 and doing the same in the following year. Thus Year 7 cohorts in 2013 and 2014 were all recruited from other primary schools.

The recent admissions policies have prioritised access to Looked After Children, siblings and children of parents or founders. The school then state that in order to fulfil their role as a ‘community hub’ they will allocate 60% of remaining places to children living nearest to the school. This is followed by the school reportedly wishing to provide “fair and open access to the wider community” and so offering the remaining places to those children who live within four specified electoral divisions in the area. Where this number exceeds the number of places, offers will be determined through the use of random allocation.

The data for both years that the school has been open indicate substantial under-representation of disadvantaged children. In its first year the school had 3.4% FSM children; in its second year this figure was 3.9%. This compares with a secondary LA figure of 12.9% in 2014-2015. The school’s SR in 2014-2015 was 0.35. All of the six comparator secondary schools had higher FSM proportions as did all but one of the nearest primary schools. These figures could suggest a number of things. First, that parents from the wider community are not applying to the school and so its intake is predominantly reflecting the affluent local area where it is situated. Second, parents from the wider community may be choosing and applying to the school yet they may still be predominantly more affluent families. Finally, some less wealthy families from the wider community may be applying but may be missing out on places due to the random allocation procedure used. If the school is really committed to admitting pupils from a wider range of backgrounds in the future it may wish to specifically set-aside a number or percentage of places for children eligible for the Pupil Premium as the Admissions Code

(DfE, 2014a) allows. The incentives for schools to do this voluntarily, however, appear very limited.

8.3.2 Schools that are moderately representing FSM children

School C

School C opened in 2011. It is a mixed-sex 11-18 secondary school located in London. In 2013, the school received a 'Good' grading from Ofsted. The school website states that the school provides a 'classical liberal education', small class sizes and a competitive atmosphere. One of the stated objectives is that all children will obtain 8 GCSE qualifications at grade C or above. The school has been oversubscribed every year since it has been open.

Since opening the school has reserved 10% of its places (12 pupils per year) for students who display musical aptitude. It has also prioritised places for children of the school's founders and siblings. Some changes have been made to the oversubscription criteria used to allocate remaining places. In the first years of the school opening 50% of remaining places were given to those pupils who lived nearest to the school. A further two thirds of remaining places went to children living within 1.5 miles of the school and the final one third remaining to children living between 1.5 -3 miles from the school (allocated by random ballot). These criteria suggested an interest in providing both a community school but also giving the opportunity for families who live slightly further afield to apply and gain places too. Subsequent policies have indicated slight alterations to the proximity criteria, perhaps as a result of an OSA decision to uphold a parental complaint about the use of distances and the proportion of places to be allocated via the random ballot. The 2015-2016 admissions policy still allocates 50% of remaining places to those living nearest the school but then states that 2/3 of remaining places are for children living within a mile of the school. These methods suggest that the majority of pupils gaining places at the school are likely to live within very close proximity. First, it means that a higher proportion of children will be living within close proximity (one mile) to the school. A proportion of places are reserved for pupils who live further afield and are allocated on a random ballot basis.

Since opening School C has persistently taken a proportion of FSM children in line with the LA and other local schools. Each year it has had a FSM percentage of just over 20%; in 2014-

2015 this figure was 23.1% compared to an LA average of 20.2%. Its SR was 1.01 in the same year. The proportion of FSM children attending the school suggests that disadvantaged families are both attracted to applying to the school and that they are able to gain places through the admissions criteria. The use of staggered proximity criteria and the random allocation of some places may contribute toward this as may a well-publicised message that the school should be considered an option by all local families irrespective of background. Another factor could be that the school is surrounded a population with varied demographic characteristics. Its urban location and the density and mix of housing in the local vicinity could have had an impact on the intake.

In coming years, School C will change its admissions policy to prioritise entry from pupils from two newly-opened designated feeder primary schools. It is difficult to know whether these changes will have any effect on the overall composition of the school. In their opening years, the two primary schools have both had initial intakes which considerably under-represent disadvantaged children so it will be interesting to see whether that continues with subsequent intakes and if so, whether this carries forward in to the linked secondary school.

School D

School D is a mixed-sex 11-16 secondary school located in a northern city. The school opened in 2011 and in 2013 was given a 'Requires Improvement' grade by Ofsted. Concerns about leadership and financial management led to the school being taken over by a local MAT in 2014. When it first opened the school stated that it would specialise in Science. This specialism has been dropped since the recent sponsorship by the MAT.

School D adopted a fairly complex mix of allocation procedures and admissions criteria when it first opened, using school-based banding, a series of catchment areas, some random allocation and giving some priority to children eligible for FSM. The school stated that it was aiming for a balanced mix of children based in terms of ability and socioeconomic background and as such children would be separated in to five equal ability bands. In addition, 55% of places would be available to children who resided with certain postcodes in an 'inner catchment area'. The remaining 45% of places would be given to children at postcodes in the 'outer catchment area'. 15% of places in each band would be prioritised for

FSM children and the remaining places within each band would be allocated randomly. Since being taken over by the MAT the admissions policy has largely stayed the same. The main exception, however, is the removal of the priority category for FSM children. This could be due to the fact that the school has taken at least an ‘equal’ share of disadvantaged children and above the 15% stated in the admissions policy over the four years that it has been open. As a result those running the school may feel that this criterion is obsolete based on the demographics of the local area.

Since opening the school has had intakes very much in line with the LA proportion of FSM children (between 21-23%). Its segregation ratios have indicated an ‘equal share’ of pupils in relation to the other six schools nearby and School D has often been the school with the most ‘equal share’. As a comparison, the nearest school, a Roman Catholic secondary, has persistently under-represented poorer children and an undersubscribed local community school has had segregation ratios of 1.5 or higher in recent years.

Whether there will be any further changes to admissions or allocation procedures following recent governance changes at the Free School remains to be seen. It not clear whether the school’s underperformance (in terms of inspection reports and recent negative news coverage) have impacted on the characteristics of those families considering and applying to the school but it is possible. An improved Ofsted grading and an improved reputation more generally may lead to the school becoming a ‘school of choice’ for more parents although that will not necessarily impact the overall social composition of the school.

8.3.3 Schools that are over-representing FSM children

School E

School E opened in 2012. It is a mixed-sex 11-18 secondary school situated near to the centre of a large Midlands city. The school was the first Free School to be opened by the local MAT; a further three have followed since. In 2014, the school received an ‘Outstanding’ grade from Ofsted in 2014. The school website states that its education is based on “traditional values and ethos” and children will receive a broad and balanced curriculum.

In 2014 the OSA investigated some areas of School E's admissions policy. These included: wording that suggested that parents who placed the school as a first choice would be prioritised; no reference to how children with statements of SEN would be prioritised; different versions of admissions arrangements being found on school and LA websites; and previously Looked After Children not being given equal first priority. All of these issues contravened the Admissions Code (DfE, 2014a) and appear to have since been addressed by the school. The school has, however, kept the same oversubscription criteria since opening. In order of priority these are: Looked After Children, siblings and proximity to the school. These are the same criteria used by the LA and the other schools run by the MAT, perhaps reinforcing the school's commitment to providing education for those living locally to the school.

In its first year, 55.8% of the school's intake were eligible for FSM. This figure rose to 67.4% the following year and dropped back down to 52.0% in 2014-2015. The percentage for the LA in that year was 22.2%. The school has persistently taken more than an 'equal share' of FSM children in comparison to other local schools with an average SR over three years of 1.28. Interestingly, the nearest school to School E at the time of opening was School A, just 0.7 miles away. The two schools provide a clear picture of the contrasting intakes of institutions located in the same community. They highlight how targeting different families and utilising different methods for prioritising places can result in very different student compositions. Of course, this is not a new phenomenon and occurs in neighbourhoods across the country, irrespective of whether the schools are Free Schools or not. It does, however, show the potential for Free Schools to add to new, localised clustering of children.

School F

School F opened in 2012. It is a mixed-sex secondary school located about four miles from the city centre of a large northern city. The school opened as the result of a campaign by parents following the closure of two other local secondary schools. Both were closed in 2012 due to falling rolls. School F opened on the site of one of the closed schools. A DfE impact assessment for the Free School stated that it was assumed that the majority of students from the closing schools would attend School F on opening. Unlike the other schools featured in this section, this meant that School F started with children across the year groups rather than

just beginning with Year 7 and building up intakes each year. In 2014 the school received an inspection grade of 'Inadequate' (the lowest grade); as a result the original head-teacher and board of governors were replaced. The school went on to receive a 'Requires Improvement' grade in 2015 but current performance data indicates that students' attainment and progress remains substantially below that of the national average.

Since opening the school has prioritised, after Looked After Children, those with medical or social needs, siblings and those who live nearest to the school. The school has been undersubscribed since opening, however, and so has admitted all pupils who have applied without the need to use any oversubscription criteria. Undersubscription is not an issue just for this school though. The DfE impact assessment also noted the substantial surplus of secondary places in the local area with the nearest two schools having surplus capacity of 30% and 26% in 2012. These and other schools nearby have continued with a surplus of places for the last three years. Despite the concerns raised in the impact assessment School F was still deemed viable with the report projecting an increase in numbers of secondary-aged children in the area from 2015 onwards.

School F has had a falling roll since opening (from 424 pupils in 2012 down to 315 in 2014). The numbers leaving the school annually in Year 11 are, it seems, not being replaced by Year 7s. It could also be the case that dissatisfied parents have removed their children from the school if they were able to gain a place at a preferred local provider. The proportions of FSM children attending the school has risen year-on-year. When it first opened the school's FSM figure was 36.3%; in 2015 it stood at 44.8%. The LA proportion for 2014-2015 is 14.7%. Segregation ratios for School F have also risen from 1.19 to 1.5.

The DfE impact assessment reported that the local area served by School F is particularly deprived. As a result, high proportions of disadvantaged children are perhaps to be expected. Indeed all six other schools have higher than LA percentages but none are as high as the Free School and none have higher SRs than the Free School in 2014-2015. The impact assessment report concluded that the Free School would create greater choice for parents and greater competition between schools, some of which were under-performing. The problem seems to be that none have underperformed (or have been perceived to underperform) as much as the

Free School and with surplus places at nearly all other local schools, families are able to avoid School F should they wish to. It is not clear whether, with falling rolls and high levels of disadvantaged children whether the school will be able to improve its viability and performance enough to become a 'school of choice' for more families. New management and governance may help with this but while there are a number of other more successful and undersubscribed schools in the area, School F may continue to struggle.

8.4 Discussion

This research has shown that in their first years of existence many Free Schools in England do not have student compositions that are in line with intakes of other local schools. The findings suggest that many Free Schools are under-representing disadvantaged children, a substantial number also appear to be over-representing them too, and overall, the number of FSM children attending Free Schools across the country is in line with the national average. This mixed picture provides both support for those who argued that the schools would provide educational opportunity for poorer children as well as those who believed that Free Schools would not take their 'fair share' of poorer pupils and would primarily serve those from more affluent backgrounds. While some proponents of the Free Schools policy have attempted to draw conclusions about the early effectiveness of the initiative and its competitive benefits across the system (Porter and Simons, 2015), this analysis has provided an alternative way of viewing the policy, considering instead some of the equity issues involved. It acknowledges that the Free Schools programme is still in its infancy and therefore is unlikely to have had an impact on the levels of stratification across the country as a whole. However, by considering the data on a more local level it is possible to see how the new schools sit alongside existing ones in terms of their intakes. The analysis shows that it is not possible to simply claim that Free Schools are or are not adequately representing disadvantaged children. Rather, that there are substantial differences between Free Schools themselves as well as between some Free Schools and their local alternatives. The very nature of the policy appears to encourage this variation and it raises questions about how useful it is to analyse the schools as if they were a homogenous group.

The difference between the intakes of the Wave 1 schools and latter waves is an important finding. Previous authors (Burn-Murdoch, 2012; Gooch, 2011) identified the

disproportionately low numbers of FSM children in the first wave of Free Schools in their opening year. This can be explained, at least in some part, by the fact that nearly 60% of Free School pupils in 2011 were attending schools that just the year before had been fee-paying independent schools. The current study demonstrates, however, that for many of the Wave 1 schools underrepresentation continued into subsequent years, and that the intakes do not necessarily ‘balance out’ as more children are admitted to the school. The data suggest there was perhaps something ‘different’ about the first wave of schools when compared with subsequent waves. Gorard *et al.* (2003) refer to a ‘starting-gun effect’, suggesting that it is those who are more advantaged, aware and motivated that will opt to get involved in brand new policy initiatives. Others may wait to see how the policy emerges or take longer to learn how to become involved. This concept could apply to both the proposers involved in the set-up of the first schools as well as the families opting to use them. Some Wave 1 proposers had put together plans for a new school before the coalition government had been elected and the policy announced in 2010, and perhaps before the subsequent focus on equity emerged as one of the justifications for the initiative. As a result, social inclusion was not necessarily a primary objective in many of these earlier bids. This supports the work of Higham (2014) and Miller *et al.* (2014) who present evidence that the Free School application process did not always support and encourage involvement of proposers seeking to serve more disadvantaged communities.

As has been shown in earlier work, the location of a school tends to have a significant effect on the characteristics of the students that attend it. This is due to both the practicalities of children being able to travel to school as well as the use of geographical criteria to prioritise the allocation of places. Prior to their opening there was debate about whether the first Free Schools were located in deprived areas (DfE, 2011b; Vasagar and Shepherd, 2011). More recently, analyses by Green *et al.* (2015) have shown that the “distribution of opportunities to attend free schools would not appear to be being concentrated among poorer households, but nor is it especially the preserve of better-off households” (Green *et al.*, 2015, p. 12). So many Free Schools are being located in more disadvantaged areas, as this study also shows. Yet they are often still under-representing poorer children compared to other local alternatives, suggesting that mechanisms other than their geographical location are influencing their intakes. The previous chapters have begun to explore some of these school and parent-based

factors but they are complex, varied and frequently interlinked, making it difficult to directly link with school intakes. Without further close study it is impossible to know exactly which mechanisms may have an effect on student composition and how are operating within the local area where the schools are based.

The findings here indicate that irrespective of where they are situated, almost all Wave 1 schools have persistently under-represented poorer children in the years since they have been open. This may begin to suggest that some schools have established themselves as schools that serve more affluent families and have found ways to maintain this. It is possible that schools which start with low numbers of disadvantaged children are more easily able to develop a reputation for being successful irrespective of the initial lack of performance data. Ball (2003) notes that parent perceptions of academic ‘quality’ and ‘quality of student intake’ are inextricably linked, and this is a theme that has also emerged in a previous part of this study (see Chapter 7). If this is the case then it becomes possible to see how these schools are able to continue the cycle of attracting more advantaged parents if they do so from the outset. The ways that the schools choose to market themselves and, in line with previous studies, the use of some admissions arrangements may also be contributing factors in determining which families consider the school, apply and eventually gain places (Pennell *et al.*, 2006).

The second, third and fourth waves of Free Schools appear to demonstrate a much more mixed picture overall. Each wave has a broad range of FSM proportions and segregation ratios. The Wave 2 schools, for example, opened with 20.2% pupils eligible for FSM. These aggregate figures appear to have done much to calm some of the original concern and commentary regarding disadvantaged children being able to access the schools. However, they fail to expose the substantial variation between the individual schools, and between the intakes of the Free Schools and their local counterparts. The case studies indicate how some of this variation might be linked to admissions arrangements, early performance and reputational factors and the specific local contexts in which the schools are situated. As suggested above though, these factors are often school and area-specific. When considering Free School applications, the impact assessments compiled by the DfE are designed to establish the potential effect of these local social and schooling contexts in order to determine the new school’s viability and that of others nearby. While the reports briefly consider issues

of roll numbers, the potential make-up of the compositions of the schools (both Free Schools and competitors) rarely seem to be a factor. Of course it would be difficult to predict the characteristics of all those expected to attend a new school but if there was a genuine interest in promoting more balanced intakes, this is something that could be explored further. Linking the impact assessments more closely with the Free School's intended admissions arrangements and expressions of interest from local parents could be a useful starting point.

With regards to segregation across the system, the substantial over-representation of poorer children within individual Free Schools is as much an issue as under-representation. The findings have shown that about one fifth of Free Schools in 2014-2015 are taking considerably more disadvantaged children than we might expect them to. School intakes do not exist independently of each other and where a Free School is taking more than an equal share of disadvantaged pupils, then other local schools will be taking less than an equal share. Schools (whether Free Schools or not) with a high proportion of FSM children are likely to face increased social and behavioural challenges, and children are more likely to enter the school with lower attainment. Essentially, these schools may have to work a lot harder and use more resources to meet the same standards as other schools with fewer disadvantaged children. Whilst Pupil Premium funding has been introduced to support this work and close the attainment gap (Carpenter, *et al.*, 2013) there is no robust evidence yet that it is having this effect or incentivising schools to take more FSM children. A small minority of Free Schools have opted to prioritise Pupil Premium children in their admissions arrangements but this can only be worthwhile if disadvantaged pupils actually apply to the school. It seems likely that those schools over-representing poorer children are doing so due to similar reasons as are found in any other type of school. These include being located close to deprived neighbourhoods, having poor performance and/or reputation and perhaps as a result of the intakes of other local schools too.

A further key finding is that the majority of the schools across all waves which can be classed as having a faith designation/ethos, offering an 'alternative' curriculum/pedagogical approach or are ex-private/independent schools appear to substantially under-represent disadvantaged children. Such findings are in line with recent studies that show an association between religious schools and advantaged intakes (Allen and West, 2011) as well as international

findings which suggest that highly educated or more affluent families are more likely to choose Steiner or Montessori education (Dahlin, 2007; Rindskopf Dohrmann, 2003). In relation to the policy objectives of the Free Schools policy, these schools and the diversity that they are understood to be contributing to the system are welcomed. They are viewed by proponents as offering additional choice for parents although for families looking for a general or secular education, the schools may not be considered a feasible option. Allen and West (2011) argue that there is a case for incentivising faith schools to serve children from different social, religious and ethnic backgrounds. In relation to pupils from poorer backgrounds, the Pupil Premium funding could be used in this way with schools (faith schools and those with specialist curriculum approaches) being required to take a particular proportion of disadvantaged pupils if oversubscribed.

Warnings that faith schools exacerbate religious, cultural and ethnic divisions within society (Cantle, 2013; West, 2014) and often flout the legislation in the Admissions Code (Thompson, 2015) seem to have gone unheeded in relation to the Free Schools programme as new schools with selective admissions arrangements are approved and opened each year. This study suggests that many religious Free Schools are not taking an equal share of poorer children indicating that they may be contributing to pupil sorting, not just on religious and possibly ethnic grounds, but on socioeconomic ones too. Evidence from the more established Free Schools initiative in Sweden suggests that there has been an increase in socioeconomic and ethnic segregation between schools, particularly in more deprived areas (Bunar, 2010; Swedish National Agency for Education, 2010). Extending parents' ability to select schools based on their ethos and the background characteristics of other children who are likely to attend them highlights an interesting tension within the 'market model'. In order for improvement to be driven by choice and competition, economic theory would suggest that parents must choose schools based on educational quality. But encouraging further diversity in the system provides parents with alternative bases for choice. This is particularly true in the case of Free Schools in their initial years as there is even more limited information about academic quality and reputation available. Parents are therefore required to use other indicators to inform their choices. Chapter 7 shows how some of these might be linked to promises of academic quality but are often closely associated with notions of social distinction too. As such, it becomes possible to see how the new schools and the parents who

choose them are able to reproduce (consciously or subconsciously) societal divisions through their student compositions.

With regards to ex-private/independent schools, it is expected that it would take some time for intakes to become representative of the local area. On opening, the schools are likely to have established cohorts of more affluent children that have been at the school prior to it gaining Free School status. The question is whether the schools will seek to preserve their advantaged intakes now that they are in the state sector, and if so, how they will aim to do this. The previous chapter highlighted how some of the brand new Free Schools were seeking to adopt a private school ethos and how this was reported favourably by parents choosing the schools. It is quite possible that the Free Schools which have converted from independent status may also seek to use this ethos as a 'selling-point' for families considering the school. The implications for this are not yet clear but there is a possibility that this 'private school for free' philosophy could introduce or reinforce a status hierarchy between schools in the local area. The Free School is potentially able to position itself between the private and state sector in parents' minds, appearing as a 'better' option than other state-schools and the 'next best thing' to a private school. This positioning may impact the families that consider the schools and those that are able to gain access via the allocation and admissions arrangements.

The role of admissions arrangements in influencing school intakes has been examined in previous studies (Allen *et al.*, 2010; Morris, 2014) and has also been considered in relation to Free Schools in Chapter 6 of this study. As discussed above, however, they are by no means the most important or only factor involved in determining whether disadvantaged pupils do or do not attend certain schools. The data here do not allow us to draw clear links between the schools, their intakes and their admissions policies. However, the case studies begin to highlight an association between some of the schools and the way that they are prioritising certain groups of students. The admissions policies used by Free Schools vary considerably, not just between themselves but sometimes with other nearby autonomous schools (such as academies) and LA arrangements too. Many of the Free Schools also opt to operate their admissions outside of the LA coordinated programme (as they are allowed to do in their first year). It is, therefore, possible that some parents may have been unaware of or unwilling to complete the additional applications required to gain a place at a Free School in their opening

year. Again, awareness of new schools may grow over time as reputations (either positive or negative) are built but inclusive strategies should be established, publicised and used by the schools when they first open in order to ensure that all local parents are informed and supported during the choice and application process. This is something that could feasibly be built in as a condition of funding during the proposal stage and included as a requirement during the pre-opening phase checks.

8.5 Conclusion

This chapter has presented the findings and discussion following examination of the student compositions of Free Schools in comparison to their local counterparts. It begins to highlight the complexity of the policy and the difficulties of exploring Free Schools as if they are a single group of schools, assuming that they have more similarities than differences. This is not necessarily the case. It seems that, as with other school types, there are varying levels of commitment and interest in catering for pupils from different social backgrounds. Many of the Free Schools have clearly sought to take an equal share of disadvantaged children, and have achieved this since opening. As a result, it seems likely that some, via their curricula, admissions, intakes or aims, will become almost indistinguishable from other community or academy schools. But it is also true that there is considerable variation between some Free Schools and their local alternatives and between many Free Schools themselves. Introducing additional schools that offer some kind of distinction (either through their religious ethos or curriculum/pedagogical approach) is something that policymakers need to be mindful of if they are interested in achieving more balanced intakes across local areas. This so-called ‘diversity’ in schooling, in reality, offers only limited additional choice to some families and runs the risk of helping to preserve an already socially segregated school system through unbalanced intakes. Yet, it is not just Free Schools with a faith ethos or specialist/alternative curriculum/pedagogy that are under or over-representing disadvantaged children. Nor is it a problem exclusively associated only with Free Schools. The findings presented in this chapter highlight the issues with intakes of new schools in England but also remind us of the existing and persistent stratification within the system as a whole. These issues warrant further attention and action on both a local and national level, and from both policymakers and school leaders, if the status quo in relation to school compositions is to be altered.

CHAPTER 9

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS OF FINDINGS

This final part of the thesis revisits the original aims and overall findings of this project. It takes each of the research questions and summarises the key findings in response to them. Within each of these subsections, I summarise the contributions of this study to scholarship in this field. The next section reminds readers of the limitations of the study. Finally, I suggest some implications for policy and research.

9.1 Summary of main findings: a response to the research questions

This study was carried out with the aim of developing a response to the following two-part question: ‘Who attends English Free Schools and why?’ To address this overall question, three separate research questions were developed:

- What allocation methods are Free Schools choosing to use in order to prioritise their available places?
- Why (and how) do parents choose a newly-opened Free School for their child?
- Are Free Schools taking an ‘equal share’ of socially disadvantaged pupils?

For each question a distinct phase of data collection and analysis was designed and carried out. This allowed for a clear and in-depth focus on each area, with each strand contributing something to the overall research question. The study was designed to provide much-needed data on a new policy initiative which had primarily been the focus of theoretical commentary rather than empirical research. In the years since beginning the project, this picture has changed slightly with a number of important studies now having taken place (Green *et al.*, 2015; Higham, 2014). Some of the findings from this research have also been published (Morris, 2014; Morris, 2015). It is felt that the data presented within this study make an original contribution to our understanding of the Free Schools policy, particularly in relation to the schools’ use of admissions policies and parents’ experiences of ‘choosing’ them.

9.1.1 Research Question 1: What allocation methods are Free Schools choosing to use in order to prioritise their available places?

The findings from this study show that the majority of Free Schools are using allocation methods that are very similar or the same as Local Authority schools. The Free Schools have a wider range of criteria available to use, but in terms of the actual number of criteria included in their admissions policies, the schools were, on average, operating in line with the LAs. The vast majority of secondary Free Schools use a combination of both geographical (usually proximity) and sibling link criteria to prioritise access if oversubscribed. But unlike the LA schools, a significant minority of Free Schools have also opted to use their admissions freedoms to prioritise: children of staff/founders; those who can demonstrate commitment to a particular faith; and those who have aptitude in a particular field. Whilst perfectly acceptable within the legislation of the Admissions Code (DfE, 2014a), there remains concern that these criteria act as proxies for other background characteristics (e.g. ability, affluence, ethnicity or parental commitment to education), calling into question the equity of such admissions arrangements and raising concerns that they can be used to ‘cream-skin’.

In relation to matters of social justice within the admissions process, all of the secondary Free School policies included within this study referred to the requirements for Looked After Children and children with statements of SEN. Whilst a few of the schools have in the past been referred to the OSA regarding concerns about the clarity of these criteria, it seems that the schools are now aware of the need to include these two groups as the highest priorities in their policies. In addition, a small percentage of secondary Free Schools are using their admissions criteria to suggest an ethos of equity and inclusion. Some have opted to prioritise disadvantaged pupils (those eligible for the Pupil Premium) and some have opted to use random assignment or banding methods, presumably in an attempt to encourage more balanced intakes. The rationale for the choice of these admissions arrangements is not clear from the available data but would provide a useful focus for future research. Whilst this is a potentially interesting finding, it is important to note that these schools form just a small minority of all Free Schools included in the study, and an even smaller minority of the schools system more widely. Moreover, as with any study of oversubscription criteria, it must be remembered that these arrangements remain obsolete if a school is undersubscribed. And even where the school is oversubscribed, the criteria are only used in relation to those families

that have actually applied to the school. This part of the study does not explicitly consider ways that the schools could ‘select in’ or ‘select out’ potential students prior to the application phase.

When read alongside the recent literature on admissions, the Free Schools in this study appear to be operating in similar ways to other autonomous schools (such as academies or VA faith schools) (Academies Commission, 2013; Noden *et al.*, 2014; West *et al.*, 2009). These studies highlight the variation in school admissions arrangements and indicate how this has particularly being exacerbated through the options available to individual autonomous schools. This wider context is vital in ensuring that we do not overstate the potential differences between Free Schools and other school structures. Nonetheless, there are still causes for concern. There are clearly persistent and troubling issues with the admissions system as highlighted in the recent report from the chief schools adjudicator (OSA, 2015). But it is necessary to differentiate between contraventions of the Admissions Code (which is what the OSA deals with) and the much broader issue of the potential for admissions arrangements to contribute to or alleviate stratification between schools. The findings in this study suggest that the admissions arrangements of Free Schools may well have some role to play in the maintenance or exacerbation of segregation on a local level. Yet they are not the only school type with which we should be concerned. The issues within the admissions system, therefore, need to be addressed on a much wider, systemic level rather than by targeting the procedures used by particular school types.

The findings from this study are new in the sense that, at present, they provide the most in-depth and up-to-date description of the range and type of admissions arrangements being used by all secondary Free Schools that opened between 2011 and 2014. The work offers similar findings to those presented in larger-scale, more general overviews of allocation methods used in England (Academies Commission, 2013; Noden *et al.*, 2014) but with the most current admissions policies available at the time of study. Importantly, the findings indicate that fears that Free Schools would fully exploit their admissions freedoms to manipulate their intakes have not been proved correct. The reasons for this remain unknown but there are a number of possible reasons that could provide some explanation. First, fears that Free Schools, in their early years, may struggle to recruit, may lead the schools to try and ensure that their

admissions policies do not make it difficult or unlikely for families to secure places. Essentially, the schools would prefer to recruit children irrespective of their background characteristics rather than be significantly undersubscribed. Second, it is also possible that Free School leaders and governors, along with leaders of other school types and Local Authorities, share a commitment to the provision of a service based on the need of those in the local area. As such, they may in reality be more focused on fostering equal access to their schools than market theory might suggest. Despite this, a substantial body of literature has highlighted instances where schools, particularly autonomous schools, have been found to use their admissions in ways that are not equitable (Academies Commission, 2013; Allen and West, 2009; Thompson, 2015; West *et al.*, 2009; West *et al.*, 2011). Free Schools currently form just a small proportion of autonomous schools in England; continuing to monitor their use of admissions arrangements is important but a focus should also remain on the wider schools system and the issues that remain in relation to access to schools and the impact on school intakes.

9.1.2 Research Question 2: Why (and how) do parents choose a newly-opened Free Schools for their child?

To respond to this research question, two separate but linked data collection methods were used. Parents of Year 7 children attending Free Schools or non-Free Schools were asked to complete surveys about their reasons for choosing schools and their experiences of the application process. Via the questionnaire, I was able to hear from 346 parents (139 Free School parents and 207 non-Free School parents). This was followed-up with a series of in-depth semi-structured 20 interviews with parents of a child attending a Free School. These interviews provided opportunities to understand more fully the varied experiences and attitudes of parents. Achieving scale and a strong sample size with this part of the study proved challenging. The practicalities and attempts to address the difficulties of recruiting schools and parents to participate have been outlined in the methods section and are revisited in the ‘limitations’ subsection below. As with a number of other studies which explore parents’ reported reasons for choosing schools (Benson *et al.*, 2014; Gewirtz *et al.*, 1995; Reay *et al.*, 2011), this one has had to accept a relatively small sample. Nevertheless, the data collected for this phase of the study provide some important and interesting insights in to the motivations and experiences of parents choosing schools in the most current context.

Free schools were introduced in England in the expectation of changing local school markets through liberating the supply side. This research question considers whether this ‘supply side’ innovation carried any implications for the demand side: how parents chose schools. The data collected in this section enabled a preliminary answer which might inform future research. I now summarise the two main findings.

Type of chooser

First, my findings revealed important differences between those parents who chose a Free School for their child. The interview data suggested that parents approached their choices from different starting points and took different routes to eventually selecting the school. As a way of discussing the parents and highlighting the differences in their experiences, a classification of three ‘types’ was developed. The groups identified - the ‘initiators’, the ‘active choosers’ and the ‘reluctant choosers’ – indicate the different roles and strategies that parents adopted during the school choice process.

Such categorisation of parents during the choice process is, of course, not new (Gewirtz *et al.*, 1995; Willms and Echols, 1992). However, rather than focusing on parents’ inclination and/or ability to ‘choose’, the groupings presented instead indicate parents’ role in specifically choosing a Free School. The three groups are useful for drawing our attention to a number of emerging issues when considering this new context for school choice. First, the ‘initiators’ group indicates an interesting convergence of two different roles: the parent choosing a school for their child and an individual opting to be involved in the set-up of a new local school. Within my sample, there were just two parents within the ‘initiators’ category. Nevertheless, the identification of this dual role is significant as it is not something that has been clearly identified before now. Their preferences for schooling aligned in many ways with those in the ‘active choosers’ group. However, they are distinctive in their capacity to exert substantial influence over the school’s development and in their ability to ensure that their individual preferences were realised. Understanding the complexities of being simultaneously involved in steering the introduction of a new school and being personally invested in the choice of school as a parent could contribute to our knowledge of the motivations behind parent-led school proposals and the issues they face.

The second group – the ‘active choosers’ – was the largest group and was characterised by the parents’ commitment to selecting the Free School. Whilst not involved in the establishment of the school, these parents had generally followed the development of the Free School’s introduction and had been convinced from a fairly early stage that it was their preferred choice. As such all of the parents either placed it as their first or only choice when completing the application stage. These parents all indicated a desire and capacity to make informed choices about school. Their responses (and actions), however, challenge economic theories of school choice in two ways. First, the evidence here does not support the idea that parents will necessarily select and consider a range of choices before choosing their preferred option. Second, some interest in the use of objective performance information was reported but the parents’ choice of the Free School and their perceptions of other local schools was more influenced by the ‘grapevine’ knowledge that they acquired from those within their social circle (Ball and Vincent, 1998; Coldron *et al.*, 2008; Schneider *et al.*, 2000). Earlier research has shown how widespread the use of performance tables are in England (Burgess *et al.*, 2010; Coldron *et al.*, 2008) but the findings here suggest, that for the ‘initiator’ and ‘active chooser’ parents, the absence of such information was not an overriding concern. Parents still felt able to choose based on quality, using alternative signals from the schools and other parents to indicate this.

The final group, known as the ‘reluctant choosers’ are interesting in the way that they appear to somewhat challenge the ‘choice’ discourse that surrounds the Free Schools policy. Having an additional school, particularly in an area where other schools are underperforming, may indeed provide an extra option but as this group indicate not all of the children attending a Free Schools are there because they actively opted for the school. When preferred school choices were oversubscribed, for the parents in this group, the Free School appeared to present a ‘least worst’ option when higher preferences were not available. Here, a Free School’s ability to address the basic need for places rather than appealing specifically to parental preferences (for performance or other features) comes to the fore.

Factors influencing Free School choice

Another key finding from this strand of the study relates to the factors that influenced parents' choice of a Free School. The questionnaire revealed that Free School and non-Free School parents valued broadly similar features of a school. Academic and school quality was shown to be most important from both sets of parents. From the interview data three broad themes emerged in terms of what influenced parents' choice of a Free School: academic quality, interest in a personalised and holistic approach to education, and location/ convenience.

These findings are interesting for a number of reasons. The focus on academic quality from both sets of parents is perhaps not immediately surprising. This finding sits in line with recent studies which indicate that school performance and quality are valued highly by the majority of parents (Burgess *et al.*, 2014b; Harris and Larsen, 2015; Leroux, 2015) and perhaps reflects the extent to which parental choice has been shaped by a 'league table' environment. But for the Free School parents, objective information which would indicate the performance of the new school was not available. There were no Ofsted reports or examination data at the time of applying to the school. Instead, those who stated the school as a preferred option (the initiators and the active choosers) reported using other factors which served as proxies for the school's potential to be a success. For these parents, there was a clear sense that the Free School could offer something 'better' than what was on offer elsewhere; as a result, comparisons with private and grammar schooling were frequent, reinforcing a status hierarchy between schools and placing the Free School at the top end of this. The features that the parents described as being influential in their choice of the Free School were perhaps not only perceived as indicators of school quality but also of the 'type' of family that might choose the school. In short, there is a sense that in wanting a school that resembled a model from the private or independent sector in terms of its provision, parents also felt that it might resemble this type of school in relation to its more advantaged intake. This finding supports previous research which has highlighted the links between perceptions of school quality and a school's social composition (e.g. Bagley *et al.* 2001; Ball, 2003; Benson *et al.*, 2014). In a new school where the intake has not been fully established and where there is a limited local reputation, there is also the opportunity for the school to 'create' its school mix 'from scratch'. From a school's perspective, developing the 'right' composition is important in the short term for ensuring that potential applicants view the school as a quality option, and, in the longer term,

for fostering an environment that is likely to lead to levels of academic performance. The data suggest that schools themselves played an important role in stirring parents' imagination, presenting perhaps an idealised account of what a new Free School would be like. Their role in marketing the school to parents was significant; the majority of parents reported relying heavily on information received directly from the school. Foregrounding particular points of distinction and placing the Free School highly within the hierarchy of local schools were both successful strategies.

The school environment and culture were also reported by parents as key factors for influencing their choice and often appeared to be used to confirm their initial positive thoughts on the high quality education available at the Free School. The opportunity for children to participate in a range of enrichment activities and a focus on a personalised, nurturing schooling environment were rationalised as ways of ensuring the child's happiness. These findings reinforce much earlier research that suggest that parents are just as interested in 'process' criteria, (i.e. factors that may influence a child's social and emotional wellbeing at school) as they are in 'product' criteria such as examination outcomes (Coldron and Boulton, 1991; Walford *et al.*, 1996). However, this may be influenced by the new context of the Free School and the fact that parents did not have the performance data to refer to. They, therefore, are perhaps simply justifying or confirming their choices with what limited information was available from the schools.

This strand of the research extends our understanding of parental choice in two key ways. First, it highlights the emergence of an interesting new 'type' of chooser in the school choice market. This parent has been termed the 'initiator' and represents a blurring of the boundaries between school providers and school users (i.e. both the production and consumption sides of schooling). This role was only experienced by a small number of participants in this study but does indicate an important shift or extension of power in relation to the school choice process. It raises a number of issues surrounding who opts for this role and their reasons for doing so, as well as how this individual dual role could impact on the choice and wider schooling experiences of others. A key expectation of the policy was that Free Schools would emerge in local markets where other schools were underperforming. This is something that emerged from the accounts of the initiators although their perceptions of performance were not related

just to examination data or inspection reports but were often more influenced by the location of the schools and their intakes. Second, this part of the study suggests that even where a new school enters the local market, parents that choose it report valuing broadly similar features to those who opted for established schools. There is also the suggestion that some of the new schools were maximising on the absence of performance data, using it as an opportunity to develop a convincing image of success by foregrounding other features that the school offered. This area would benefit from further examination though in order to draw conclusions as to whether the school's behaviour had any discernible impact on the families considering and/or applying to the school.

9.1.3 Research Question 3: Are Free Schools taking an 'equal share' of socially disadvantaged pupils?

If required to answer this question in the simplest way the answer would be 'no'. This finding is in line with other recent studies of Free School intakes and the literature on other autonomous school types (Allen and West, 2011; Green *et al.*, 2015; Gorard, 2014a). When compared with their Local Authority and their six nearest schools, the majority of the earliest Free Schools (opened in 2011) substantially under-represented disadvantaged pupils in their first year and have mostly persisted to do so since. The picture, however, is more complex than one of straightforward under-representation when we consider more recent waves of schools.

Whilst, like the Wave 1 schools, the majority take proportionally fewer disadvantaged pupils, there is also a substantial minority of Free Schools that have FSM figures in line with other local schools or their LAs. Some are also taking a higher proportion of disadvantaged children than might be expected. In terms of achieving balanced intakes across a local area, it is important to note that this outcome is no more desirable than one where schools are under-representing these children. The vast range between different Free Schools highlights the problematic issue of discussing Free Schools as a single homogenous group. The very nature of the policy encourages difference. The schools are not randomly located across the country and are products of government policy and those that have set-up them up (Higham, 2014; Miller *et al.*, 2014). As a result, difference can be manifested in terms of their ethos, curriculum, location, other school options in the area, staffing arrangements, choice of

admissions arrangements and size. Free Schools that have attempted to overtly offer some form of ‘diversity’ (either through faith designation or curriculum/pedagogical specialism), tend to be under-representing poorer children. This supports similar findings in relation to other ‘specialist’ school types (Allen and West, 2011; Exley, 2009) and raises concerns about equity of access and opportunity in relation to the new schools.

The findings from this section indicate that there is at least some cause for concern in relation to the student compositions of Free Schools and fair access. However, we must also be careful to acknowledge that the unbalanced intakes are unlikely to be simply as a result of the individual behaviour of schools. As earlier studies have indicated, there are likely to be a complex mix of factors (linked to the schools, other schools in the local area and the backgrounds and behaviour of the parents/families) that influence the intakes (Allen, 2014; Burgess *et al.*, 2014b; Gorard, 1999). The small scale of the Free Schools initiative means that these student compositions at present are likely to have little impact on stratification on a Local Authority or national level (Green *et al.*, 2015). It is possible, however, that over time, schools could start to notice a shift in their intakes on a local level, particularly where multiple new schools begin to emerge. Exploring this longitudinally, as the Free Schools policy expands and individual schools become more established, could be a useful avenue for further study.

This phase of the study set-out to establish the student compositions of Free Schools and whether they appeared to be taking an equal share of disadvantaged pupils. It was designed to build on earlier studies which had just examined the intakes of the first wave of schools (Gooch, 2011; Vasagar and Shepherd, 2011). It is the only study to date which looks at all mainstream Free Schools that opened between 2011 and 2014 and tracks their intakes over the years that they have been open. It is also the only study of Free Schools that has utilised segregation ratios as a method for establishing the composition of the new schools in relation to those in the local area. This has allowed for clear comparisons to be made and for the Free School to be examined within the context of the local school’s market rather than analysing the intakes just in relation to who lives near the schools. As previous research has highlighted, identifying the most appropriate local ‘market’ for between school comparisons is not straightforward (Burgess *et al.*, 2006; Gorard *et al.*, 2003). The use of LAs and alternative

local schools is not ideal but was deemed sufficient for providing the initial insights in to the student compositions that this study required.

Before concluding this section, it should be noted that in the final months of writing this thesis, a more in-depth and sophisticated study of Free School compositions was published (Green *et al.*, 2015). This has provided similar findings and draws similar conclusions to those in this study and those published earlier (Morris, 2015) in relation to FSM intakes of Free Schools; crucially though, it also examines other pupil characteristics (such as ethnicity and ability), creating a broader evidence base exploring social selection.

9.2 Limitations of the study

As discussed in earlier chapters, there are a number of limitations with this study. Some of these are as a result of the circumstances or context within which the research was undertaken. Others can be attributed to errors or a lack of experience on my part as the researcher. The first issue is linked to the complexity of keeping track of a recent and ever-developing policy initiative. In the case of the Free Schools policy, this has meant that the number of schools to be studied has increased year on year since starting the study and in addition, some of the schools have closed, moved location or reopened under new names or with new sponsors. Knowledge of this has been dependent on being able to find and access available information. Wherever possible, these changes have been addressed within the data collection and analysis.

For many working in the field of education, the Free Schools policy is viewed as controversial or even radical. In some ways it has become heavily politicised and amongst academics, policymakers, practitioners and the media, the initiative often seems to polarise opinion. The schools have been subject to a lot of judgment in advance of the availability of systematically collected and analysed data. This, I feel, contributed to reluctance from many of the new schools to be involved in the research. A small number of head teachers remarked on this when responding to requests to distribute the parent questionnaire. Being involved in a project where parents could potentially comment negatively about their experience of the application process was deemed too sensitive and too big a risk. This, of course, raises questions about the representativeness of the Free School sample and may indicate that it is those schools with

satisfied parents and/or who are ‘playing by the rules’ that are more likely to have opted to participate.

This ‘gatekeeping’ by the schools made access to Free School parents quite challenging and limited the number of parents who had the opportunity to complete the questionnaire. But it also meant that recruiting comparator schools was challenging too. The original plan to involve parents at the nearest schools to the Free Schools had to be abandoned due to very few being willing to be involved. Instead, and to ensure that at least some comparison element was maintained, other schools within the same LA as the Free School were recruited. Even where parents (both Free School and non-Free School) were given access to the research, there was a sense that the majority of those who responded were parents who felt strongly (either positively or negatively) about their experience of the admissions process and/or their child’s current school. I was aware of the likelihood of this self-selection bias in this part of the study but in reporting the findings have tried to be mindful of it and acknowledge the potential skew in the representativeness of the data and the danger of overstating what the data suggest. This study only interviewed parents who *had* received a place at a Free School; a more robust approach would have been to have also heard from parents who had been unsuccessful in their Free School application and those who had actively chosen not to apply to a Free School. With more time and resources, this would be an interesting area for future study.

9.3 Implications for policy

The findings here suggest that although in many ways Free Schools appear to be operating in similar ways to other types of school, the fact that additional schools are entering the market and choosing to prioritise places using criteria (such as geographical, aptitude or faith criteria) that can reinforce segregation is problematic. This is a problem that exists beyond just Free Schools though and indeed is not something that should be dealt with on the level of individual school type. There is no point (and indeed it seems unfair) in making recommendations about how Free Schools should use their admissions policies if academies, VA schools or community schools are all permitted to do something different. The literature and the findings from this study encourage us to question why ‘freedoms’ in relation to school admissions arrangements are really necessary. While some argue that individual schools

should have the right to support their ethos through their intake, this does not seem to be a good enough rationale for permitting selection based on pupils' background characteristics, nor is it a good enough reason for allowing the maintenance of stratified student compositions. Offering additional schools that select based on faith or aptitude or carefully-designed catchment areas, may be viewed as part of the government's choice and diversity agendas. Nevertheless, this 'choice' is only available to those who are eligible or willing to apply. For some, this will be no choice at all. If the aim is for fairness across the system as a whole and for all families, decisions about the most equitable methods of allocation need to be made, and these need to form a clear and ideally mandatory part of all school admissions policies. Simply giving schools the option to use them is unlikely to make much difference unless improved incentives for doing so are also introduced. As Coldron (2015) notes, measures like this are not likely to be a 'quick fix' for solving imbalanced school intakes across the country but they may go some way to dealing with the issue and creating a fairer, more accessible choice system for all families.

The current findings on Free School intakes also suggest that continued tracking of the policy and its development will be important. From a policymaker's perspective, this seems unlikely to be a current priority. At present, the commitment to expanding the programme and to supposedly improving standards via the choice and diversity that it brings, has meant that one of the key original objectives of the policy – improving provision for those from disadvantaged backgrounds – has been significantly relegated. Proposers do not have to show any assurance that they wish to serve students from different backgrounds, nor are they required to use admissions arrangements that might support access for poorer pupils. These could have been successfully included within the requirements for those wishing to set-up a new school. Recently, it was announced that Free School proposers also do not need to show evidence of parental demand or engagement with their local communities (Dickens, 2015). For some, this may be viewed simply as the next step in 'liberating the supply side': a natural progression for the policy, but developments that will require careful monitoring in terms of their impact on equity.

9.4 Implications for research

9.4.1 A holistic approach to policy evaluation

This study has highlighted the benefits of using different approaches to investigate interlinked areas within a single policy initiative. Different elements of the Free Schools policy have been explored, considering the behaviours of both schools and parents, and outcomes in terms of student compositions and segregation. Such an approach has allowed for the initiative to be viewed from different angles, and has increased awareness of the complex relationships that exist between them. The use of the large data set to first explore the extent to which Free Schools were serving disadvantaged pupils provided a useful starting point for the research and a clear rationale for further investigation of mechanisms that have previously been shown to contribute to the characteristics of school intakes. If any one of the different research components had been examined in isolation, and had formed the focus for the whole thesis, then the broader perspective that has been gained from the more holistic approach here would have been lost. There would, of course, be benefits to extending the scope and depth of some of the data collection and analysis (particularly in relation to the parental choice section). Nevertheless, for the purposes of this initial investigation in to a new policy, it is felt that the findings are able to provide useful responses to the research questions and clear indications of the different areas where further research would be beneficial.

9.4.2 Gaining wider access to the views of parents

In order to address the research question about parents' reasons for choosing schools, it was necessary to gain access to them. For the purposes of this study, I opted to do this via the schools. As detailed above, this was not always a straightforward approach and was sometimes met with resistance or suspicion, meaning that significant numbers of parents were not made aware of or given the opportunity to participate in this research. This is problematic in terms of the representativeness and size of my sample but perhaps more concerning for me, was the potential unfairness of this gatekeeping, and the lack of agency that it allowed parents as individuals. One parent, for example, found out about my research through a colleague and contacted me about involvement. She was unaware that her child's school had not wished to distribute the questionnaire, and felt disappointed that she had not had the opportunity to share her experiences of the application and admissions process. This example highlights an

interesting tension and a potentially uneven balance of power between the school and the parents. It is true that even if given the chance to participate in the research, many parents may have opted not to be involved but I think there is a case for seeking out ways for democratising participation. This might include use of contact via social media or parent events, perhaps in combination with access via schools.

9.4.3 A new context for school choice research

This research has illustrated a new and important context for school choice research. The expansion of the academies programme since 2010 has provided a number of widespread changes to the schools system across the country. Central objectives linked to increasing choice, diversity and autonomy have led to a number of new school structures being developed. This study has considered just one of these – Free Schools – but the issues raised are also prescient when thinking about others such as Studio Schools and University Training Colleges. A much more developed ‘choice’ landscape has begun to emerge across the country and the implications of this in relation to standards and social justice remain fairly unknown at present. For researchers interested in these policy developments, the radical changes introduced in the last parliament provide a dynamic and novel situation for investigation. Now that some of these school structures have become more embedded and established within the system, longitudinal studies exploring their effectiveness and value are necessary. But whilst interesting, investigating specific school types completely in isolation is also problematic. It is important that the novelty of particular school structures, particularly those with very limited numbers and serving relatively small populations, does not become a distraction that takes focus away from the needs of the wider schools system as a whole.

9.4.4 Parents as ‘providers’ and ‘consumers’

Emerging from the parental choice data was a new ‘type’ of chooser, a parent that appeared to occupy a dual role of both instigating or supporting the provision of a new school, as well as selecting that school for their own child. This is not something that has been highlighted before and is indicative of a policy that actively encouraged parental involvement in the set-up of Free Schools. The data here are limited by the tiny number of parents that formed part of this category. Nevertheless, they form a potentially interesting and important starting point for further research in to this phenomenon. Whether or not the characteristics, motivations and experiences of these parents are similar or different in some way to other parties involved in

the establishment of new schools is an empirical question. The answer though could give us valuable further insight into the Free Schools policy and the extent to which one of its original aims of encouraging parental involvement in education has been realised.

9.5 Final thoughts

This project emerged from an interest in the development of education policy following the election of the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition in 2010, particularly the rapid expansion of the academies programme. The Free Schools initiative represents a relatively small but highly significant part of that overall policy agenda. It has seen the most concerted effort to date to introduce a substantial number of new and autonomous schools in to the system. The purpose of this study was to examine the new policy in relation to some of the concerns raised about equity and access to the schools.

The findings indicate that in some ways we are right to be concerned about Free Schools. Many are under-representing disadvantaged children in comparison to their local alternatives and many are using admissions criteria which have the potential to maintain or exacerbate socioeconomic, religious or ethnic segregation between schools. But this is not the full story. The study has noted examples of good practice that some of the schools appear to be using to encourage equity. It has also highlighted the diversity and heterogeneity that exists within the schools system, not just between Free Schools and non-Free Schools, but between individual Free Schools too. These findings suggest a tension between the promotion of autonomy and the government's desire to maintain a considerable degree of control. They also indicate a disconnect between government policy which claims to be in the pursuit of raising standards, and the implications of such policies on social justice. Whilst it is too early to have clear evidence that the former has been achieved, this thesis provides support for the suggestion that Free Schools have been introduced with limited consideration for ensuring fairness and opportunity for all. It is not clear why equity has been sacrificed in the pursuit of excellence when both should (and could) be the aim. It is hoped that this thesis provides a starting point for further investigation of some of these interesting and important issues.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: Letter to Head Teachers



UNIVERSITY OF
BIRMINGHAM

School of Education
University of Birmingham
Edgbaston
Birmingham
B15 2TT

Dear

Re: Secondary schools admissions research

I am currently working on a project aimed at learning more about the admissions and allocation procedures in different types of secondary schools across England. As part of this project, I am inviting parents of Year 7 children to participate in a short questionnaire about their experiences of applying to secondary school.

In order to reach as many parents as possible, I am writing to schools to ask whether they would be willing to hand out the questionnaires to Year 7 parents, in order that they can be taken home and completed. **Schools will not be required to do anything further following dissemination of the questionnaire** as Freepost envelopes will be included for parents to use following completion. Alternatively, schools may collect the questionnaires in themselves if they wish to.

A copy of the questionnaire and letter to parents is enclosed.

Following distribution of the questionnaires and analysis of the data, each participating school will receive a report of the general findings, and of the results specific to their own school. Of course, any reference to the school, teachers, parents or children will be reported anonymously with responses kept confidential at all times.

If your school would be willing to hand out the questionnaires to Year 7 parents, then I would be really grateful if you could respond to this letter using the email address below. Following agreement, information letters and questionnaires will be supplied to your school ready for distribution.

Should you have any questions about the project or about your school participating, please do not hesitate to get in touch using the contact details below.

Yours Sincerely,

Rebecca Morris
Doctoral Researcher
University of Birmingham

APPENDIX B: Letter to Parents (with questionnaire)



UNIVERSITY OF
BIRMINGHAM

School of Education
University of Birmingham
Edgbaston
Birmingham
B15 2TT

Dear Parent/Carer,

Re: Secondary schools admissions research

I am a researcher at the University of Birmingham and am currently conducting a study into school choice and the school admissions process in England. The aim of this is to learn more about parents'/carers' reasons for choosing secondary schools and their experiences of the applications process. As part of this research, the parents of Year 7 children at your child's school are being asked to share their views via the attached questionnaire.

The questionnaire should only take around **8 minutes** to complete.

Anonymity and confidentiality: This questionnaire does not require you to disclose your name or any other personal details unless you wish to do so. Only the researcher will see the completed questionnaires. In reporting the results, any identifying information will be removed and kept completely confidential.

Voluntary consent: Completion and return of the questionnaire is on a completely voluntary basis. You do not *have* to participate.

Right to withdraw from questions: You do not *have* to answer every question on the questionnaire if you do not wish to. You may leave out any questions that you do not want to answer.

If you would like to participate in this study, please continue to complete the questionnaire attached and return it to **using the Freepost envelope** attached as soon as possible. Should you have any questions regarding this research, please do not hesitate to contact us using the email addresses below.

Yours Faithfully,

Rebecca Morris
Doctoral Researcher
University of Birmingham
E: [REDACTED]



Parental Questionnaire: Secondary School Choice

All answers will be confidential and anonymous. If you do not wish to answer a question, please leave it out and continue with the remainder. The questions all relate to your child in Year 7. Please tick as many boxes as you need to, or write your answer on the lines provided.

Section 1: Factors which influenced the selection of schools for your child:

1. The following have all been given by parents in other studies as reasons for selecting schools for their children. Please indicate how important they were for YOU in choosing a school.

Tick one of the three boxes after each question.
1: Not important 2: Important 3: Very important

Reason for school 'choice'	Not important	1	2	3	Very important
Brother or sister went/go there					
Care/pastoral support					
Caters well for children with special needs					
Child's friends go or were intending to go					
Children who attend do well in the future					
Cost/ease of transport					
Did not like other schools					
Discipline and behaviour					
Ethnic mix of the school					
Extra-curricular activities (music, sport, dance, drama etc)					
Focuses on a particular curriculum area					
Good exam results/academic reputation					
Good facilities/resources					
Likelihood of gaining a place					
OFSTED inspection report					
Overall reputation/impression of the school					
Overall quality of education					
Pleasant ethos					
Quality of teaching					
Religious affiliation of the school					
Safe environment					
School is near to home					
Size of the school/classes					
Traditional values/curriculum/uniform					
Wanted a single-sex school					
Wanted a new or different kind of education					
Your child's preference					

Any other reason important to you, or further comments: _____

2. Which of these reasons was most important in influencing your decision to choose your child's current school?

Section 2: Before applying to this secondary school

3. Were you involved in helping to set-up the school that your Year 7 child currently attends?

Yes No

4. How important were the following sources of information in encouraging you to apply to your child's current secondary school?

Not important \longrightarrow Very important

	1	2	3
Adverts/articles via local media e.g. newspapers/radio			
Being a member of the governing body/teaching staff			
Contacts/friends who work at the school			
Department for Education performance tables			
Information from a local faith group/place of worship			
Information from my children			
Information from other parents/adults			
Information from my child's primary school			
Letter from the head teacher/governors			
Local Authority website			
OFSTED report			
Older siblings attend the school			
Open days/evenings			
Other family members attend the school			
Poster/leaflets/flyers			
Promotion via Twitter/Facebook			
Public meetings about the school			
School prospectus			
School Website			
Social Media e.g. Twitter/Facebook			
Other (please write in):			

5. Which of the following open events/visits did you attend before applying to your child's current secondary school? (tick all that apply)

- Open evening
- Open event during the working day
- Open event on a weekend
- Private appointment to visit the school
- Did not visit the school before applying
- Other (please write in): _____

Section 3: The application process

6. Which of the following formed part of the application process for your child's place at their current school? (tick all that apply)

- Applying directly to the school
- Applying via the LEA's coordinated application process
- Completing a paper application
- Completing an online application

7. What was your experience of the application process?

- Easy
- Neither easy or difficult
- Difficult

8. Was the admissions procedure for your child's current school fair and objective?

- Yes
- No

9. Please list all of the schools that you applied to (including any fee-paying or independent schools) in order of preference:

10. Were you requested or required to attend any form of interview/meeting prior to being offered a place at this school?

- Yes
- No

11. Did you apply for a 'faith-based' place for your child at this school?

- Yes
- No

Section 4: About you and your child

The following questions will help us to understand how different groups of people have experienced the school choice and admissions process.

12. Is your Year 7 child...?

- Male
- Female

13. What is the first part of your home postcode (e.g. N7, B17 or SW12)? _____

14. Is your Year 7 child eligible to claim Free School Meals?

- Yes
- No
- Don't Know

15. Which occupational group do you best fit in to?

Higher managerial, administrative and professional occupations (e.g. company directors, teachers, bank managers, doctors, social workers, scientists)	<input type="checkbox"/>
Intermediate occupations (e.g. dental nurses, secretaries, electrical equipment installers, sales advisors)	<input type="checkbox"/>
Small employers and own account workers (e.g. farmers, restaurateurs, publicans)	<input type="checkbox"/>
Lower supervisory and technical occupations (e.g. plumbers, butchers, bus drivers, carpenters)	<input type="checkbox"/>
Semi-routine and routine occupations (e.g. shop assistants, hairdressers, waiters, cleaners, security guards)	<input type="checkbox"/>
Never worked/long term unemployed	<input type="checkbox"/>
Full time student	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other (please write in):	<input type="checkbox"/>

16. What is your ethnic group?

- White
- Mixed Race/Multiple Ethnic Groups
- Asian/Asian British
- Black/African/Caribbean/Black British
- Other ethnic group (please write in) _____

17. What is your family religion or denomination?

- No religion
- Christian (Church of England)
- Christian (Catholic)
- Christian (Other denomination)
- Buddhist
- Hindu
- Muslim
- Jewish
- Sikh
- Other (please write in) _____

18. Any other comments you wish to make about any of the topics raised in this questionnaire:

19. If you would be willing to participate in a short telephone or face-to-face interview about the topics raised in this questionnaire, please add your contact details below:

Name: _____ Telephone Number: _____

Email address: _____

Thank You for your help. Please return this survey as soon as possible using the Freepost envelope provided.

APPENDIX D: Informed Consent Form



UNIVERSITY OF
BIRMINGHAM

Informed Consent Form

School Choice and Admissions

Researcher: Rebecca Morris, University of Birmingham

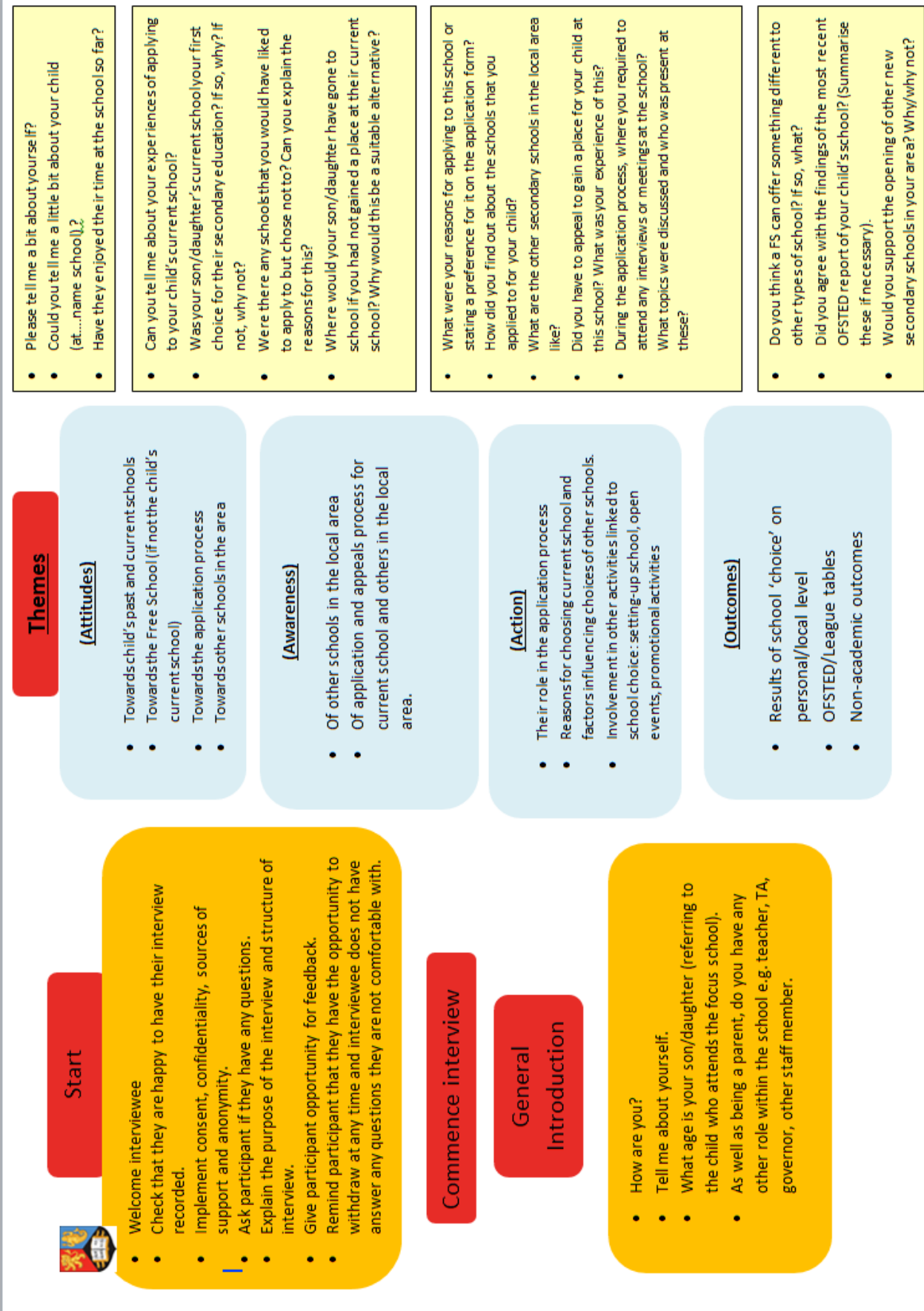
1. I have read and understood the attached information sheet giving details of the project.
2. I have had the opportunity to ask the researcher any questions that I had about the project and my involvement in it, and understand my role in the project.
3. My decision to consent is entirely voluntary and I understand that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving a reason.
4. I understand that the data gathered in this project may form the basis of a report or other form of publication or presentation.
5. I understand that my name will not be used in any report, publication or presentation.

Participant's signature: _____ Date: _____

Participant's name (in capitals): _____

Researcher's signature: _____ Date: _____

APPENDIX E: Interview Schedule



Start



- Welcome interviewee
- Check that they are happy to have their interview recorded.
- Implement consent, confidentiality, sources of support and anonymity.
- Ask participant if they have any questions.
- Explain the purpose of the interview and structure of interview.
- Give participant opportunity for feedback.
- Remind participant that they have the opportunity to withdraw at any time and interviewee does not have to answer any questions they are not comfortable with.

Commence interview

General Introduction

- How are you?
- Tell me about yourself.
- What age is your son/daughter (referring to the child who attends the focus school).
- As well as being a parent, do you have any other role within the school e.g. teacher, TA, governor, other staff member.

Themes

(Attitudes)

- Towards child's past and current schools
- Towards the Free School (if not the child's current school)
- Towards the application process
- Towards other schools in the area

(Awareness)

- Of other schools in the local area
- Of application and appeals process for current school and others in the local area.

(Action)

- Their role in the application process
- Reasons for choosing current school and factors influencing choices of other schools.
- Involvement in other activities linked to school choice: setting-up school, open events, promotional activities

(Outcomes)

- Results of school 'choice' on personal/local level
- OFSTED/League tables
- Non-academic outcomes

- Please tell me a bit about yourself?
- Could you tell me a little bit about your child (at.....name school)?
- Have they enjoyed their time at the school so far?

- Can you tell me about your experiences of applying to your child's current school?
- Was your son/daughter's current school your first choice for their secondary education? If so, why? If not, why not?
- Were there any schools that you would have liked to apply to but chose not to? Can you explain the reasons for this?
- Where would your son/daughter have gone to school if you had not gained a place at their current school? Why would this be a suitable alternative?

- What were your reasons for applying to this school or stating a preference for it on the application form?
- How did you find out about the schools that you applied to for your child?
- What are the other secondary schools in the local area like?
- Did you have to appeal to gain a place for your child at this school? What was your experience of this?
- During the application process, where you required to attend any interviews or meetings at the school? What topics were discussed and who was present at these?

- Do you think a FS can offer something different to other types of school? If so, what?
- Did you agree with the findings of the most recent OFSTED report of your child's school? (Summarise these if necessary).
- Would you support the opening of other new secondary schools in your area? Why/why not?

APPENDIX F: Demographic details of interview participants

Parent ID	School ID	Region	Mother/Father	Child eligible for FSM	Occupation Category (1-8)	Ethnicity
AB	1	South East	Mother	No	1	Black
EM	1	South East	Mother	No	2	White
TP	1	South East	Mother	No	1	White
LB	1	South East	Mother	No	1	White
FD	2	East	Mother	No	1	White
RS	2	East	Mother	No	2	White
KF	2	East	Mother	No	1	White
DF	2	East	Mother	No	1	White
XP	3	South East	Mother	No	1	White
CB	3	South East	Mother	No	1	White
HL	4	North West	Mother	No	5	Asian
NL	4	North West	Father	No	1	Asian
IR	5	East	Mother	No	1	White
TL	6	North East	Mother	No	1	White
OW	6	North East	Mother	No	2	White
MG	7	West Midlands	Mother	No	2	Black
CQ	7	West Midlands	Mother	No	2	Black
SH	8	West Midlands	Mother	No	6	Asian
BH	9	South East	Mother	Yes	1	White
SG	9	South East	Mother	No	1	White

