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A large, stylized graphic on a purple background. It consists of a thick yellow wavy line that starts on the left, curves down, then up, then down again. A black railing with white vertical bars follows the curve of the line, appearing to be on top of it.

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The Waikato Journal of Education is a well-established peer reviewed publication that has quality articles on a range of topics related to education.

New Zealand has a strong presence in Pacific education, and Pacific communities have a strong presence in New Zealand schools. However, opportunities for publication of Pacific research in mainstream journals are limited. Therefore, this call for papers seeks articles that focus on Pacific education; both research and practice. Pacific research is reflective of the traditions of the past, as well as the present and future. It often embodies different paradigms, perspectives and critical stances that are not always captured in mainstream research and aims to benefit Pacific communities. Articles will be welcomed that theorise about Pacific research, report on research projects, report on an innovative practice or initiative, or a combination of any of these. As well as traditional manuscripts, the journal welcomes submissions in other formats, such as short stories, poetry and drawings.

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SCHOOL QUASI-MARKETS: BEST UNDERSTOOD AS A CLASS STRATEGY?

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ABSTRACT *To what extent it is best to see the market as a class strategy is a question which goes to the heart of research debates over school quasi-markets in New Zealand and elsewhere. Whereas most research suggests that school quasi-markets increase social and educational inequality, Stephen Gorard and colleagues have argued that school quasi-markets are relatively benign. From their perspective, class strategy research has generated a poorly supported and unhelpful ‘crisis account’. This article summarises the range of scholarship and research evidence which supports the class strategy account and considers some problems in the perspective which has been taken by Gorard and colleagues. It is argued that the claims of Gorard and colleagues have not unravelled the arguments of class strategy proponents but in important respects are rendered problematic by those arguments.*

KEYWORDS

Market competition, Schools, Social class, Educational research

INTRODUCTION

One of the liveliest educational debates during the 1990s concerned whether or not introducing market competition into school systems would increase social inequality. Looking back from 2005, it is clear that in New Zealand this debate was never so much resolved as ended in an ideological impasse between market proponents and critics, despite New Zealand research findings pointing towards greater inequality (e.g., Fiske & Ladd, 2000; Gordon, 2003; Lauder et al., 1999). In contrast, the UK impasse has been empirical as well as ideological, as different research claims have jostled for position. In particular, there have been important tensions between what I call here ‘class strategy’ accounts and the research findings of Stephen Gorard and colleagues; tensions with continued relevance to those in New Zealand and elsewhere who want to draw on research evidence in this area.

One sociologically compelling interpretation of schooling in capitalist economies is to view it as an arena for class strategy as families attempt to gain advantage over others in pursuit of social reproduction or social mobility. Put another way, high socio-economic (SES) schooling – whether private or public – can be seen as a *positional good* (Hirsch, 1976). The key point about positional goods is that they are scarce in absolute terms so that only some people can benefit from them. If they were available to all they would lose the relative advantages they bring and hence their positional value. Marginson (1997) defines educational positional goods as “places in education which provide students with relative

advantage in the competition for jobs, income, social standing and prestige” (p. 38, see also Brown, 2000). The positional use of high SES education has been most famously manifested in socially elite English public schools such as Eton and Winchester with their historic links to Oxbridge. Ironically, it may have also led to the growth of comprehensive education in England and New Zealand since this resulted as much from the demands for grammar-style education by the growing post-war middle classes as from any desire for greater equity (Crook, Power & Whitty, 1999; McCullough, 1991). However comprehensivisation also threatened the positional advantages associated with high SES schooling because it created schools which were seen as more socially diverse than had previously been the case and thus blurred their differential status.

THE MARKET AS A CLASS STRATEGY

Related to this, an important interpretation of the development of school quasi-markets is as a reassertion of the positionality of schooling. In an article intended to “establish a sociological agenda for researching and theorising the educational market,” Ball (1993, p. 3) provided an argument for seeing school quasi-markets as a class strategy. In a 1994 version of this article, he concluded:

... [school] choice and the market provide a way for the middle classes to reassert their reproduction advantages in education, which had been threatened by the increasing social democratic de-differentiation of schools, the cultural reform of the curriculum ... and the diversion of resources to those with greatest learning needs and difficulties. (Ball, 1994, p. 123)

At the time, Ball’s argument was only able to draw on ‘titbits’ of early research evidence but there has been much subsequent international scholarship and research on the impact of school quasi-markets, including important contributions from New Zealand (Lauder et al., 1999), which has further supported this perspective. The argument for viewing the market as a class strategy now draws on many interrelated elements. They include analyses of:

- important problems, contradictions and silences in the arguments of market theorists and other market proponents. The main contribution here has been to illustrate how their arguments idealise the strengths of markets and overgeneralise the deficiencies of public education systems (Ball, 1993; Jonathan, 1997; Lauder et al., 1999; Marginson, 1997; Olssen, 1997).
- the immediate political intentions behind the introduction of school quasi-markets. For instance, in England a number of accounts have shown these to be less about increasing social justice than attacking comprehensive school structures and their associated ‘progressive’ teachers and teaching approaches (e.g., Ball, 1990; Davies, 2000; Lawton, 1994).
- the role of education in the social reproduction of inequality. There is now a huge sociological literature which theorises and empirically illustrates how middle class people gain advantage through schooling (for overviews see Ball,

2000; Halsey, Lauder, Brown & Wells, 1997). While much of this literature is not directly related to the development of school quasi-markets, from its theoretical standpoint it is hard to see why quasi-market conditions wouldn't enable class strategies in education.

- the importance of pre-existing social inequalities in educational markets. Those who argue for the market as a class strategy emphasise the impact of pre-existing residential segregation. School quasi-markets begin to develop amongst schools which already have markedly differing intakes and levels of resourcing (e.g., Ball, 1993; Gewirtz, Ball & Bowe, 1995; Lauder et al., 1999; Walford, 1994).
- the growth of middle class anxieties around education. The main significance of these is that they might be expected to intensify the drive for positional advantage in school quasi-markets (e.g., Brown, 1997, 2000; Jordan, Redley & James; 1994, Thrupp, 2001).
- the growth of an individuated consumer culture in relation to education. This can be expected to encourage amongst parents a culture of self-interest which does not consider the wider social implications of school choice (e.g., Jonathan, 1990; Kenway & Bullen, 2001).
- the control exerted by the state over league tables as indicators of school performance. The narrow focus on academic success these encourage is important because it allows middle class parents to justify their selection of socially elite schools and also requires schools, if they are to be 'successful', to gear their curricular approaches to those which favour the middle class (e.g., Gillborn & Youdell, 2000).
- processes of school choice amongst parents and families. There is now a very large literature in this area and most of it has indicated that middle class families are advantaged in relation to both making a choice and to seeing it realised (e.g., Ball, 2003; Ball, Bowe & Gewirtz, 1996a, 1996b; Ball & Vincent, 1998; David, West & Ribbens, 1994; Echols & Willms, 1995; Lauder et al., 1999; Reay & Ball, 1997). An interesting development in this area has been work which is considering children's perspectives on school choice, especially the psychic costs for children who have to attend schools which are 'losing' in the marketplace (Lucey & Reay, 2001; Reay & Lucey, 2000, 2001).
- the likely advantages to be gained through high SES schooling. A number of studies have indicated that attending a high SES school really does bring numerous advantages. These include the social capital of peers, extra material resources, contextual effects which raise student achievement, better pathways to elite tertiary institutions and the effects of the 'old school tie' in the labour market (e.g., Ball, Maguire & Macrae, 2000; Gewirtz, 1998; Thrupp, 1999).
- how and why schools tend to favour middle class students and exclude others. A number of studies (e.g., Gewirtz, Ball & Bowe, 1993; Lauder et al., 1999) illustrate how schools which can turn away struggling or otherwise

problematic students are spared “the ‘psychic costs’ of dealing with these clients and [how this] enables them to enjoy the best of all monopoly profits...a quiet life” (Boyd, 1982, p. 120).

- the educational costs of the market. There is little evidence of the pre-existing social hierarchy of schools reducing through the diversity of types of school provision promised by market proponents. This argument ignores the positional value of traditional, high SES education: essentially the pressures are towards a superior ‘grammar’ style education rather than greater diversity (Glatter, Woods & Bagley, 1997).
- within school processes which push resources to typically middle class ‘able’ students rather than to typically working class ‘struggling’ students or to Special Education Needs (SEN) students (Bagley, Woods, & Glatter, 2001; Gillborn & Youdell, 2000). It seems that schools will engage in powerfully differentiating practices such as educational ‘triage’ in order to maintain or improve their standing in the league tables and through this their acceptability/status for middle class families and government and all the advantages this brings.
- increased segregation between schools as a result of school quasi-markets. Some research has directly shown increasing segregation through statistical means (Noden 2000). Research in New Zealand has provided detailed explanations for this (e.g., Lauder et al., 1999; Waslander & Thrupp, 1995).
- links to similar processes in early childhood and further and higher education. What is developing is an account of the market as a class strategy in education, if not from cradle to grave, then at least into adulthood (Ball et al., 2000, Ball & Vincent 2005).
- the market as a class-based electoral strategy. The class strategies identified by the parental choice and market forces studies are likely to be creating new constraints and possibilities for national policy also. As McCaig (2000) has put it in relation to the UK, “the aspirational middle class is now attracted to individualist forms of organization and signals of opportunity and excellence. New Labour’s electoral success has been built on creating an association with such individualist responses to aspirational demand” (p. 201).

It might be argued that many of these elements better support the argument that market policies systematically *advantage* middle class families than they do the argument for a class *strategy* and, indeed, many of the researchers involved would probably see their work more as evidence of class advantage than class strategy. However, the distinction is not clear since the notion of a class strategy does not need to imply a conscious, deliberate set of tactics to bolster or reproduce class interests. While there is the “very real danger when analysing household strategies of reading more calculation into the process whereby action is determined than is in reality present” (Crow, 1989, p. 8), limiting the notion of class strategy to only an overtly rational calculating approach results in “the exclusion of the richness and complexity of social action” (Hatcher, 1998, p. 16). On balance, I prefer the term

'strategy' and will refer in what follows to 'class strategy arguments' and 'class strategy proponents' but I acknowledge that there will be differences in outlook amongst the researchers mentioned above on this issue. This matter aside, some of the above elements may still seem more relevant to the argument than others but it is the cumulative picture they paint which I would argue is important. As Ball noted about the various points raised in his 1993/1994 article, the key point is that they "all combine to gear public education more directly than previously to the reproduction of social and economic inequality" (Ball, 1994, p. 126).

AN EMPIRICAL CHALLENGE

Not surprisingly, the main critics of such perspectives have been neo-liberal proponents of educational markets (e.g., Tooley, 1997, 1999) but such critics have rarely employed empirical findings. The most widely-published and best known empirical challenge to the class strategy arguments has been the research of Gorard and colleagues (for an overview see Gorard, Fitz & Taylor, 2001). Using national data, they found that social segregation between schools in England and Wales declined during the seven years following the introduction of market policies in 1988 (from 35% in 1989/90 to around 30% in 1996) and after that only increased a little (up to 32% by 1999/2000). They argued that the findings might reflect:

- market reforms working in the sense of allowing poor families to use schools in areas they cannot afford to live in;
- a wider trend of continuous improvement and 'comprehensivisation' over several decades;
- changes in residential stratification;
- changes in poverty levels;
- school reorganisations, especially closures, and
- Local Educational Authority (LEA) control over admissions (see Gorard et al., 2001, p. 9).

Gorard et al. (2001) allowed for "some truth in all of [the above] possible explanations and others like them" and suggested that they "would not wish to evade the necessity for critical analysis by jumping to conclusions about the role of markets in either stratification or school performance" (p. 22). They also noted that "even such a simple social scientific question as 'do markets cause segregation?' has complex answers" (Gorard et al., 2001, p. 22). Despite all this, some of their work suggests that Gorard and colleagues believe that their research fundamentally unravels the class strategy account. This is indicated in at least five ways.

First, their findings were initially presented as "inevitably rais[ing] questions about the findings generated by some previous qualitative studies of markets and choice in education" (Gorard & Fitz 1998a, p. 365). Second, Gorard identified what he saw as an ideologically-driven 'crisis account', complete with 'crisis disciples' who do not let facts get in the way of a good argument. Gorard (2000a) argued that:

The first major component of the crisis account of British education [is that] [c]hildren are segregated in socio-economic terms by the schools they attend and the situation is apparently getting worse over time. In fact, the near-consensus from research on the process of school choice in the UK appears to be that the limited market is a class strategy used to extend the privilege of the already privileged. (pp. 20-21)

Here we see the inter-linking by Gorard of the ‘crisis account’, the perspective that segregation is getting worse *and* the wider class strategy argument. (It is not clear here to what extent Gorard acknowledges differences within the class strategy perspective.) Similarly, Gorard (2000b) not only argued that “...the relatively good news that schools are becoming more mixed over time has met academic opposition...often of a creative and ingenious kind...” (p. 311) but went on to argue that:

In retrospect, it is surprising how weak the evidence is that segregation in schools was increasing over time, *and obvious that the major changes in education policy since 1944 had at least the intention of providing greater social justice in schools.* (p. 312, emphasis added)

This again signals a wider critique than one centred on research related to between-school segregation alone. It clearly challenges what is typically argued by class strategy proponents.

A third indication that Gorard and colleagues had little time for the market as a class strategy is the way they gave only passing reference to the work of class strategy proponents and usually did this only to indicate its limitations (Gorard, 2000a, 2000b; Gorard et al., 2001).

Fourth, this in turn seems to be related to the way Gorard and colleagues have viewed what counts as evidence of the impact of the market. That Gorard favours quantitative analysis because he sees it as less subject to political bias is clear from his book *‘Education and Social Justice’* which is “intended to be a contribution to the discussion on what precisely constitutes the evidence base for educational policy in Britain” (Gorard, 2000a, p. 15). Although Gorard described the book as “a plea for a middle way in education research: balanced, rational and *numerate*” (p. 13, emphasis in original), the text often implied more weight to ‘numbers’ than ‘narratives’. Consider the following:

... the very distinction between the two supposed paradigms of research is perhaps overused and seemingly an excuse for some to evade the limitations of generalisation, transparency, replicability and so on that are the hallmark of convincing and cumulating social science. (p. 13)

Once ... constraints of testability are removed, ‘researchers’ can write pretty much what they want (and on the evidence presented in this book, at least some may be already doing so). (p. 185)

Gorard also took the view that good research is systematic and cumulative:

If research is to be cumulative, we should start with the basics, get the simple things correctly set down and move on from there. This is clearly going to involve numbers, but not necessarily difficult calculations. Of course social processes such as education are complex, and the findings of research based on them are also often complex but this should not be used as a practical justification for starting where the complexity is greatest – rather the reverse. (Gorard, 2000a, p. 187)

and

The task for the next few years may be to sift the existing evidence to provide conclusions that are a sound base for cumulation. Such cumulation of reliable knowledge is perhaps not a property commonly associated with educational research...The results might allow researchers to draw a line under this field of endeavour [ie research on educational quasi-markets] and say ‘well, that about wraps it up for school choice research’. (Gorard, 1999, p. 26)

Finally, Gorard and colleagues raised a number of arguments apart from those on levels of segregation which directly challenge the class strategy account. For instance there is Gorard’s argument, already noted, that “the major changes in education policy since 1944 had at least the intention of providing greater social justice in schools” (Gorard, 2000b, p. 312). Gorard and colleagues also suggested:

What we have shown is not that choice is SES free but that it is certainly no worse, and probably a great deal better, than simply assigning children to their nearest school to be educated with similar children living in similar housing conditions. (Gorard et al., 2001, p. 10)

Of course, the local school is often more diverse than this suggests. Although this comment is part of a wider argument about the importance of the status ante (discussed later), it could easily be read as support for differentiated rather than comprehensive schooling.

‘ROBUST CONCLUSIONS’?

The main challenges to Gorard’s findings have been along methodological, largely technical, lines (Gibson & Asthana, 2000; Goldstein, 2001; Goldstein & Noden, 2003; Noden, 2000). They have involved concerns such as levels of aggregation, the type of index of segregation used, and the use of the Free School Meals (FSM) indicator in the Cardiff research. While such challenges have often been vigorously rebuffed (e.g., Gorard, 2000b; Gorard, 2000c), the validity of Gorard’s findings remains by no means assured. For instance, Goldstein (2001) has argued that the value of his ‘segregation index’ is a function of the size of school and without controlling for this, differences in the index cannot be interpreted as measuring

changes in segregation. Overall, it is difficult to see this statistically-oriented debate resolving very much.

In any case, the debate also turns on wider issues: how much emphasis one places on different kinds of empirical evidence, on empirical evidence versus theory, on understanding research findings compared to just generating them, on valuing nuanced arguments over simple ones and on the immediate evidence at hand cohering with other forms of research and scholarship. While the argument for the market as a class strategy has been more qualitative and more untidy than Gorard and colleagues would like, it has also been rich, multi-faceted and well theorised. What Gorard has offered is some (contested) statistical evidence against increasing levels of between-school segregation, along with explanations which can only be tentative without more detailed research into local markets. There are apparent tensions here between the meaningfulness (or lessness) of general claims about changes in levels of segregation and local variations. What is happening in those localities, and does it matter? To the class strategy proponents it does matter because they hold that markets only really make sense as a local phenomenon (see the discussion of Gewirtz et al. (1995) below).

The Free School Meals indicator has been another obvious point of tension. Whatever its statistical pros and cons, it is clearly sociologically inadequate. Not only may some working class families find Free School Meals stigmatising to the point that they will not apply but such targeted interventions are often taken up by particularly cash-strapped middle class families (as was the case with Assisted Places scheme – see Edwards, Fitz & Whitty, 1989).

Gorard's arguments have overclaimed in other respects. This is often because they haven't been qualified adequately (like the claim that policy has had the intention of providing greater social justice in schools) or because there is more agreement with class strategy proponents than is suggested.

These problems are well illustrated by what Gorard and colleagues refer to in a summary article as five "robust conclusions" (Gorard et al., 2001, p. 22). The first argument made was that:

The school system in England and Wales is certainly fairer now than it was in 1989, but the most recent trend, long after the maturation of the school choice process, is once again towards unfairness. It would be preposterous to claim, as others have done, that either of these trends was the outcome solely of government policies of increasing parental choice. Such a claim would ignore the important role of changes in population characteristics and residential segregation, for example. (Gorard et al., 2001, p. 22)

By 'fairer,' Gorard and colleagues presumably meant slightly less segregated. As I have already noted, the findings in this area are in doubt because of methodological concerns and because they go against the grain of so much other research and scholarship. To describe them as 'robust' is therefore unrealistic. Nor have the 'crisis disciples' been unaware of other factors which could impact on levels of between-school segregation; their arguments are much more nuanced than is being given credit for here. Gewirtz and colleagues argue for instance that:

It is our basic contention that there is no one general education market in operation in England. Education markets are localised and need to be analysed and understood in terms of a set of complex dynamics which mediate and contextualise the impact and effects of the Government's policy. (Gewirtz et al., 1995, p.3)

and

Furthermore there are a whole range of intricate variations in the operation of markets within and across nation states that reflect the struggles and negotiations people make as they live and work around and within lived markets. An understanding of how public sector markets work involves devoting careful attention to the similarities and differences within and between markets and within and between nation states (Gewirtz et al., 1995, p. 5)

Gorard and colleagues' second 'robust conclusion' was that:

[M]arket forces in education clearly do not lead, necessarily, to the kind of increased stratification that we had feared. The local variation in implementing national policy, and the lack of diversity or even, in some regions, of alternative schools, show the simple market-outcomes model to be invalid. (Gorard et al., 2001, p. 22)

What is odd about this conclusion is the associating of concerns about increased stratification with the 'simple market outcomes model'. The thrust of the class strategy account has been that there is nothing simple about 'lived' markets compared to the idealised views of neo-liberals. Nor, again, have class strategy proponents been unaware that the impact of school quasi-markets depends a great deal on the context of policy and school provision into which they are introduced.

Gorard and colleagues' third conclusion was that:

The stratifying effect of market forces in schools depends, to a large extent, on the *status ante*. What we have shown is not that choice is SES free but that it is certainly no worse, and probably a great deal better, than simply assigning children to their nearest school to be educated with similar children living in similar housing conditions. Were choice to be imposed on a system of random assignment to school, on the other hand, then the trend presumably would be towards the levels of stratification that we encounter now. (Gorard et al., 2001, p. 22)

Class strategy proponents would not argue for choice over neighbourhood schools because of the potential for using the market as class strategy. However, the idea that the *status ante* is all important in the impact of school quasi-markets would again be readily accepted by class strategy proponents: as noted earlier, it forms another kind of important context.

The fourth conclusion was that:

the regional and local variation we found both in the practice of school assignment and in school based trends shows that localized small-scale research (based only in inner London for example) is inappropriate in isolation as a basis for generalization. (Gorard et al., 2001, p. 22)

The note about inner London may be a reference to the extensive parental choice and market forces research undertaken by Stephen Ball and colleagues. While, as already noted, Ball and others would accept – indeed stress – the importance of context, it is not unreasonable to expect that similar processes would be occurring in other urban areas. Moreover, two of the three boroughs researched by Ball and colleagues were in outer London and were socially very different from the inner London one.

Finally, Gorard and colleagues argued that:

We have shown there is no worsening crisis in UK initial education. There is therefore the time to conduct the kind of rigorous large-scale mixed method studies needed to address the serious issues of social justice and differential attainment that remain. There is no real need for “panic initiatives” at present. (Gorard et al., 2001, p. 22)

Again the initial claim here is too loose: there are many senses in which schooling in the UK could easily be described as in crisis (teacher workloads, teacher shortages, levels of student failure and student exclusions, for instance). Presumably what Gorard and colleagues mean is that social and achievement disparities have not been increasing but, again, other arguments for the market as a class strategy point to reasons why they would be. Class strategy proponents have never argued that there is not time to do more research, but would typically be more accepting that many kinds of research – both large and small scale – can help to fill in the picture of the impact of market reform. Finally, they would agree that ‘over-the-top’ school-based remedies won’t help. For instance, Whitty (1998) commented that there is too much of a focus on what is ‘easy’ and ‘popular’ rather than on what ‘works’ in New Labour’s reform strategy.

CONCLUSION

The debate discussed here should be of interest to New Zealand academics and commentators who want to assess research evidence on both sides of the debate about markets in education. The point of the article has not been to argue that the Gorard and colleagues’ empirical findings are simply wrong. They may be but, more importantly, they remain puzzling given the range of arguments for the market as a class strategy. It is also important that Gorard and colleagues do not misrepresent the class strategy account by constantly washing out its complexities in their dismissals. Their approach may be fuelled by what Gorard and Fitz (1998b, p. 303) describe as the “chorus of disbelief” from other academics which met their findings but such a chorus is understandable. A key problem for Gorard and colleagues has been that those they are seeking to convince have a theoretical as

well as empirical rationale for their arguments. The findings of Gorard and colleagues do not unravel the arguments of class strategy proponents but in important respects are rendered problematic by those arguments.

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