

# **Why are secondary schools socially segregated?**

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## **Abstract**

This paper seeks an explanation for the persistent social phenomenon of segregated schooling whereby children from families with broadly the same characteristics of wealth, education and social networks are more likely to be educated together and therefore separate from children from more socially distant groups. The paper outlines the historical legacy and the current level of segregation in English schools. It considers explanations that focus on the effect of marketisation of education and finds these explanations limited. A deeper explanation in terms of the practices of more affluent and more highly educated parents is found to be more adequate but in need of amendment in its characterisation of collective action. The complementary practices of poorer parents with less education are highlighted. The way in which these class mechanisms operate in England at the present time is illustrated by considering the different ways in which segregation is generated in selective, faith and community schools.

## ***Introduction***

Social segregation of schooling occurs in industrialised countries throughout the world (Burgess et al 2007), though different geographical, administrative and educational characteristics make it more or less extreme (Hockley and Nieto 2004). It appears to be implicated in a number of current concerns about education. In particular it is thought to be a source of unfairness. A number of different reasons for this are put forward. One is that more affluent and more highly educated parents are gaining access more easily to the better schools thus compounding, and doing nothing to redress, the already existing inequality of educational opportunity between rich and poor. Another argument is that when poor pupils are educated in schools with concentrations of other poor pupils they do not progress as well as they would in a school with a more balanced intake, while those already advantaged and educated

with their more affluent peers flourish educationally. Not only is this seen as unjust but it also negatively affects overall attainment and a country's position in the international league tables for educational performance. Socially segregated schooling is also implicated in the reduction of social cohesion and civility. In densely populated urban contexts it creates polarisation with extremely popular and extremely unpopular schools. Children and adults from different social backgrounds rarely interact and the polarisation adds to inequality of opportunity the injustice of mal-recognition and denigration<sup>1</sup>. In England, social segregation also affects the manageability of admissions and causes seasonal political embarrassment. Segregation and polarisation result in fewer parents getting their preferred places and a higher level of appeals with accompanying costs of time, money and stress.

In these ways segregated schooling is seen as a problem and there have been policy responses by central governments and policy recommendations by commentators and academics. An evaluation of these responses depends on an adequate analysis of the mechanisms that generate socially segregated schooling. This paper attempts to present such an analysis based on the English education system. For reasons of space it leaves a full evaluation of policy options to another paper.

### ***English schooling: A historically segregated system***

Schools in England have historically served different groups of society with the responsibility for provision being shared between religious or philanthropic groups, and the state. Before 1870 they were generally founded and run by churches, other voluntary or philanthropic organisations or private individuals. This broadly fell into three separate systems, 'the elementary schools for the working class, secondary for the middle class and private public schools for the ruling class' (Ball 2008 p 61). By the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century, in response to the growing

urbanisation, extension of the franchise and skill-hungry industrialisation, free universal compulsory elementary schooling was established catering for children between 5-12 years and by the beginning of the Second World War attendance at school was free and compulsory between the ages of 5 and 14. Full time education beyond this was available to individuals who won scholarships to grammar schools which were required to take at least 25% through scholarships, or for those with parents who could pay the fees for private schooling.

This broad segregation of schooling was not disrupted by the 1944 Education Act (McCaig 2000). It allowed the private fee paying sector to continue and introduced free secondary schooling for all in the form of 'tripartism' whereby modern, technical and grammar schools would be 'equal but different'. Admission to these schools was by attainment tested at the age of 11. In the event very few technical schools were established and it quickly became a predominantly bipartite system. The selection process favoured children from families with more social, cultural and educational capital and as a result grammar schools were populated largely by children from relatively privileged families (Crook et al 1999). As a result the claim of parity of esteem became difficult to sustain as did the fairness of a system that, on the basis of a test at eleven, fixed a child in one kind of school with little chance of mobility between. In addition, the technical efficacy of the test was questioned from its early days (Yates and Pidgeon 1958). The fee paying sector, the grammar schools and the secondary moderns in effect continued to cater for different sections of society, with different curricula and entrance requirements. In the face of mounting evidence that the state funded selective system was not functioning well in terms of equal opportunity or meeting the needs of parents or the need for an increasingly educated workforce there was growing support for non-selective comprehensive schools. From

1965 to 1981 the proportion of 11-16 year olds in comprehensive schools rose from approximately 8% to 83% under both Labour and Conservative governments (Ball 2008).

As a result of this historical legacy the current stock of English secondary schools is a complex patchwork. In addition the policy of increased diversity has added Academies, Foundation, Trust and Specialist schools to the mix. Approximately 7% opt out of the publicly funded sector to attend fee paying schools. There is considerable local variation and in London, for example, the proportion is 20%. In the maintained sector policies to admit all ability intakes are the norm but 5% (164) of secondary schools continue to select all of their intake by attainment.

### ***Current levels of segregation***

Much of the debate about the current level of social segregation between schools has focused on whether it is increasing or decreasing (Gibson and Asthana 2000; Goldstein and Noden 2003; Fitz et al 2002; Gorard 2002). Despite the sometimes heated debate, often focused on the most appropriate means of measuring segregation, it is now reasonably well established that social segregation has not significantly increased nationally since the introduction of a quasi market in education. However, Allen and Vignoles (2007) provide evidence that, despite there being no overall increase, segregation *is* increasing in specific localities particularly in London and other densely populated areas and that different patterns of separation occur in different LAs.

Not only does social segregation vary by geographical area but also by type of school. In voluntary aided (faith) schools in 2006, the average proportion of pupils on free school meals was 5.6% compared with 14.6% for the surrounding areas (Sutton

Trust 2006). Pupil level data reveals that grammar schools are populated by children from more affluent families with higher levels of education, while secondary modern schools are populated by children from less affluent families and with parents who have fewer educational qualifications (Atkinson and Gregg 2004). Whereas 12% percent of pupils in secondary modern schools are on free school meals, the figure is only 2% in grammar schools. Further, grammar school selection appears not to be solely on the basis of ability. Atkinson and Gregg (2004) found that if you were of high ability but poor you stood less chance of gaining a place, with poorer children with the same underlying ability only half as likely to attend a grammar school as other children. However, community and foundation comprehensive schools, which together make up the great majority, and that do not select by ability or faith, also differ markedly in their intake both in terms of attainment and social background (Gibbons and Telhaj. 2007; Sutton Trust 2006).

### ***Segregation and the marketisation of education***

What mechanisms continue to generate segregated school intakes? An influential set of arguments identifies the market as the main mechanism. In these market explanations we can identify three mutually reinforcing themes. The first broadly argues that the market and its compulsory consumerism is congenial to some social groups but not others and results in differential access to schools. This position is elaborated by Gewirtz et al (1995) in their highly influential study. They did not aim to explain segregation but their analysis implies three elements of an explanation. Firstly, that segregation is both created and made worse in an education market because less affluent and less highly educated parents are not as skilled or engaged with choosing as more affluent and more highly educated parents and so do not gain access to high performing schools. Secondly, when poorer parents do engage they choose differently from the latter. Thirdly, because of the competitive context created

by the market, this differential engagement is accompanied by changes in the marketing of schools to appeal to higher socio-economic parents in higher socio-economic groups. A key feature of their analysis was the identification of three ideal types of parents – skilled choosers, semi skilled choosers and disconnected choosers and these have roughly been interpreted as mapping on to the categories of middle class, aspiring working class and working class parents. A number of other studies developed similar distinctions (e.g. 'inert' and 'alert' parents in Echols and Willms 1992) and this differential relationship to choice has been consistently reinforced in surveys of parents (Flatley et al 2001; Which 2005; Coldron et al 2008).

This difference in the way that parents engage with the education market has been taken up in popular and political debate, and constitutes a second theme. It constructs less affluent and less highly educated parents as deficient choosers lacking in educational discrimination. (Education and Skills Select Committee 2004). On this view, these parents contribute significantly to segregation because they are insufficiently engaged in the choice process, make less conscientious choices or lack competence at managing the complex information about admission arrangements. Consequently they are less successful at gaining access to the best schools than more affluent and educated parents who gain more information and are more capable of managing that information once they get it. The Education and Skills Select Committee took this line (Education and Skills Select Committee 2004) and it is embodied in the rationales for regulation and advice to parents set out in the revised Admissions Code which came into force in February 2009 (DCSF 2009 Appendix 5). The problem is not with an education market *per se* but with its fair operation and is cast as a matter of differential access to the 'good' schools

uncritically constructed as such on the basis of performance and reputation with the effect of intake barely acknowledged.

A third market theme locates further causes of segregation in the behaviour of some schools and parents. The education market works by encouraging parents to act as good consumers who conscientiously compare schools. This process of comparison contributes to the creation or strengthening of a hierarchy of popularity of schools particularly in urban areas where choice is more extensive. As a consequence schools seek to position themselves as advantageously as possible within the marketplace and local hierarchy of schools (Woods et al 1998; Gewirtz et al 1995; Lauder et al 1999). Doing well in the performance tables is a crucial part of that positioning. In addition, English secondary schools are largely, and still fairly crudely, held accountable by government and government agencies for the performance of their pupils in public examinations. It is therefore in the school's interests to attract children who are, because of their social characteristics or prior attainment, more likely to perform well in these tests. Schools are also well aware of how parents perceive the other children who would be their child's peers, including the reputation of the residential areas from which they come. These considerations give schools a strong incentive to select on the basis of social characteristics and a number of studies provide evidence that schools have responded by covertly selecting higher attaining pupils and those with more affluent and educated parents (Gewirtz et al 1995; Woods et al 1998; Lauder et al 1999 (in the New Zealand context); West and Hind 2003; Pennel et al 2006; West et al 2009; Coldron et al 2008; see Ball 2003 for a comprehensive over view). Added to this covert selection by schools is parental fraud and skulduggery with a minority of parents going to great lengths to gain access to a particular school, for example using false addresses, temporarily renting

accommodation near the school, or becoming newly active in church communities. Parents with more resources of time and money are more able to do these things. This argument offers an explanation of segregation as a market dysfunction with some providers and consumers blamed for illegitimately trying to gain market advantage.

One implication of each of these themes is that less highly educated and less well off parents are not getting what they want, or should want. Their explanation of segregation remains within the boundaries of market theory cast as unequal access to the scarce resource of good schools with schools taken to be good by virtue of their attributes (good teaching, good management, above average examination results) independent of their intake.

The evidence to support some of the implicit claims is not strong. In relation to covert selection by schools direct evidence is difficult to come by. While schools have a strong incentive to select given the competitive context and systems of accountability, evidence that a significant number do so is circumstantial. Some schools have adopted admissions criteria that could be used for social selection<sup>ii</sup>, and cases occasionally come to light where schools have been found to operate dubious or irregular practices. While there is no doubt that it happens we have little evidence to gauge its extent either in the past or in more recent times. Currently a minority of schools (5%) legally select by aptitude and this arguably is also likely to be socially selective by default. About half of these (2.5% of all schools) use face to face meetings of various kinds which gives more room for social discrimination (Coldron et al 2008). Another minority request information on supplementary forms which could be used to select higher attaining, or socially privileged children or deselect those

from poorer backgrounds (West et al 2009). However, schools' ability to manipulate their intakes through illegal admission arrangements is becoming more and more limited. Increasingly stringent Codes of Practice have been introduced (DfES 2003; DfES 2007; DCSF 2009) which now outlaw all of the known ways schools might use to covertly select. The regulations are getting harder to ignore and while this kind of active selection certainly exists it is probable that it now makes only a relatively small contribution to the overall sorting of pupils and it is difficult to judge how much it contributed in the past. What is more evident is the use of legal admission arrangements to maximise easier to educate intakes. For example some schools that select by attainment also select by aptitude. Others combine legal oversubscription criteria, such as priority for siblings, proximity, catchment or feeder schools, to gain the most advantaged intake.

Parents who are deliberately fraudulent in their applications may, in some densely populated areas, contribute to segregation. But no studies suggest that they are more than a minority, even in London. The idea that most middle class parents are fiddling the system in this way would be a caricature, and diverts from the more significant fact that, for the majority of those with multiple advantages - social, financial, educational, residential - the work of getting their preferred (usually high performing) school is often already done. The same is true of schools that have affluent catchment areas or select by attainment. Advantaged schools and advantaged parents do not usually need to resort to dubious means to ensure a segregated intake. It is possible though that covert selection and parental fraud, together with legal admission arrangements that are socially selecting by default, can have a significant joint impact.

The claim that parents are not getting what they want is not supported by the evidence. Two nationally representative surveys of parents (Flatley et al 2001; Coldron et al 2008) found that there was no association between parental background and success in gaining their most preferred school and that most parents of all backgrounds are satisfied with their child's secondary school. The evidence (which we look at in the next section) suggests that socially distant parents make equally conscientious but different choices and that decisions are fundamentally influenced by material resources, perceived risk, social solidarity and a realistic assessment of the chances of admission. An active assessment of the costs and benefits in different circumstances combines with different values and dispositions to generate different responses. We should therefore treat with great caution explanations of segregation in terms of some deficit on the part of poorer parents such as lack of engagement with their child's education or lack of skill or competence in managing the admissions process. Only if one accepts the ethic of the market are these parents not fulfilling their role as good educational consumers. Less affluent and less well educated parents are different but not deficient choosers.

Governments and politicians who embrace market reforms in education persist in talking simplistically about good and bad schools and resist acknowledging that the socially patterned choices of parents radically affects the quality and attractiveness of the schools chosen and not chosen. Conceiving the problem as about market dysfunction has led policy makers to focus on redressing its perceived flaws and policies have been introduced to mitigate unfairness as conceived within the market paradigm. For example, the Choice Advice initiative is specifically aimed at redressing a perceived lack of access to information on the part of parents seen as less engaged or incompetent to help them make better choices. But, if mechanisms

deeper than the market are generating segregation, then even universal compliance with regulations might leave segregation largely untouched and policies to promote choice will have little effect.

### ***Middle class strategy***

A deeper and more comprehensive account is available that sets the English system in a global context and gives a fundamental role to differential parental practice.

Qualitative studies show that parents in all social groups make conscientious and informed choice of school but that the underpinning values of socially distant groups are different. Less affluent and less highly educated parents tend not to view their children's success at school in terms of a consumerist market approach where the 'best' school will produce the best output. There is more trust that schools as a public service are equally good and educational success or failure is associated not so much with attributes of the school but with the capacity of the child to learn (Reay and Ball 1997; Ball, Braun and Vincent, 2007). These parents are also more likely to take their child's preference of secondary school into account. These views lead many less affluent and less educated parents' to be more accepting of the local school (Noreisch, 2007). Relatively affluent and educated parents on the other hand are more likely to see school as a place where their children can succeed and therefore of value as a means to better occupations. Consequently schools are scrutinised because they are assumed to differ in how they can deliver a high performance from their child. Their child's peers are seen as likely to have a significant impact on their own child's performance and consequently low achieving schools in deprived areas are classed as bad, and their pupils labelled unruly or rough (Reay, 2007; Gulson, 2007). These parents are also more likely to overrule, or persuade their children to accept what is best for them in the long run.

Class and stratification are key to understanding these differences. Following Bourdieu's seminal contributions there has been a reinvigoration of these as key concepts (Crompton 1998; Reay 1998a and 1998b; Savage 2000; Skeggs 2004; Sayer 2005). This work focuses on the experience of differential social positioning and emphasises qualitative evidence of classed experience rather than the statistical analysis of large data sets according to pre-determined categories, refocusing instead on what Sennett and Cobb (1972) called the 'hidden injuries' of class. Stephen Ball's *Class Strategies and the Education Market* (Ball 2003) gives an extended application of this approach to the issue of parents and schools, elaborated in a later book with Carol Vincent (Vincent and Ball 2006). Significant papers by Diane Reay, Helen Lucey, Gill Crozier, David James and others have illustrated in great detail, from a number of qualitative projects, how parental practice differs by class. This work, in contributing to the wider reconceptualisation of class, provides a detailed and subtle picture of the educational practice of parents. It places the education market in a wider context as a means by which relatively advantaged parents' strategic purpose (the reproduction of their advantaged position) is achieved. More affluent and highly educated parents have a greater motivation to gain educational advantage because of the fear of downward social mobility and are therefore:

*... fearful, alert and strategic...(and) within the social field of education the middle class have enough capitals in the right currency, to ensure a high probability of success for their children. Their tactical deployment of these capitals more often than not enables them to gain access to and monopolize advantageous educational sites and trajectories. (Ball 2003 p168).*

Further, in line with the global resurgence of neo-liberal advocacy of the free market, national policies have aimed to improve services by introducing greater choice by informed consumers between a diversity of providers (Beck 2005; Gunter 2008). As a result the marketisation of education in England and other developed countries offers strategic advantages to parents who are willing and able to engage with market choice. As Ball puts it,

*...currently, in developed societies around the world, education policies are primarily aimed at satisfying the concerns and interests of the middle class. (Ball 2003 p25)*

On this argument parental choice and competition provide means by which middle class parents' greater resources of social and financial capital are activated in local authority contexts and in schools, to gain a greater share of scarce educational resources. Just as important, a pervasive individualism, together with discourses of contamination and denigration, provide ideological justifications for separation (Gillies 2005; Crozier et al 2008). Securing educational advantage isn't a matter of gaining access to the best schools independent of intake. It is a matter of achieving segregation that,

*...provides a sort of guarantee, an assurance of success. The school is not represented as an independent variable...with qualities of its own separate from its intake...In effect a school can only be as good as its intake. (Ball 2003 p155)*

In illuminating reasons why already advantaged parents might want segregated schooling this growing body of work suggests mechanisms that generate socially

segregated schools. They describe the subtle interplay of different kinds of resource (social, financial and educational) in particular contexts and provide rich qualitative analyses that:

*...demonstrate how class positionings are generated, maintained and reproduced through structured social relationships ...(and)...highlight the status of social class as dynamic, symbolic and culturally produced,...(Gillies 2005 p837)*

In summary, on this perspective it is not working class parents' deficiency that is the problem but the collective strategic practice of the middle classes together with their historical achievements in influencing policy, and establishing congenial structures, and procedures. At the same time it is a practice which necessarily characterises less affluent and less well educated parents as less deserving and incompetent and their children as to be avoided as peers for their children. While all parents are well aware of the potential influence of their children's peers and feel something of a moral panic as their children approach adolescence, for middle class parents this moral anxiety is felt acutely as they contemplate loss of advantage. Consequently, educational success becomes particularly important. This anxiety is projected onto less advantaged social groups whose way of life and the places they live are demonised (Reay 2007; Holme 2002; Gillies 2005; Ball 2003) It is articulated as fear for their child's involvement with crime, drugs and counter-cultural groups of friends. They imagine the potentially catastrophic effects on educational attainment, physical security and mental health. Partly nourished by these fears a status discourse develops that positions schools in a local hierarchy and is distilled into the reputations of different schools in the area (Holme 2002).

These accounts in terms of class and stratification lay bare the way in which current arrangements (including the education market) work in the interests of the already advantaged and show the processes of classification and stratification as fateful. They do this by replacing previous concepts of class with constrained active social location, what Bottero calls individualised stratification (Bottero 2004), achieved through the mediated action of each individual seeking to maintain or advance their interests as they perceive them. Taking this perspective, the intricate process of relative positioning within real constraints is fundamental and is theoretically distinct from self identification as belonging to a particular class.

But, as a consequence of this theoretical gain, there are problems with identifying these practices as collective and strategic. A continuing and fundamental difficulty is the ontological status of class and the extent to which individuals are objectively and subjectively positioned as class members. In so far as the *collective* action of the middle class is a key factor in the explanation of segregation it is vulnerable to criticisms as to the difficulty of coherently conceptualising quite how it *is* collective. As Bottero points out (Bottero 2004), on the one hand the strength of this form of explanation lies in replacing pre-determined class attribution with processes of stratification within which power and advantage operate in a variety of ways. But many of the writers cited above continue to use concepts that sit uncomfortably with this logic of individual stratification from which groupings emerge and the benefits of solidarity are recognised, but which does not rely on the substantive concepts of middle or working class. Gillies for example offers a pragmatic and heuristic (rather than theoretical) justification for the use of these terms:

*While approaching a concept like social class as if it existed in some kind of objective, independent realm is problematic, some form of abstract reification can work to bring particular phenomena into sight so they can be better understood. For this pragmatic reason the terms 'working class' and 'middle class' are used...to describe the material and social status of the families discussed. (Gillies 2005 p841)*

The difficulty is adequately to acknowledge the heterogeneity of any actual group described as a class without the notion of class losing its meaning. For example there are some low income parents with relatively little education and living in areas of deprivation who seek entry to schools whose intake is more privileged than themselves, and some highly educated, professional and relatively affluent parents who choose less popular schools with intakes socially distant from their own. The latter are often public-sector professionals who see benefit in a diverse social mix (Noreisch, 2007; Vincent and Ball 2006). These findings have led a number of writers to identify fractions within classes (Vincent and Ball 2006; Ball and Vincent 2007) whose different social trajectory is invoked to explain their different values. While this kind of analysis illuminates important differences between people, the boundaries of the fractions - who is to be designated as a member of a class fraction - are themselves part of the analysis. It is essentially arbitrary and subject to change. The fractions as identified at any particular time might plausibly be defined otherwise and, because contexts change over time, the decisions of individuals as they seek optimum advantage within those changed contexts may result in different solidarity groups. Where collective action and the social regularities that it creates are found they are:

*...the aggregate product of individual actions guided by the same constraints, whether objective (the necessities written into the structure of the game or partly objectified in the rules), or incorporated... (Bourdieu 1990 quoted in Lau 2004 p371)*

Class action arises when individuals identify over time with a group of others with mutual interests to benefit from solidarity. This includes the symbolic violence of negative classifications of other social groups explicitly identified by living in different places, and in different ways and (of significance for the topic of this paper) also by populating certain schools. The greater the material and symbolic inequalities the greater the motivation to social distance and segregation.

A further problem is that explanations that put the emphasis on a middle class strategy of self interest in effect accuse some middle class parents of hypocrisy (Crozier et al 2008; Reay et al 2007 and 2008) and most working class parents of a form of false consciousness (e.g. Reay and Ball 1997). The new approach to class and stratification means that the concept of self interest is made universal, or more accurately is replaced by a principle of optimal positioning, such that it is taken as axiomatic that individuals wish to act in a way that optimises their desired self positioning. In this case, judgements of hypocrisy or false consciousness become inappropriate.

### ***Residential segregation as an explanation of segregated schools***

It may be argued that this explanation of segregated schooling misses an obvious and immediate cause namely residential segregation, popularly referred to as selection by mortgage. There is a very strong correlation between residential

segregation and school segregation but it cannot be considered a primary cause. Rather, choice of where to live and choice of school are driven by the same mechanism of individualised hierarchical differentiation broadly correlated with volumes of economic, cultural and social resources.

Solidarity with people recognised as like oneself operates powerfully to maintain both residential and educational separation (Southerton 2002). Residents of all backgrounds wish to relate to others who they perceive to be like them. In the new town where Southerton interviewed his participants the social separation overlapped almost entirely with geographical separation. But more fundamental than that is the implicit desire for social interaction distance<sup>iii</sup> or social separation. The group with the highest levels of economic, educational and social resources, that with the least and that in between comprised of those with moderate economic capital but low educational and social capital, were all engaged in distinguishing themselves from each other and choice of school was part of this process.

The disposition toward solidarity and fraternity is exhibited by members of all communities as a result of the perceived benefits of solidarity and the effects of social policing. But the relation to the community and locale, what Allen et al call the residential habitus, varies. Residents in what, by all indices, are areas of considerable deprivation and consequent social stress have a stronger attachment to the local community than others. Allen, Casey and Hickman identified this as a located habitus characterised by '*...an orientation to residence that was firmly located within the social and economic landscapes that enveloped it...*' (Allen et al 2004). MacDonald et al (2005) in their study of young adults and social networks in

some of England's poorest neighbourhoods also found this emotional and practical connection to their community and that:

*...their familiarity with the place and their inclusion in strong, supportive family and social networks meant that most saw no reason to leave... (p 880)*

The located habitus is contrasted by Allen et al with the cosmopolitan habitus of the more affluent which

*'...consisted of an orientation to residence that was strategically engaged with the social, cultural and economic landscapes that opened up before it. This mobility class primarily consisted of middle class households. It also contained households from working class backgrounds that had obtained higher education qualifications and professional employment.'*

Added to the benefits of solidarity is the social 'policing' felt by members of both more and less affluent communities which levies a social cost on individuals who step out of line in terms of school choice. In a family where both parents are highly educated, have professional occupations and are relatively affluent the educational performance of their children is a sign within their social networks of their success or failure as a 'good' parent (Jordan et al 1994; Gewirtz et al 1995; Ball 2003) and lack of solidarity by an individual threatens the justificatory discourses of the majority and risks ostracism. In less affluent communities social policing also operates as illustrated by this working class parent interviewed about choice of school:

*If you live in a deprived area, to then say, 'I'm good enough to get into grammar school', is going to get you bullied.*

As well as the benefits of solidarity social policing is likely to explain instances of collective action.

### **Mechanisms leading to segregation in different types of school**

We have attempted to identify the deep mechanisms generating segregated schooling. These help to explain the school choices, the varying educational practices, of different social groups. The way in which these mechanisms are actualised in different contexts is likely to vary. In this section we look at how segregation occurs for different types of school in England.

#### *Non-denominational comprehensive schools that prioritise proximity or local catchment areas*

About two thirds of all schools prioritise applications from children who live nearest to the school<sup>iv</sup>. Residential segregation is the proximate cause of segregated intakes in these schools but they are simultaneously symptoms of and a means of achieving individualised hierarchical differentiation. Schools that are in advantaged areas have a predominantly advantaged intake and are therefore popular with similarly advantaged parents and are most likely to have relatively good average attainment. Financially advantaged parents are more able to buy into the area to take advantage of the proximity criterion while less affluent parents are less able to do so. To this is added the likelihood that parents who do not identify with the catchment community are unlikely to apply. Less affluent but aspiring parents (i.e. those who opt for exit rather than solidarity), living out of the catchment of schools serving a relatively advantaged community, cannot easily gain entry to the popular comprehensives

because of the proximity criterion. The cost of transport together with poorer parents' located habitus also plays a part. Residential segregation is accompanied by, and reinforces, social pressure to conform in addition to parents positively choosing for their children to be with people they recognise as like them. This leads to opting for the local school as an expression of an affective bond, arising from a shared habitus, and as Bourdieu warns us, is partly 'choosing' what they cannot avoid. But, there is also an open eyed and realistic assessment of what is possible and in their children's interests given what they see as the financial, social and emotional costs and benefits.

### *Grammar schools*

There are currently 164 grammar schools in England. The proximate cause of segregation here is the greater education and wealth of middle class parents combined with a greater motivation arising from the fear of downward mobility and maintenance of face within social groups. These lead to a disproportionate number of better off children applying for a grammar school place and doing better in the tests. Better off parents can more easily pay for private primary schooling, or private tutors, and are likely to provide a family environment in which the children absorb information and develop attitudes conducive to demonstrating higher attainment. In addition their children's peers reinforce the need for high educational performance. Where grammar schools exist they tend to be at the top of the local hierarchy of schools because of their symbolic prestige, advantaged intake and relatively good exam results. The greater attunement of middle class parents to the need for education to maintain or enhance their social position means that they will more actively seek to gain admission to the more prestigious schools. Less affluent parents make different judgements given their different social location. For them the grammar

school may have some attractions but there are also social and financial costs to consider. It means choosing exit over solidarity and both child and parents enduring the reaction to their choices within their community. There are also extra financial burdens of uniform and travel. In ten of the fourteen most selective areas in England parents have to opt-in to the entry tests involving the expense of time and money.

### *Faith schools*

There are around 500 faith schools in England making up 17% of all maintained secondary schools. Almost all are Christian<sup>v</sup> and of these 64% are Roman Catholic, 21% Church of England and 2.5% Mixed Christian (e.g. part Roman Catholic and part Church of England). Like the Grammar schools they draw their intake from a larger area than neighbourhood schools and so residential segregation is not the main driver although if there is more than one faith school of a particular denomination each is likely to serve a different part of the LA area and there is therefore room for residential effects on intake. The main criterion for entry is evidence of religious commitment. The intakes of these schools are more advantaged (Allen and West 2007; Pennel et al 2007). Unlike grammar or neighbourhood comprehensives it is not so easy to see a single proximate cause. While it is the case that the social class of the churchgoing population in general and that of the Church of England in particular is predominantly from the wealthy and highly educated professional and managerial classes the social profiles for Roman Catholic attendees is different with greater participation from less affluent and less well educated classes<sup>vi</sup>.

It is likely that a number of factors operate together to generate the segregation.

There is circumstantial evidence that Church schools may more often select covertly

by social background. For example, about 8% of faith schools in 2006 asked for details that could facilitate social selection e.g. personal information about the child, reasons for application, background details of family or child and commitment to school (Pennel et al 2007; Coldron et al 2008). More often than other types of school their over subscription criteria (OSC) omitted to prioritise children who are more difficult to educate (such as looked after children or those with special educational needs). At the same time they are much more likely than other schools to include potentially discriminatory over subscription criteria such as parental commitment. They also have markedly more complex over subscription criteria than any other type of school having more OSCs, twice as many items per OSC and twice as many items in total and this relative complexity is found to correlate with higher segregation (Allen and West 2007) although, as noted earlier, we need to be cautious about inferring a generalised incompetence of certain social groups. In addition the criterion of religious commitment verified by reference from a priest is likely to favour parents who have more time and resources to demonstrate this in the community of the local church. Finally, if in particular contexts a faith school is already known to have a highly privileged intake less affluent parents will, for the reasons already discussed, be less likely to apply.

#### *Schools that are their own admission authority*

Any of the types of school above can be either a community school or voluntary-controlled school. If so their admissions are controlled by the Local Authority and will be similar to all other community or voluntary controlled schools in the same area. Alternatively, they could also be schools that control their own admissions. Studies have found that schools that are their own admission authorities are more likely to have fewer poor children, a higher proportion of able children and fewer children with

special educational needs (West et al 2009). Although this does not imply a causal connection it is worth noting that the great majority of Faith schools are their own admission authority.

### *Oversubscribed and under-subscribed schools*

Once a hierarchy of schools is established in an area some are likely to be oversubscribed and others undersubscribed. This introduces two mechanisms that ratchet segregation. One such is that undersubscribed schools will have spare places and therefore will be allocated more of the students who move into the area and a greater proportion than average of these students present the schools with multiple educational challenges and this reinforces the negative signals of low exam performance and ethnic composition to which affluent and highly educated parents are highly attuned. A second is that in any case the hierarchical position of the schools is more likely to be reinforced and will be difficult to change. As Burgess et al (2007) put it:

*"... if peer effects are important, then students who find themselves in schools with less able peers will suffer educationally relative to others. This process is likely to cumulate in that poor achievement one year will attract a less able group of students the following year, thus compounding the problem."* p140

### **Conclusion**

This paper has concentrated on the case of English secondary schools. Previous accounts have either focused on the effects of the market or the way in which the market has been used as a class strategy. This paper started at a different point with the persistence of segregated schooling and tried to explain how and why it is reproduced. Segregated schooling is not simply a result of flaws in the way the

market works and therefore will not be solved by actions to regulate, or to redress perceived or real asymmetries of information or engagement. Even if the tight regime currently in place in England achieved perfect compliance with the regulations it would not eliminate socially segregated admissions to schools. Class, in the sense of individualised hierarchical differentiation (active social location), is an essential factor but the idea of a class strategy or collective action needs careful formulation.

Ultimately the drivers of segregated schooling are in the fundamental wish of individuals and families to optimise their social position given the resources at their disposal. While this is shared by parents of all backgrounds, existing inequalities in social position and wealth largely determine different approaches to and returns on engagement with choice of school. The great social distance between the most advantaged and the least, the benefits of solidarity and the effects of social policing lead the majority of both groups to opt for segregated schooling. This raises some difficult questions for policy. If segregated schooling is a conscientious choice by different groups of parents, what is the rationale for imposing more balanced intakes? If the motivation to distinction is so deep rooted in the world view of the already advantaged in the service of maintaining that advantage, will the interests of poorer children be served by more integration or will the visceral response of middle class parents put them in the way of more humiliation and denigration? It is hoped that the analysis in this paper has helped to provide a basis for addressing such questions.

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<sup>i</sup> See Young 1990; Fraser 1997; Gewirtz 1998 and 2002; Sayer 2005; Reay and Lucey 2000 and 2002; Lucey and Reay 2002a; Reay 2007.

<sup>ii</sup> See Flatley et al 2001; West and Hind 2003; Coldron et al 2008; West et al 2009 for detailed studies.

<sup>iii</sup> See Prandy and Bottero 2000 on social interaction distance.

<sup>iv</sup> 61% have proximity as a criterion and 65% have catchment as a criterion

<sup>v</sup> There are also nine Jewish schools, three Muslim and one Sikh.

<sup>vi</sup> The Tearfund report on churchgoing updated every six months found that AB social classes have annual churchgoing levels consistently above average at 34% and that C2 and DE social classes have annual churchgoing levels consistently below average at 21% and 22% respectively. <http://www.tearfund.org/> (accessed 2009)