

Emerging discourses within the English ‘choice advice’ policy network

Sonia Exley*

Institute of Education, University of London, London, UK

This paper examines regulating discourses ‘spoken’ within the complex multi-sector network of educational policy and provision that has grown from a recent introduction of choice advisers in England. Choice advice documentation from across the network is examined and four discursive themes are identified: equity; parental responsibility; independence/impartiality; and realism. The paper suggests that choice advice – as an English policy case illustrating broader social and political trends – superficially promotes empowerment for disadvantaged parents with a depoliticised, managerial approach while disempowering them by diverting attention away from wider stratification and shifting responsibility for educational quality away from the state.

Keywords: choice advisers; discourse; policy networks; parental responsibility

Introduction: choice advice and the drive to ‘make choice fairer’

In the last two decades, choice and diversity in public services have become increasingly important and accepted parts of the global policy fabric. English education provides a good example of this, and within popular language, where choice in schooling may once have been regarded as radical, now it is considered normal or even necessary, indicating normative shifts in discourse over time; the breaking down of old policy assumptions and the sedimentation of new ones (Ball 2008).

However, despite having existed as a dominant international discourse in education for twenty years, within England it would be wrong to say that choice policy has remained unchanged over time. Research has been carried out showing the differential cultural capacities of different parent groups to engage with choice (Gewirtz, Ball, and Rowe 1995; Ball, Rowe, and Gewirtz 1995, 1996; Reay and Ball 1997; Reay 1998; Ball and Vincent 1998; Vincent 2001; Vincent and Ball 2001; Ball 2003b) and also the selective practices of schools in discriminating against disadvantaged families within a choice context (West and Ingram 2001; Coldron et al. 2001; West and Hind 2003; West, Hind, and Pennell 2004). More broadly, it has been suggested that school choice exacerbates socially stratified hierarchies of schools, ‘rewarding’ popular schools with greater numbers of advantaged pupils and punishing those which are unpopular (and which educate disadvantaged pupils) through falling school rolls and thus decreased funding, leading them into ‘spirals of decline’. Perhaps as a result of such criticisms in England, adjustments have been made by government on both the ‘supply’ and ‘demand’ sides of school choice in order to address social justice issues. On the supply side, admissions codes of practice have been revised such that particular discriminatory practices by schools – for example prohibitively expensive uniforms – have been declared unacceptable (Department for Children, Schools and Families 2009). On the demand side, attempts have been made to deal with information asymmetries and unequal cultural and social capital between parents such that – regardless of background – all

*Email: s.exley@ioe.ac.uk

have the resources they need to make confident decisions over schooling. Recent policies in England can be viewed as stemming from a 'Third Way' (Giddens 1998) approach to public services, leaving enshrined the basic individualist right of consumers to make free choices while harnessing the positive 'allocative efficiency' benefits of parents choosing schools and filling in paperwork for themselves (i.e., the smooth functioning of school admissions procedures), but also attempting to correct for market failures and to 'make choice fairer'. Demand side policies to make choice fairer can be seen abroad, for example in the US where state level educational experiments have led to provision of vouchers for parents and pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds (Fliegel and Maguire 1990; Chubb and Moe 1990, 1992; Gill et al. 2001).

Nevertheless, arming parents in disadvantaged circumstances with the resources they need to make choices can be viewed as diverting attention away from the basic bounded nature of choice for these parents. Within a deeply socially stratified hierarchy of schools as is the case in England (reflecting a socially stratified society) there can only ever be so many places in the 'top' (i.e., most positionally advantaged and prestigious) schools. Choosing schools does not mean gaining access to them, and the extent to which policies to make choice fairer can correct for this without reducing inequalities overall is limited. Moreover, the introduction of measures to make choice fairer simultaneous to the promotion of parental 'partiality' (Swift 2003) over wider community responsibility might be viewed as diverting attention away from the fact a fairer society cannot be achieved where the members of society prioritise individualism without attempting to change the stratified context around them.

Looking beyond education to broader parenting policy within England, government measures for families have been increasingly interventionist, redrawing the lines between public and private. Standards have been set around the (subjective) notion of 'good parenting' (Vincent 2000) and measures have been put in place where parents are perceived to be taking inadequate responsibility for their children. Such measures focus largely on crime and anti-social behaviour – for example government parenting orders, parenting contracts and family intervention projects (Home Office 2007, 2008). They can also be seen in policy areas such as healthy eating (Department for Education and Skills 1998; Ball and Vincent 2005), early years education and child development (Hey and Bradford 2006) and have been found to intervene particularly in the lives of working class and disadvantaged families (Gewirtz 2001).

Within the national social and policy context outlined above, the 2006 Education and Inspections Act in England created a legal mandate for local authorities to set up choice advice services that would intervene and promote the engagement of all parents – particularly those who are socially disadvantaged – in the process of school choice. While working class and disadvantaged parents in England have traditionally resisted school choice and have tended to show support for local comprehensive schooling (Reay and Ball 1997), they have been encouraged to cultivate consumer identities, personalising educational preferences and examining information on a variety of local (or indeed non-local) schools:

A wide variety of information is already available to help parents make decisions but we know that not all parents are accessing this and many still find it difficult to navigate the admissions system – particularly when it comes to finding a secondary school. Choice Advisers will have a real impact on ensuring that all parents are armed with the information they need to find the right school for their child. (Schools Minister Jim Knight, June 2006)

As a result of policy, £12 million has been spent by the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) in England in order to establish a national network of choice advisers, with particular funding priority attached to local authorities with the largest numbers of disadvantaged families. Advisers are contracted by authorities but act independently of them and are instead answerable nationally to the DCSF. Advice is given face to face, by telephone and text message and through school visits and community centre surgeries. There is a focus on

‘outreach’ and home visits to families perceived as vulnerable and most in need of choice advice support.

Discursive networks within policy provision

Choice advice services must also be understood in the global context of the changing nature of the state. Recent decades have seen a shift in public service policy and provision outwards, from centralised government departments towards networks of state, private and voluntary sector bodies. This is the case not just in western industrialised societies but also in countries such as India and China (Tooley 2001; Tooley and Dixon 2003; Ball 2007; Nambissan and Ball in press); a ‘disarticulation’ of the state (Ball 2008) and a shift from *government* to *polycentric governance*.

Within education, boundaries between sectors have become particularly blurred. In England this is illustrated by the case of choice advisers, around which a complex policy and service delivery network has emerged through the processes of competitive tendering and ‘contracting out’. Figure 1 shows the way in which DCSF has devolved umbrella responsibility for the management and support of choice advice to a nominal body called the Choice Advisers Support and Quality Assurance Network (CAS&QAN). Although this network has a DCSF web address, its staff base is elsewhere because it is in turn managed by a partnership between two private education services companies called A4E and Centra. Within this partnership, Centra assumes responsibility for the ground-level provision of choice advice services in local authorities. Such a remit includes: organisation of training and national events plus telephone and email advice for choice

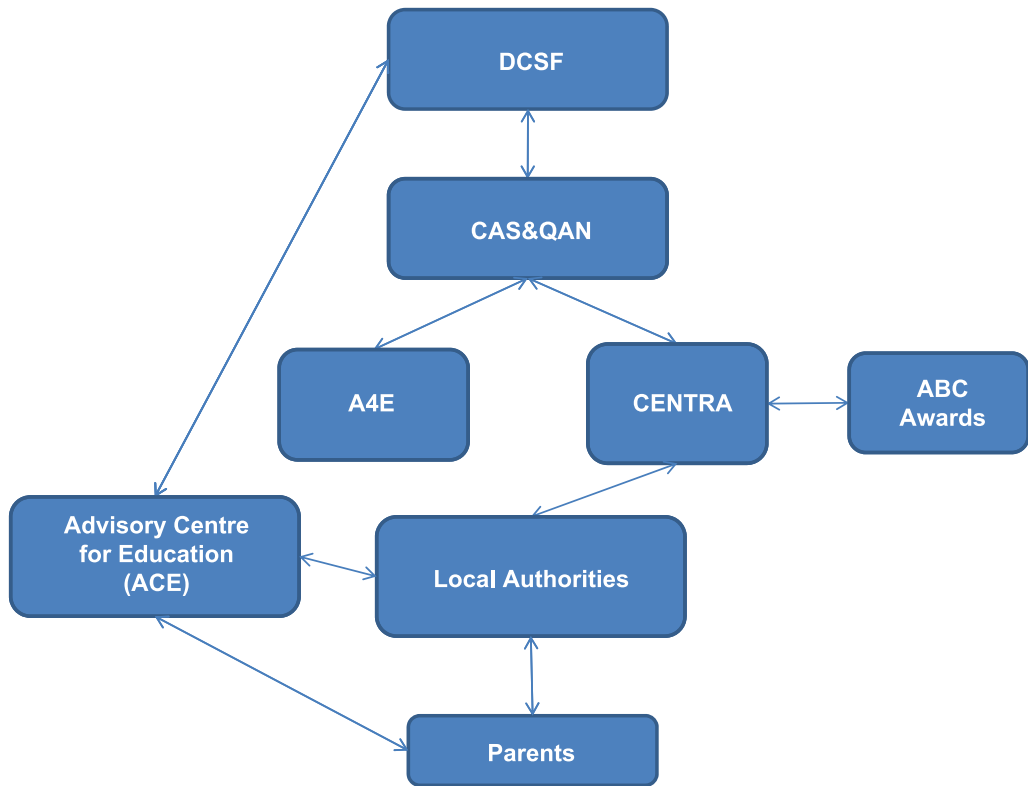


Figure 1. Mapping choice advice networks of policy and provision.

advisers; creation of an online forum, newsletters and the promotion of collaboration between advisers; and the national tracking of choice advice activity.

Beyond this, choice advice service provision is complicated by the involvement of ABC Awards, a private company contracted by Centra to develop vocational qualifications for advisers. The Advisory Centre for Education (ACE), a registered charity set up by Michael Young in 1961, is contracted by some local authorities to provide training for advisers at the local authority level. ACE also provides advice direct to parents on school choice and is formally endorsed by the DCSF as being a key source of parental information and support. The picture painted is one of multiple sites of policy activity; a changing role for the state and a growth in polycentric governance.

National, sub-national and supra-national networks of policy-making and public service provision can be thought of as *discursive communities*, generating, spreading and reinforcing dominant ideas and assumptions. Examples across the globe include the neo-liberal acceptance of choice and diversity or indeed the enshrined right of parents to choose schools for their children. By virtue of the nature of their job, choice advisers within England are nodes in the networked flow of discourse on school choice and parental rights and responsibilities. Global and national policy narratives are spread and reinforced by those who organise and manage choice advice provision, and advisers in turn pass narratives on to parents. There are implications for social justice in the spread of discourse and rhetoric here. From a Foucauldian perspective, discourse as text acts to reinforce power structures, flowing through 'capillaries' within and between societies and preserving the position of elites while reinforcing domination of the oppressed. Can this be said to be true for the language of choice advice as it flows through policy networks? Does it preserve the position of advantaged members of society? Does it promote empowerment for disadvantaged families or does it regulate them, managing their expectations and 'keeping them in their place'?

Research questions and methodology

This paper provides an early policy sociology examination of discourses and values emerging from national documentation on choice advice in England. The examination involves textual analysis across the multi-sector policy and provision network, asking:

- What discourses are spoken within choice advice documentation? What are the assumptions underlying these discourses?
- To what extent do discourses reflect dominant trends in parenting policy and neo-liberal parental consumerism over broader notions of community responsibility or social cohesion?
- To what extent do discourses regulate existing power relations within society?

Documentation analysed for the paper includes all publicly available online information on choice advice in England at the time of writing (February 2009), from all organisations identified as part of the choice advice 'network' (DCSF, CAS&QAN, A4E, Centra, ABC Awards and ACE). Materials for the first ABC Awards qualification in Choice Advice have been analysed, as have ACE and DCSF booklets for parents on choosing schools and a newsletter from A4E containing choice advice information. Analysis has been informed by methodological writing on the critical discourse analysis of text. Fairclough (1995), influenced by theorists such as Foucault and Gramsci, has argued that discourse can be defined as language with performative impact and, in particular, language which acts to serve the interests of the powerful in society by promoting socio-cultural reproduction and preserving an unequal social order. Fairclough has stressed the importance of considering normative assumptions underpinning text, examining

the basis of such assumptions in ideology. He has discussed the use of devices such as metaphors, presuppositions and silences within text, ultimately contributing to a recognition of 'domination and oppression in [their] linguistic forms' (Fairclough 1995, 1).

Discourses of choice advice: some emerging themes

Emerging discourses identified in documentation around choice advice can be summarised under four headings. These are: (1) equity; (2) responsibility; (3) independence and impartiality; and (4) realism. Each is discussed in turn below, and then some overarching conclusions are drawn.

Equity

Themes of 'equity' and 'fairness' stand out in all documentation around school choice advice. The principle that choice should be for all parents, not just some, is stated strongly and an acknowledgement of structural inequalities can be seen in statements about parents who are disadvantaged by 'the system':

Choice advisers will make the school admissions process clearer, fairer and more equitable by supporting those families most in need of help. (CAS&QAN website 2009)

All parents should have an equal opportunity to access a good education and should not be disadvantaged by a lack of information. (CAS&QAN website 2009)

Local Authorities have been given funding to provide a Choice Advice Service to support parents who are disadvantaged by the system, to make informed decisions about their secondary school preferences for their child. (Centra website 2009)

However, despite regular use of words such as 'fair', 'equitable', 'moral' and 'ethical' within choice advice documentation, their political and contested nature is not acknowledged. Where debates around fairness, ethics and morality rage within philosophy, choice advice rhetoric 'name-checks' abstract concepts and treats them as unproblematic. They become depoliticised and are given procedural definitions, hidden within the glossaries of documents such as the 'Level 2 Award for School Choice Advisers' syllabus:

The word 'moral' can be defined as 'of or concerned with the goodness and badness of human character or with the principles of what is right and wrong in conduct'. In the delivery of the qualification a tutor must undertake to instil in a student the difference between good and bad practice, most significantly in those practices relating directly to their employment. (ABC Awards 2007, 22)

A definition of ethical is given as 'morally correct, honourable', and can be attributed to a school choice advisor, as nearly every activity that they will undertake as part of their working life will require their compliance with given procedures and processes. (ABC Awards 2007, 22)

A depoliticised approach here sidesteps questions of morality around school choice while at first sight appearing to deal with them. Aside from a basic assumption that it is good, equitable and moral to ensure all parents have the advice they need to choose, there is no other attempt to consider critically what fairness and equity mean, for example in relation to *how advisers should advise*. Making choice fairer will prove difficult where there is no explicit, shared understanding of terms around social justice within the policy network. It might be argued that there is a duty to emphasise the contested nature of fairness and equity around choice. Rhetoric is key in that it filters to parents, explaining to them with an air of expert legitimacy and credible authority what is good and what is fair. Responsibility for such subjective judgements should therefore be taken within the discursive community.

More broadly, can a policy commitment to equity within school choice be taken seriously when accompanied by rhetoric emphasising the individualist parental right to choose without

similar emphasis on wider community responsibilities? Where all parents seek to maximise competitive advantage and ensure the 'very best' for their own children, it follows that, within a hierarchical education system, other parents will have to settle for less. Fairclough (2000) has problematised Third Way discourse under New Labour in highlighting the apparent irreconcilability of 'freedom' and 'equality' in public services given their radically different distributive implications. Contradictions such as this are apparent within choice advice documentation and nowhere are they reconciled. Rhetoric may therefore be as likely to preserve an unequal status quo as it is to promote equity.

Related to equity, the idea of 'empowerment' is used as being central to making choice fairer for all. Disadvantaged parents are to experience the 'opportunity' to choose. They are to be equipped with a sense of agency around choice that they did not previously possess:

I want parents to choose schools, not schools to choose parents. (Schools Secretary Ed Balls, quoted on the CAS&QAN website 2009)

The government is strongly committed to empowering parents and wishes to ensure all parents are able to access relevant information when making decisions which will affect their child's future. (CAS&QAN website 2009)

Empowerment is taken to mean the beneficial effects for parents of receiving school choice advice and information. It is to be achieved by a means of 'targeting' support to families who 'need it most'. Themes of 'compensation' in education (see Little and Smith 1971; Smith 1987) emerge, evoking a commitment to equality of opportunity and to the metaphor of the 'level playing field', 'making up' for disadvantage with an efficient use of government money.

However, can such a narrow definition of empowerment be defined as truly empowering for disadvantaged parents? First, it should be noted that, despite rhetoric around targeting these parents, government policy mandates the provision of choice advice *for all parents who seek it*. Middle-class dominance in the use of public services in England has been noted historically (Le Grand 1982) and here there is scope for further dominance, with potentially disempowering consequences for disadvantaged parents. Early academic work on choice advice has indicated concerns about the extent to which it succeeds in targeting 'hard to reach' parents (Stiell et al. 2008). Second, do parents possess power when given information and advice on school choice but the basic bounded nature of their choices as described above – namely that they are unlikely to secure places within the most desirable schools, made desirable by the existence of a steep schooling hierarchy – is not addressed? A focus on providing choice information and advice diverts attention from structural inequalities in society which, if addressed, might bring markedly more empowerment for these parents.

Responsibility

The theme of parental responsibility towards individual children is key within choice advice rhetoric. Standards are set and regulating judgements are made on what does and does not constitute 'good parenting'. Being a good parent in school choice terms means thinking about the personalised educational requirements of the child, considering unique talents, needs and preferences, seeking advice and information on educational options and selecting the most appropriate form of schooling. More politically, it means cultivating a consumer identity, engaging with choice as a neo-liberal concept and seeking pro-actively to exercise the individualist 'right' to seek 'the best'.

The following quote comes from 'Blueprint', the monthly newsletter created by A4E:

Most parents and carers recognise the critical importance of getting a place in a secondary school that will meet their children's academic and developmental needs... However, there are a number

of families who find the system difficult to understand. There are also a small number of parents who, for one reason or another, are unable or unwilling to engage with the process. Failure to express a choice or return paperwork can cause problems. This tends to happen more frequently in the most deprived communities. (A4E 2006, 16)

Note use of the words 'most parents' here, setting an implied capable majority against a 'small number' within deprived communities who are 'for one reason or another' (showing an absence of insight on class and cultural capital; also an absence of acknowledgement of the bounded nature of choice for many) 'unable or unwilling' to engage with school choice. 'Unable' here suggests failure and this word is used explicitly. 'Unwilling' suggests non-compliance with the requirements for good parenting and so there is an implication that some parents lack responsibility for their children.

In a study of working class values around choice, Reay and Ball (1997) argued that a refusal to engage with choice on the part of working class parents was related to *ambivalence*, *not indifference* or a lack of parental responsibility. Ambivalence stems again from the relative unlikelihood of success in securing 'desirable' school places for these parents and an acknowledgement of the limited nature of their apparent 'choice': 'to refuse to choose what is not permitted offers a preferable option to choices which contain the risk of humiliation and rejection' (Reay and Ball 1997, 91).

Related to this, in a study comparing working class and middle class approaches to choosing schools and childcare, Vincent, Braun, and Ball (in press) have drawn attention to positive reasons for a working class rejection of choice and consumerism. These include differing priorities and an attachment of meaning and importance to ideas of community and local service provision.

Thus, it is simplistic to imply that parents are somehow shirking responsibility by not engaging with choice. Promoting consumer identity in this context and judging parents who reject that identity is an imposition of middle class values onto working class and disadvantaged parents – an attempt to 'resocialise' them (Gewirtz 2001; see also Vincent 1996, on the normative dominance of middle class values in education). Rejecting choice (and not all working class parents do reject choice) does not mean these parents are worse at doing their job; merely that they see things differently, and they may have good and positive reasons for doing so.

Building on the theme of 'responsibilisation' of parenting, choice advice rhetoric is filled with statements that tell parents and children what they want or need:

Applying for school places can take time and effort. And as a parent, you want to get it right. (DCSF 2008, 2)

Every parent wants their child to attend a good school. (CAS&QAN website 2009)

Choice advisers will work with families to understand their child's educational needs and interests. (CAS&QAN website 2009)

Use of the word 'understand' gives greater weight to the authority of advisers as professionals (albeit in the art of choosing rather than in education itself) than to the authority of parents in knowing and understanding their children. Discourse here can be viewed as disempowering disadvantaged parents in the same way that 'compassionate ageism' disempowers older people (Arber and Ginn 1991) – patronising them, presenting them as incapable and removing their sense of agency.

There is strong emphasis within choice advice documentation on the 'critical importance' for parents of engaging with school choice. Emotive statements are made about the impact on children's 'lives', 'futures' and 'best interests' as regards selecting a good school, in order to avoid them 'slipping through the net'. Accompanying such language are directive statements on how parents should engage with choice. Despite rhetoric emphasising that parents must 'judge

for themselves' and that 'choice advisers will offer advice but will not take decisions for [parents]' (CAS&QAN website), within broader school admissions literature complex and detailed instructions are given about what parents *should* do, what it is 'sensible' for them to do, and the importance of doing such things 'early'. ACE booklets (endorsed on the DCSF website) place particular emphasis on parental fact finding missions, stressing the importance of gathering *all* information on *all* local schools in order to gain a 'whole picture'.¹ Discursive standards are therefore set for what good parents do and bad parents do not, reinforcing a sense of inadequacy for those without the resources to undertake extensive research (going beyond that which would be facilitated by choice advisers). Again this can be considered regulatory and far from an ideal of 'empowerment' for disadvantaged parents.

Within warnings for disadvantaged parents that their children are at risk of 'slipping through the net' where they do not engage with school choice, there is a shifting of responsibility for educational quality away from the state and on to parents. If parents want their child to have a good education then it is imperative that they choose well. Should they fail to do this, the implication is that they must shoulder some of the blame for their child's subsequent educational failure. Discourse here is disempowering because it judges and blames the victim, with disadvantaged parents particularly affected because their choice is bounded by limited places in 'good' schools. Fuller responsibility on the part of the state for the provision of 'good' schooling would mean a stronger commitment to tackling the proverbial 'elephant in the room' – that is, educational hierarchy reflecting wider social stratification – so that sufficient places at 'good' schools would be available for all.

Impartiality and independence

Reassurances of choice advisers' 'impartiality', 'objectivity' and 'independence' constitute a third key element to rhetoric and documentation around the choice advice service.

CAS&QAN is a DCSF funded service aiming to support choice advisers in providing impartial advice to parents navigating the school admissions system... We also work with local authorities in ensuring the impartiality and quality assurance of the choice adviser service. (CAS&QAN website 2009)

... [training advisers to give] independent, impartial, realistic, quality advice. (ABC Awards 2007, 6)

Depoliticised, managerial discourse here again presents decisions about schooling as value neutral, and so the role of the choice adviser is rendered politically unproblematic. Wide-ranging attempts to professionalise the workforce in all sectors of the economy under a Labour government since 1997 have led to a vast array of new vocational qualifications (Hargreaves 2006), and an example of this can be seen in the certification of choice advice. In assessing new vocational choice advice qualifications, protocols and procedures for defining choice advice 'best practice' have been created. There is an unquestioned assumption that 'best practice' *can be defined* as regards choice advice. Moreover, best practice is framed in terms of a hegemonic consumerist discourse without consideration of alternative models of 'best practice' (for example those which acknowledge the political nature of choice and which emphasise community responsibility in addition to individual parental rights).

In training towards choice advice certification, advisers receive guidance on the sorts of information that are 'relevant' to parents in making school choices. These include definitions of differing forms of school governance, tables of school examination results, school inspection reports, data on school over/under-subscription, data on appeal success rates in different schools, specialist school curricula, online prospectuses and school uniform, special needs and local authority transport cost policies. However, silence can be observed on broader potentially relevant materials informing parents on choice, for example texts debating its thorny moral

context. The 2003 book *How not to be a hypocrite: School choice for the morally perplexed* was written by philosopher Adam Swift in order to deal with these issues. It is targeted at a non-academic parent audience. Relevant texts might also include media commentaries or academic research summaries on the impact of choice on undersubscribed schools in deprived areas (see Gewirtz et al. 1995).

In addition to guidance on relevant facts around schooling, advisers receive formal training in helping parents to interpret information ‘correctly’. What counts as a correct interpretation in this context? Is it possible that particular forms of interpretation will be favoured over others, for example those which view schools as ‘good’ or ‘bad’ depending on examination scores without adequate consideration of social context? Normative assumptions are not questioned here; nor is the subjective nature of knowledge. Questions can therefore be raised over the extent to which the relative undesirability of schools in deprived neighbourhoods is reinforced within choice advice discourse, with implications for pupils attending these schools. Questions can also be raised over the extent to which there is room within the daily business of choice advice for parents who hold differing political values and priorities to those underpinning the global neo-liberal choice agenda.

‘Independence’ as stressed in the role of the choice adviser is intended to mean independence from local authority control or ‘bias’. Where choice advisers are independent, objective and ‘impartial’, there is a construction of the local authority as the subjective, partial other, serving itself rather than serving parents. Negative language around local authorities can be seen, with conflict-based wording about what local authorities ‘can’, ‘can’t’ and ‘must’ do for parents, and in turn what parents can and should do in response:

A central component of the work of the Choice Advisers is that the advice they give is independent, impartial and in the best interest of the child. (CAS&QAN website 2009)

If your child has challenging behaviour an admission authority may turn them down in very limited circumstances but you can still appeal. If their behaviour is related to a disability you can claim disability discrimination. (ACE 2007, 2)²

Negative language around local authorities in England is by no means new or unique to choice advice policy. It has a long history related to the centralisation of political power and a broader neo-liberal project promoting markets in public services. Small government has been emphasised within policy and there has been a corresponding enhancement of power (on the surface at least) for parents and schools plus private and voluntary sector providers of services. There are implications for equity given the formal role of local authorities in England as community-level decision-making bodies. Such bodies have a duty to serve the interests of *all* members of their local electorate, including the most disadvantaged parents. Serving these parents may often mean intervening in school admissions to ensure a balanced mix of children across all secondary schools and supporting those schools at risk of sinking into a ‘spiral of decline’; political goals which frequently come into conflict with supporting parental choice.

Realism

A final (brief) discursive theme running through all choice advice documentation in all parts of the policy network is the notion of ‘realism’ for parents; helping them to make the best of their resources within a competitive educational marketplace but ultimately accepting limits to what can be achieved.

Helping parents, carers and children... to make the best and most realistic choice of secondary school. (CAS&QAN website 2009)

... impartial advice to targeted groups of parents and carers to enable them to express a fully informed and realistic preference of secondary school for their child. (ABC Awards 2007, 5)

Parents are told within choice advice rhetoric that advisers will help them to make choices that are both 'realistic' and 'appropriate'. Discourses of realism and appropriateness are at first sight positive and empowering for disadvantaged families because there is an idea that if they aim too high in terms of choosing the most desirable schools at the top of a schooling hierarchy within the choice 'game', there is a risk they will be rejected (see Ball 2003a on the notion of risk within the educational marketplace) and then placed in a school that is markedly less desirable, perhaps even near the bottom of the schooling hierarchy.

But is such a discourse of realism empowering or is it limiting? To some degree it attempts to deal with the bounded and limited nature of choice for certain parents, arguably a positive given research by those such as Reay and Ball (1997) which highlights the working class fear of rejection and failure in choice. However, realism here refers only to what is realistic for certain parents given the current stratified social and educational system. It does not challenge the nature or the fundamental existence of that system. As such, discourse regulates and manages expectations for certain parents, acting to divert attention away from perspectives over schooling which might have radically different (and more egalitarian) implications for society.

Conclusions

In this paper, discourses and values flowing through a network of policy and service provision around choice advisers in England have been examined. Discourses of equity, responsibility, independence/impartiality and realism have been identified. They are underpinned by neo-liberal assumptions about the consumer rights of parents to choose schools for their children and the imperative nature of engaging with choice. They are also underpinned by the positivist assumption that truth and knowledge can be considered objective or non-political, and the Third Way assumption that freedom to choose schools can go hand in hand with equity and social justice. Middle class values dominate in definitions of 'good parenting'. For those who do not comply with subjective standards being set there is a discursive implication that these parents shoulder some of the responsibility for their child's quality of educational experience. Such judgements occur despite the bounded nature of choice for many or indeed the possibility that some prioritise a commitment to social cohesion or local community over their individualist right to choose. In conclusion, choice advice discourses can be viewed as regulating an unequal social status quo. While on the surface they promote equity and empowerment for disadvantaged families, a more critical reading suggests that they reinforce a sense of inadequacy for these families, diverting attention away from the broader challenge of social and educational stratification and advancing empowerment in only a limited form.

Given the gradual normalisation of global agendas for parental choice in education alongside measures to make choice fairer, there is a danger for social justice stemming from a normative assumption that choice is here to stay but that its problems and implications for equity have somehow been 'ironed out'. This is not the case, and it is the challenge for academics within the current climate to resist the discursive tide, remaining critically engaged with all fresh problems being generated by choice. For those who support the Third Way possibility that choice *can* go hand in hand with social justice, engagement with policies such as choice advice can measure progress towards this goal. For those who reject the basic premise of choice in education, only by highlighting a continued government failure to secure social justice despite efforts to make choice fairer can the global hegemony of marketisation in public services be effectively undermined.

Notes

1. However it is worth noting here that the political history and origins of ACE as a campaigning organisation set up to promote parental empowerment in education (with a focus on special educational needs) are arguably rather different to those of other private sector organisations mentioned.
2. Given ACE's distinct history as indicated above, it is perhaps also appropriate here to draw a distinction between organisations whose critique of local authorities is ideological and those whose frustrations stem more from a history of helping parents of children with special educational needs.

Notes on contributor

Sonia Exley is a British Academy post-doctoral fellow at the Institute of Education, London. She completed a doctorate at Nuffield College, Oxford, in 2007. Her thesis traced the evolution of the specialist schools programme in England and explored the implications of this programme for the segregation of disadvantaged pupils between schools.

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