

Research Brief

Caught out

Primary schools, catchment areas and social selection

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Many children in England attend their nearest primary school, but these schools can have intakes that are quite different from their local neighbourhoods. In this research brief we describe where and why primary school intakes differ substantially in their social composition from the local neighbourhoods from which they recruit. This divergence may be because local families are choosing to attend a different school or because the school is using oversubscription criteria that do not strictly prioritise those who live closest to the school.

There are many benefits to giving parents a choice over where their child is educated, but there are also concerns that there is not equity in access to primary schools, either because higher-income families are advantaged in their ability to exercise choice or because their admissions criteria favour certain pupils. In this research we do not explore the selection that takes place before children are aged four, with families moving house to access their preferred school. Instead we look at the relationship between the social divergence between a school's pupil intake and local neighbourhood to the characteristics of both the school and the area in which they are located. We also explore the admissions policies of the schools with the highest levels of social divergence in some detail and make some policy suggestions to improve access to primary schools, particularly for low income families.

KEY FINDINGS

- There are well over 1,000 primary schools where the free school meals proportion is over 10 percentage points lower than that found in the neighbourhoods from which they recruit.
- These socially selective primary schools are more likely to be found in London and other urban areas. They are often schools with a religious character who have chosen to apply religious oversubscription criteria.
- Socially selective primary schools tend to use lengthy and more complex oversubscription criteria to decide who is allocated a place. These criteria can be complex for parents to navigate.

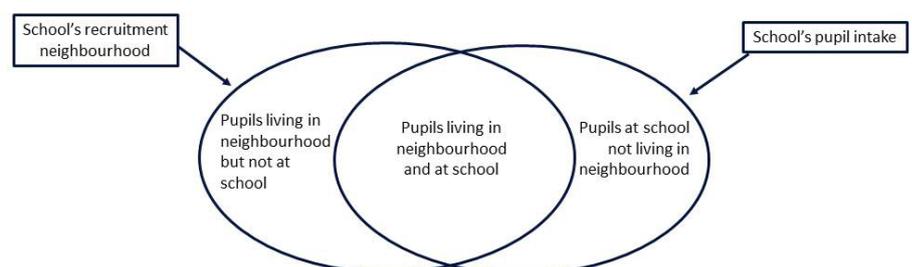
Methodology

There are many different approaches to measuring the social composition of a school's neighbourhood.¹ For our study we define a small area – the lower layer super output area (SOA) – as being part of a primary school's recruitment neighbourhood if at least five pupils have attended the school within the last five years (2010-2014). It is a flexible approach that allows for more realistic recruitment areas. We look at five

years of reception year intakes throughout the report to stabilise the statistics we generate since primary school intakes are very small.

Figure 1 shows the extent to which pupils in our recruitment neighbourhoods attend the school in question. The extent of the overlap between school and neighbourhood varies enormously: for the median school, almost all pupils – 84% - live in the recruitment neighbourhood of the school, as we defined it, and these neighbourhoods are generally very close to the school (the median

Figure 1: Relationship between school intake and local neighbourhoods



distance between school and recruitment neighbourhood is 0.9km; the 90th percentile is 2.6km). However, because areas can be assigned to multiple schools, an average of only 20% of pupils in a school's recruitment neighbourhood actually go to the school in question. These statistics emphasise that SOAs are allocated to multiple, overlapping school recruitment neighbourhoods. Our method means that the typical school recruits from seven SOAs; the typical SOAs is assigned to over three school recruitment neighbourhoods.

To measure social divergence between school and neighbourhood, we calculate the school's percentage eligible for free school meals (%FSM) over five reception cohorts and compare it to the %FSM in the school's recruitment neighbourhood. So, for example, if a school has intakes where 16% of pupils are eligible for free school meals, yet 25% of pupils living in the recruitment neighbourhoods are FSM then we assign a social divergence value of -9 percentage points (ppt).

Local divergence

There is a lot of variation in how much primary school intakes diverge from their local neighbourhood's social composition. Figure 2 groups schools according to the degree of this social divergence (the distributions are very similar for ethnic and academic divergence). For over half (56%) of schools this social divergence is small at under five percentage points.

The most socially selective primary schools are the 10% of schools found furthest to the left in Figure 2. These "top 10% most socially selective schools" have FSM intakes that are much lower than in their recruitment neighbourhoods. The difference between their school intake and neighbourhood is at least 9.2 percentage points. There are 1,576 schools in this category, with 310,000 pupils.

Areas with large numbers of socially selective schools also have large numbers of schools on the far right hand side of Figure 2 for whom

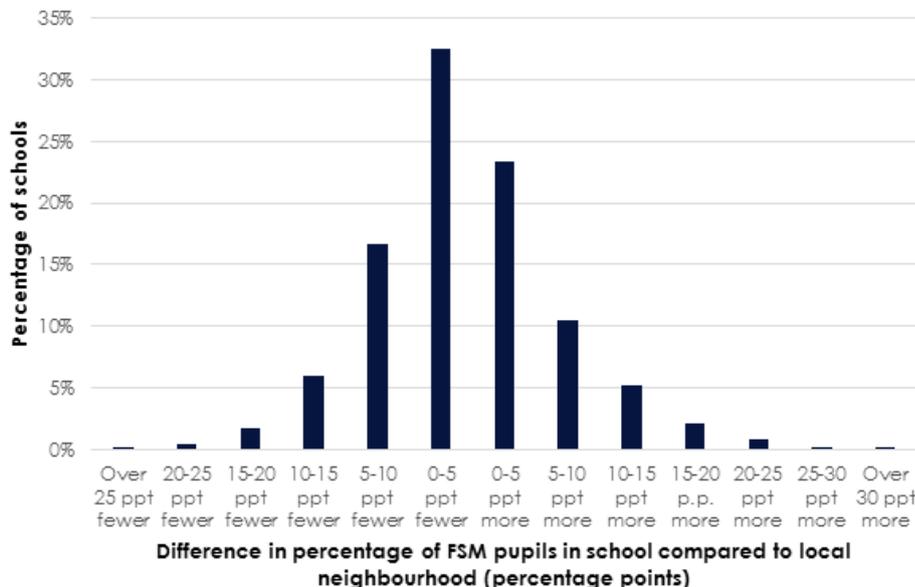


Figure 2: Distribution of schools by social divergence

their %FSM is considerably above that of their local neighbourhood.

The 20 local authorities that have significant social sorting, as measured by the proportion of their schools that appear in our list of the top 10% most socially selective schools, are:

Blackpool, County Durham, Darlington, Gateshead, Hammersmith and Fulham, Hartlepool, Hillingdon, Islington, Kensington and Chelsea, Lewisham, Middlesbrough, Newcastle upon Tyne, Nottingham, Redcar and Cleveland, Southend-on-Sea, South Tyneside, Stoke-on-Trent, Torbay, Walsall, Westminster

These are almost all urban local authorities, where it is possible for children to walk to several different schools in their area. It is generally true that more socially selective schools are located in urban areas than in rural areas (see Figure 3). We classify 682 schools (13 per cent) in urban conurbations as socially selective, compared to just 81 schools (5 per cent) in rural towns or fringe areas. This is borne out by the rurality of the 20 local authorities with the smallest percentage of schools in the list of top 10% most socially selective schools:

Brighton and Hove, Buckinghamshire, Cambridgeshire,

Central Bedfordshire, Hampshire, Kingston upon Thames, Merton, North Yorkshire, Reading, Richmond upon Thames, Rutland, Shropshire, Surrey, Waltham Forest, Warwickshire, West Berkshire, West Sussex, Wiltshire, Windsor and Maidenhead, Wokingham

Changes in selection

In order to identify local authorities where there have been changes in the number of the most socially selective schools (top 10% schools), we repeated our analysis for 2002-2006 and compared it to 2010-2014. This comparison can be seen below in Figure 4. Each point on the figure represents one local authority, with the x-axis showing the percentage of top 10% schools in 2002-2006 and the y-axis showing the equivalent percentage in 2010-2014.

The majority of schools are in the bottom left quadrant, meaning they do not have particularly high levels of social sorting in either sets of years. The improving local authorities – those that are becoming less socially selective – are in the bottom right quadrant. These nineteen local authorities had more than 20 per cent of their schools in the top 10% most socially selective schools in 2002-2006, but less than 20 per cent of their schools in the top 10% in 2010-2014. The five local authorities in the top left quadrant are becoming more socially selective – they increased to more than 20

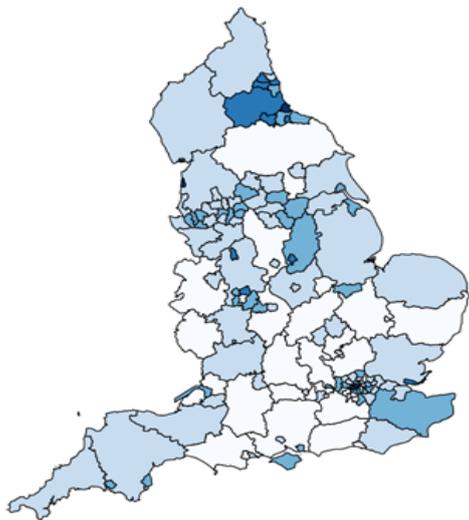


Figure 3: Map of extent of social divergence across England

Note: LAs shaded from darkest to slightly blue according to proportion of schools that are socially selective from 28-35%, 21-28%, 14-21%, 7-14%, 0-7%, respectively.

per cent in 2010-2014 but had been lower previously. The twelve local authorities in the top right quadrant (red) have had over 20% of their schools in the top 10% in both 2002-2006 and 2010-2014.

Three of these local authorities – Westminster, Hartlepool and Blackpool – each have at least 30 per cent of their schools in the top 10%, indicating school FSM intakes that diverge a great deal from their local neighbourhoods.

Governance and faith

There is a complex relationship between primary school governance, religious character and levels of social selection. Table 1 shows the proportion of schools that are in the 10% most socially selective, by both governance and religion. It is generally true that non-religious schools are not particularly socially selective and that Roman Catholic and other religious primary schools are, regardless of governance status. This reflects the fact that these religious schools consistently apply religious admission criteria. The pattern of social selection in Church of England primary schools is quite different, reflecting the variety of stances towards religious selection that dioceses have taken. They are far less likely to be socially selective than other schools with a religious denomination because many (particularly voluntary controlled) act as de-facto community schools and do not apply any religious criteria.

Links to performance

The relationship between school Ofsted ratings and social selectivity is predictable. We classify 13% of Ofsted “outstanding” schools as socially selective, compared to 7% of “requires improvement” schools and 6% of “inadequate” schools. The relationship between a school’s average KS2 score and its social selectivity is also fairly predictable. Just one per cent of schools in the bottom 10% of KS2 performance are also in the top 10% most socially selective schools. In contrast, fourteen per cent of schools in the top 10% of KS2 performance are also in the top 10% most socially selective schools.

Of course these are just

correlations and causation could run in both directions. For example, highly motivated, higher income parents might seek out high Ofsted rated schools, thus increasing their social selectivity. But equally, schools with more socially selective intakes may find it easier to achieve higher Ofsted ratings.

Types of oversubscription criteria

The most socially selective primary schools tend to use more complex oversubscription criteria than the typical primary school, which uses about five criteria. In our close examination of the 100 most socially selective primary schools we find as many as 18 oversubscription criteria used in one school and several instances where the school appears to contravene the Admissions Code. In these schools, oversubscription criteria are often faith-based, with governing bodies taking the final decision on admissions. This gives greater choice of schools to church-going families, but this also exacerbates inequalities in choice because those families are more likely to be of a higher social class.²

Such criteria and decision-making systems contribute to the divergence in FSM intake of the most socially selective schools. Common oversubscription criteria include:

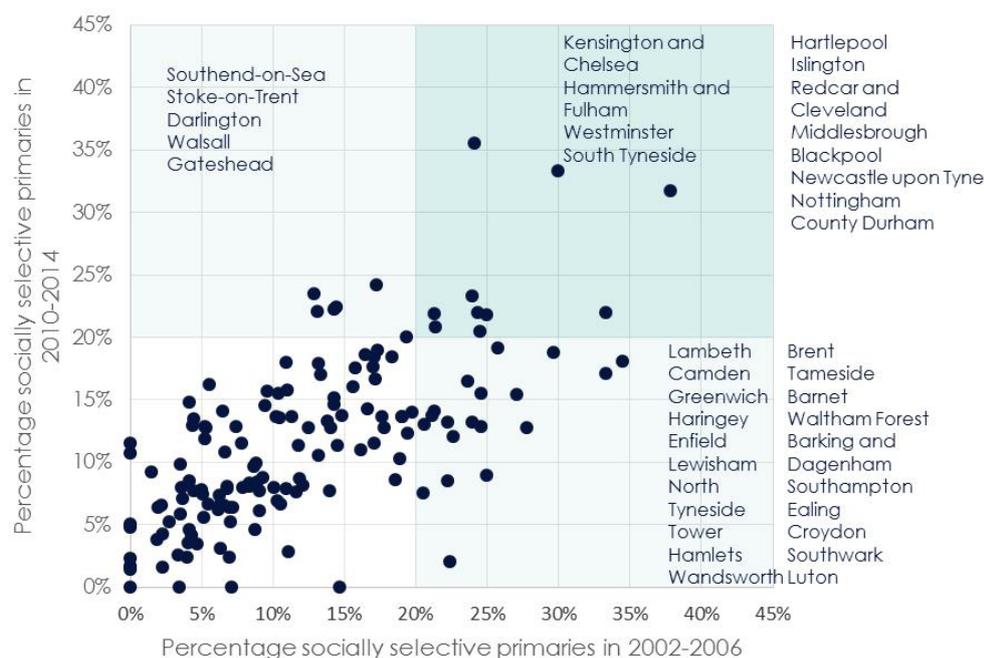


Figure 4: Percentage of socially selective primaries in each local authority 2002-2006, compared to 2010-2014

- Giving a high priority to looked after children sharing the faith of the school, but not to other looked after children

- Prioritising attendance at named churches over a long period of time, which favours families who plan primary school choice many years in advance and do not move house

- Prioritising children of staff, which may aid recruitment of staff, but needs to be used carefully

In many cases, the priority given to children with siblings already attending the school is often combined within other criteria. For example, children sharing the faith of the school with siblings already at the school are given priority over children with siblings already at the school who do not share the faith of the school.

	None		Church of England		Roman Catholic		Other Christian		Other religious	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Community	7504	6%								
Foundation	635	7%	30	23%						
Academy converter	895	6%	277	10%	196	37%	5	20%	7	57%
Academy sponsor	672	7%	109	9%	18	56%	19	37%	12	67%
Voluntary controlled	31	6%	2075	6%			49	14%		
Voluntary aided	15	13%	1728	11%	1413	32%	34	6%	35	26%

Table 1: Religious and governance status of the most socially selective schools

Proximity to the school tends to fall relatively far down the list of criteria, allowing schools to select pupils from further away through the use of other criteria. through the use of other criteria.

Finally, socially selective schools often make use of Supplementary Information Forms. These are forms

requesting additional, often faith related, information, which parents have to complete alongside standard admissions forms. Sometimes proof of religious practice or membership also has to be provided. The very act of requiring a Supplementary Information Form can discourage applications to the school.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Schools should consider the impact of their oversubscription criteria on pupil-premium children, and prioritise them in admissions.

Residential sorting encourages stratification, and any choice system should guard against this rather than reinforce it. However, the benefits of walking to school, allowing young children to be educated with friends and nurturing community cohesion around the schools' activities cannot be ignored. Within these constraints, schools may still consider prioritising pupil premium pupils – particularly where there are several neighbourhood schools, to avoid such social stratification.

2. The School Admissions Code should be properly enforced, with clearer permissible criteria and open complaints procedures.

The Schools Adjudicator and the Schools Admissions Code are designed to ensure that admissions remain fair. For this to happen it is important that it is properly enforced, including preventing cheating by parents or poor practice by schools. It may also be better to express the code in terms of what is allowed rather than focusing largely on what is not permitted. The Schools Adjudicator should be able to rule on admissions where a complaint has not been made and the right of individuals and organisations to raise concerns should not be constrained.

3. All religious schools should make places open to the local community with simple and consistent religious admissions criteria.

We recognise the important role of religious communities in the provision of primary education so we cannot avoid the very real trade-offs between allowing religious schools to give priority to those who can demonstrate faith and social sorting. That said, many Church of England dioceses do not believe that religious selection is necessary to promote a religious ethos in their schools. New faith free schools are expected to provide 50% of places for those of other or no faiths. We think there needs to be greater scrutiny of legacy criteria at existing schools, ensuring that any religious admissions criteria and processes are straightforward and fair to all.

Footnotes

1. For an overview see Singleton, A.D., Longley, P.A., Allen, R. and O'Brien, O. (2011) Estimating secondary school catchment areas and the spatial equity of access, Computers, Environment and Urban Systems, 35(3)241-249.

2. Allen, R. and West, A. (2011) Why do faith secondary schools have advantaged intakes? The relative importance of neighbourhood characteristics, social background and religious identification amongst parents, British Educational Research Journal, 37(4)691-712.