



To the south there was the equally desirable Tredegar Square - this time in the borough of Tower Hamlets but the same story educationally.

Tredegar Square



In the interests of time, I am going to have to ignore this fascinating story of the traditional white middle class in inner East London (fascinating though the story is) and focus on just one educational trajectory – that of suburbanisation. The rest are discussed in the book.

The story starts in Newham and ends in Redbridge; there is a two-way traffic in Newham amongst the middle classes. It has become a focus for inbound white middle-class professionals – in many ways a very similar group to that which ‘pioneers’ gentrified Hackney in the 1980s and Islington and Camden a decade earlier. On the other hand, Newham (the most ethnically-diverse borough in London) is home to a number of long standing minority ethnic groups who have lived there for several generations; -many have managed to haul themselves up the occupational ladder and are now working in the semi professions (nursing, social work and to a lesser extent teaching). This is the group I want to focus on.

Whereas the former group is attracted to its terraced Victorian or Edwardian housing and keen to shun the inter or post war suburbs of their upbringing, the latter are equally keen to put distance between themselves and a place they often identify as their first stop in this country which, for them, has associations with deprivation and discrimination. For them, the suburbs with their ordered semi-detached houses and own front gardens spell aspiration and achievement.

Newham



Redbridge



Unlike the white incomers, many of the latter felt they neither had the time, the confidence nor the skills to negotiate what they saw as an uncertain market in schooling in Newham which, despite some dramatic improvements, still had a number of very poorly-performing schools. Some Black African and Black Caribbean parents were able to resolve their concerns by 'cashing in' their religious assets and getting their children into faith schools (usually out of the borough). This was not usually an option for most Asian respondents who, in any case, saw aspiration in terms of suburbanization and moving to Redbridge which not only had semi-detached housing and similar-thinking Asians but also one of the best selective and non selective schooling systems in London. For them, what mattered was a place where your child went to a good school by right.

Quotation

Every morning, every morning, every morning, I am asking my two kids when I am taking them to school, how are you going to study after [school]; what are you going to do when you finish your studies? Now I am telling him he is to be a doctor. I have to look after him now so that he will look after me [in the future].

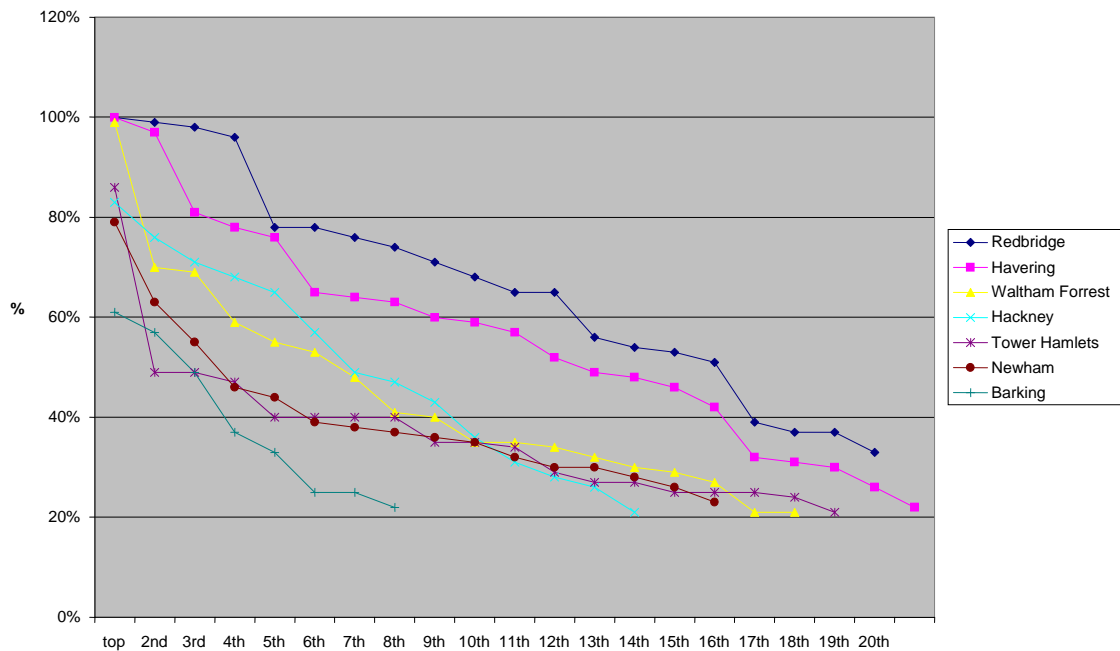
This is a good school, but it should still [be doing better]. Here the kids might get 50 percent but if they get 49 they will fail, in Redbridge they will definitely pass. (Sri Lankan, male, Newham)

Almost without exception, Redbridge was indeed the 'promised land' for our Asian respondents; Redbridge achieves its longstanding educational achievement through a mix of selective and non-selective schools. There are a number of factors that set Redbridge up for

this position. Unlike other East London boroughs which might have one successful school and then a relatively long tail of mediocre attainment rates followed by one or two schools with a very poor reputation, Redbridge has a much higher proportion of schools with very good results. Figure 2 illustrates how Redbridge compares with other East London boroughs in this respect.

Figure 2: Percentage of Pupils gaining 5+GCSE's grades A*-C, by borough and ranked school in East London

Figure 2. Percentage of Pupils gaining 5+ GCSE's A*-C, by borough and ranked school, East London, 2006



Redbridge is however a victim of its own success. There are published catchment areas for its non-selective schools which tend to be very tightly-drawn; however what really matters are the distance-to-school measures. For the most popular schools, such as Seven Kings, parents living within the nominal catchment areas are often disappointed in their first choice. This not unsurprisingly leads some parents to bend the rules. An increase in the availability of 'buy to let' flats/houses within the catchment areas of the most popular schools gives rise to what are often perceived as 'carpet-bagging' queue-jumpers – this is particularly resented by those living in the area who might have expected to get their children into the school in question.

Quote

[How did you get him in there? (son into Seven Kings)]

We did actually [laughing] have to rent a flat out for a whole year, but it was cheaper in the long run than actually sending him to a private school for the long term. It's making a sacrifice – a whole year of rent is like paying a second mortgage but we thought that was better than sending him private which was £14,000 a year, so in the long term it suited us, he is in the school where I wanted him to be. Unfortunately it is a little bit underhand but we had to do it.

*Seven Kings is quite a big school but it has a very small catchment so you have to be in specific roadsets, It's not like borough-wide or anything, it's tight, and you do find there are loads of people who are moving in, buying flats etc, specifically to get their kids into the school. Obviously the prices of the houses rise and it has a knock-on effect.
(Pakistani, male, Redbridge)*

The high standard of attainment in Redbridge's schools overall has created a 'narrative of popularity' focused around the best-performing schools which simultaneously demonizes others – most of which are in the north of the borough on the peripheral and previously white working-class housing estates. A number of respondents, who had been unsuccessful in achieving their preferred choice of school, found their child allocated to one of these (usually Hainault) and didn't hesitate to express their disappointment. Given the highly-charged issue of educational attainment for many of those who cited this as underlying their choice to move to Redbridge in the first place, this reaction was perhaps unsurprising.

What I want for my girls – I want the best education there is. But the catchment's secondary school is Hainault Forest, and they are not going there. Over my dead body will they go there!. I'll teach them at home...There's bullying, there's drugs... they were on special measures for a while, I believe they've come off it now. They're changing their name but it's like anything, you know – a change of name isn't, I know they wanna get away from the image of Hainault High, but it was a bad school when I was at school, (White British, female, Barkingside)

Thus, choice creates lack of choice depending on where you live and also ensures that however much schools 'improve', they find it very difficult to escape their reputation. Parents are encouraged to make choices for their children's education and then feel that these are systematically denied them even if they live within a particularly popular school's catchment.

What also emerges from the choice agenda in a borough with popular schools like Redbridge is the creation of a clear hierarchy of secondary schools based largely on popularity; some otherwise acceptable schools become perceived in the court of popular opinion, as failing when there is no evidence that this is the case. Choice can foster a sense of failure amongst schools, parents and children which creates a vortex of disenchantment within the schooling system. In this way, following Willis, it appears that the system is failing the children rather than *vice versa*.

Conclusions – loser choosers?

What I have tried to do in this talk add is to a geographical dimension to the largely sociological discussion about choice in education by focusing on the ways in which middle-class respondents across London have adopted a much more strategic and defensive approach to the schooling of their children over the past twenty five years. Whilst educational policy has focused around issues of 'added value' (ie the ways in which schools have improved in relation to the social background of their intake), parents have become increasingly focused on absolute performance (the currency required to access good higher education). As London has become more middle class, the juxtaposition of its increasingly aspirant middle-class population with the heritage of its largely working-class schooling system has become sharper. The language of choice, intended to provide for all what has traditionally been the prerogative of the middle-class few, has become the means of rationing access to an education system in which the perception is of relatively few high-achieving schools. This is compounded by a situation in which popularity and performance are often, in my view erroneously, conflated. The consequence has been to demonise some schools even where there are signs of improvement and, more often, to transform the majority of schools in the mid-range of the attainment distribution into ones which parents feel are second best. The result is that parents make a genuine choice and fail to get it, usually on grounds of where they live, or else they 'play safe' and go for their nearest school in the fear that otherwise they might get allocated to a worse school. In both cases, they feel dissatisfied. Thus a system which was intended to widen the net of social justice by opening up the best schools to all, appears to have succeeded in restricting them to those who can afford to live near them – in extreme cases by renting, as a temporary measure, a flat in their immediate shadow.

The middle classes have lost confidence in their ability to transmit their cultural capital in spite of the schooling system. Whilst they apparently choose on grounds of performance, in reality they increasingly appear to choose on grounds of popularity which is not always the same thing and tends to equate with a notion of social contamination – fear of the ‘educational other’ plays a large role in this. The principle of the 'distance to school' criteria in their admissions policies has a ring of social justice to it but, in the context of the more geographically-dispersed disadvantage in such locations, it is becoming a means of cementing middle-class social closure around the education market. By rooting choice in geography, we are in danger of legitimating the creation of new bubbles of urban privilege in which there are decreasing numbers of social encounters between young people from different backgrounds and in which 'social mix is for dummies'.

As has happened with the gentrification of London’s housing market, London's education system is now becoming more exclusionary and further displacing the already-disadvantaged from the opportunities it might otherwise afford them. Children are being actively displaced from good schools by more recent but more affluent arrivistes. That this is done on the basis of choice only illustrates how far we have come in the last 25 years in dismantling the notions of 'equality of opportunity' and 'parity of esteem' that lay at the heart of the reforms enacted at the end of the second world war. The role of the middle classes has also changed along this journey from being the progressive agents of social change to the, more or less willing, lieutenants of neo liberalism. This so-called ‘geography of education’ has also changed from being the means by which the state can reduce area based-inequality (through for example funding Educational Priority Areas) to the rationing of access to scarce resources.