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Making working-class parents think more like middle-class parents: Choice Advisers in English education

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‘Making working class parents think more like middle class parents’: Choice Advisers in English education

Sonia Exley

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Abstract

In this paper, one policy response to the problem of classed school choice experiences in England is examined. ‘Choice Advisers’ are employed by government to provide advice and information to working class and disadvantaged parents with the aim of ‘empowering’ them to exercise school choice and to aspire to ‘better’ schools for their children. However, Advisers have been subjectified by contradictions inherent in policy, expected to solve the problems of school choice in a context of significant structural limits to choice for working class parents. Interviews with Choice Advisers show that difficulties of the job in addition to insecure working conditions within local authorities have led to depoliticised, contradictory advice and Advisers bearing the brunt of policy both in terms of overwork and the venting of parental frustrations. Agency, both for parents and for Advisers themselves, is typically described as being something possessed by individuals rather than collectives, so there is little sense overall that underlying inequalities within the education system might be challenged.

Introduction

Over the last two decades, qualitative research in the field of education has revealed the extent to which parents as choosing subjects in an educational marketplace occupy roles and positions which are simultaneously classed, gendered and raced. Drawing on earlier work by Bourdieu on the ‘structured and structuring’ nature of class habitus (1984; 1990), academics¹ have explored the culture and habitus of middle class and working class parents and how these play out in education, with a particular focus on school choice practices, expectations, experiences and values.

What these studies emphasise is the way in which family experiences of school choice are heavily shaped by economic difference and by the extent to which parents are able to deploy a range of cultural, material and economic resources. In the words of Reay and Ball, ‘choice is a new social device through which social class differences are rendered into educational inequality’ (Reay and Ball, 1997: 89). While middle class parents tend towards being ‘privileged/ skilled’ choosers (Gewirtz et al, 1995), able to use more extensive agency to access schools with the strongest examination performance and the most middle class peers for their children, working class parents tend more towards ambivalence about choice, rejecting consumerist identities and ‘choosing’ instead schools which are outside middle class norms of desirability. They are less concerned with aspects of schools

¹ See for example Gewirtz et al, 1995; Reay and Ball, 1997; Ball and Vincent, 1998; Vincent, 2001; Ball, 2003; 2006; Vincent et al, 2008; Reay et al, 2011; Rollock et al, forthcoming.

such as examination performance, valuing instead those which emphasise inclusion and which focus attention on the less academically able, again ensuring that their children can be educated alongside others 'like them' (Reay and Ball, 1997; Coldron et al, 2010).

However, working class positions as outlined above are perceived within dominant frameworks of values as being deficient. Working class parents who refuse to engage with school choice and who do not share the same educational values as their more affluent counterparts are viewed as failing to undertake the responsibilities that 'good parenting' requires. Drawing on the work of Skeggs (2004), Vincent et al (2007; 2008; 2010) have highlighted the way in which working class parents – particularly working class mothers – face a continual struggle for 'respectability':

'Perceptions of working-class attitudes, values and behaviour have long been at the heart of the traditional division of the working classes into 'rough' and 'respectable'' (Vincent et al, 2010: 127)

Hey and Bradford (2006) have also shown the way in which particular government agendas under New Labour in Britain have reinforced notions of what counts as 'respectable' or 'responsible' behaviour for working class families, discursively legitimising increased policy intervention into the lives of these families and positioning them as being in need of 'reform'.

Policy responses to the specific problem of classed school choice experiences in England have involved interventions based on a 'deficit model' of working class parenting (Vincent and Tomlinson, 1997; Coldron et al, 2010), with attempts to challenge working class values and behaviours. A driving feature of 'Third Way' politics has been a belief in the declining importance of class identity (see Giddens, 1991; 1994; 1998) and an emphasis on individuals' greater degree of agency to make reflexive and emancipatory lifestyle choices. In this context, government education policy under Labour in Britain focused on 'empowering' parents to become 'good choosers' via a provision of information and advice about schools. In 2006, the Education and Inspections Act in England introduced a mandate for all local authorities to develop 'Choice Advice' services for parents, targeted specifically at those who were most 'vulnerable' and 'disadvantaged' (note here that the word 'class' was markedly absent from government policy). Such services were intended to make school choice 'fairer' for vulnerable families (Stiell et al, 2008; Coldron et al, 2009) by ensuring that parents had equal access to information and 'system knowhow' about schools while at the same time narrowing gaps in educational aspirations between families. Working class parents were encouraged to think more strategically about the schools to which they would send their children, cultivating consumer identities and asking the same sorts of questions that middle class parents might ask:

'Choice Advice will enable those parents who find it hardest to navigate the secondary school admissions system to make informed and realistic decisions about which schools to apply for in the best interests of their child. This will place these families on a level playing field with other families who are better able to navigate the admissions process' (DCSF website, 2009)

In 2007 a Fair Access Unit was set up within the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) in England which held, amongst other things, overall responsibility for the national co-ordination of Choice Advice. A national 'Choice Advisers Support and Quality Assurance Network'

(CAS&QAN) was also set up, run by private company A4E in partnership with the education charity Centra, in order to facilitate the creation and running of Choice Advice services within individual local authorities. In 2010, there were approximately 250 Choice Advisers operating in 150 local authorities across England via a range of different service delivery 'models'. Advisers were typically drawn from a diverse range of modest public, private and third sector occupational backgrounds. While some held university degrees, advertisements for the job of Choice Adviser asked only for a 'good general education' in addition to 'experience of working with customers', 'knowledge of current educational issues' and an appreciation of 'the needs of disadvantaged and excluded groups in society'. Advisers undertook a range of activities – meeting parents in groups or one-to-one, attending school open evenings, advising not just on secondary but also primary school choice, and supporting and representing parents in appeals where school choices had not been granted.

Returning for a moment to theory, McNay (2001) has highlighted a tendency within the later work of Bourdieu towards an increasing emphasis on 'moments of disalignment and tension between habitus and field' among classed subjects which 'may give rise to social change' (McNay, 2001: 146). With this in mind, we might envisage a situation where working class families become exposed to ideas, languages or contexts outside their normal realm of experience and so become upwardly socially mobile, 'aspiring to better' and making choices which do not simply reproduce deterministic outcomes. Choice Advice might be considered as a policy intended to introduce 'disadvantaged' parents to such unfamiliar practices in the realm of school choice, permeating or destabilising typical dispositions that might otherwise work towards reproducing social divisions and encouraging parents to 'think the unthinkable' in terms of accessing more 'desirable' schools.

However, one appreciation missing from government policy here is an acknowledgement – and certainly one emphasised by both Bourdieu and McNay – that human agency must always be considered within the bounds of structural and economic realities. An inflated belief in the power of agents to change their own lives and identities in the face of powerful class constraints is something which has been subject to critique within sociology (Archer, 1995; McNay, 1999; Wilmott, 1999; Atkinson, 2007). Thinking about schools specifically and the ways in which parents' educational options are limited by the neighbourhoods in which they can afford to live, working class families living in disadvantaged areas are typically unlikely to gain access to the most 'desirable' schools. Even if they do (for example if a certain school does not prioritise local children), their children are more likely than others to face problems fitting in, experiencing feelings of exclusion and alienation. In such a context, where working class parents frequently *have very little choice*, it is not surprising that they shy away from the idea of choosing, tending instead towards a rational adjustment of preferences:

'the most improbable practices are ... excluded, as unthinkable, by a kind of immediate submission to order that inclines agents to make a virtue out of necessity, that is, to refuse what is anyway denied' (Bourdieu, 1990: 54).

'Far from being ill considered, this reluctance represents a powerful common-sense logic in which 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)

In an earlier article exploring Choice Advice policy discourses in England (Exley, 2009), I examined policy documents, newsletters and other materials produced by actors and organisations involved in

the setting up of Choice Advice, including DCSF, CAS&QAN, A4E and Centra. I also examined training materials produced by a company called ABC Awards, responsible for creating a formal Level 2 vocational qualification for Choice Advisers. In these documents, contradictions could be seen between a promotion of working class parental agency on the one hand and a failure to appreciate fully structural limitations to parents' choices on the other. 'Responsibilising' discourses within policy documentation on Choice Advice shifted responsibility for educational quality away from the state and towards socially disadvantaged parents as choosers.

Building on such analysis, I became interested in the extent to which policy discourses 'drip', 'seep' and 'trickle down' (Ball et al, 2011a: 620) from the central structures of government into networks of Choice Advice provision 'on the ground'. I was particularly interested in ways in which policy contradictions as outlined above might be navigated by Choice Advisers in their daily working lives. Given clear constraints on choice for most working class and disadvantaged families, how far and in what sense did Choice Advisers see their own role as enhancing parental agency? Given contradictions within policy, how far were these recognised, accepted, critiqued or resisted? Work by Michael Lipsky (2010) has highlighted the extent to which apparently low-level frontline 'street level bureaucrats' in public services can often exercise considerable discretion in the enactment of policy and thus considerable influence over the shape that government policies take, engaging in selective compliance with or the creative interpretation of complex rules. However, Lipsky also draws attention to constraints faced by bureaucrats – inadequate resources and ambiguous, conflicting or impossible policy ideals from above – undermining genuine commitments to advocacy on behalf of disadvantaged groups and pushing instead towards an acceptance of prevailing unsatisfactory norms. Going beyond this, recent work by Ball, Maguire and Braun (Braun et al, 2010; Ball et al, 2011a; 2011b; 2012) has highlighted a distinction in policy enactment between 'active' and 'passive policy subjects'. While passive subject positioning involves a compliant acceptance of dominant messages (however contradictory) as a result of 'imperative/ disciplinary policy' and a limited scope for professional autonomy, active subject positioning means greater scope for challenging and responding creatively to the difficulties policy presents. Applying this heuristic model to Choice Advisers, how far might we consider this group to be active or passive policy subjects? Here I am asking not just about the extent to which Advisers are conscious or critical of government contradictions, but also about the extent to which they have the professional autonomy or scope to respond creatively to these contradictions.

Data presented in this paper is drawn from fieldwork carried out over a year-long period from January 2010 to January 2011 in ten local authorities across England. Semi-structured interviews were carried out with fourteen Choice Advisers, in addition to interviews with Choice Advice managers, members of CAS&QAN, policy makers and members of local authority school admissions teams. In three out of ten authorities, observations of Choice Advisers in their day-to-day meetings with parents were also carried out, and parents were interviewed about their experiences of meeting with Choice Advisers. In this paper I am focusing on interviews with Choice Advisers themselves, examining discourses they deploy and their own subjective perspectives on the nature of their work, rather than the extent to which Choice Advice as a service might objectively have 'made a difference' to the lives of certain families.²

² Planned future analysis will examine this further question in detail, using transcripts of interviews with parents who have used the Choice Advice service.

'I don't like the name 'Choice Adviser''

In talking about themes and principles guiding their work, Choice Advisers spoke most often about 'realism' in giving out advice to working class and disadvantaged parents. Themes of realism were also those emphasised most heavily in government literature on Choice Advice (Exley, 2009). Advisers were keen to encourage 'realistic choices' of schools among parents and there was a strong concern with not giving false hopes or expectations given limited local options in terms of schools for many. Choice Advisers saw themselves as being there to help parents secure the 'best' possible option for their children, but within limited bounds:

'Oversubscribed schools don't have places for children who aren't in the catchment area. So for sort of the best schools, which is difficult in itself to be sure of, that they are the best schools, but the most popular schools, a parent who lives outside of the catchment [area] has no chance of getting in' (Barbara, Local Authority (LA) 5)

'There's certain schools that they always want to go for, but it's just sort of getting across the message that there might be 180 vacancies at that school, but last year there was over 1000 people applying, so realistically some people won't get offered a place' (Laura, LA7)

'Probably 90 per cent of our job is doing that. Getting them the realistic choice' (Margaret, LA4)

'It's about managing those expectations, and getting people to make informed decisions and helping them with the choice, 'cos most of my schools and patches, there is no choice as such.' (Kate, LA9)

'And you know even if they don't get in the school they want, we'll have helped them look at another school that's more suitable for them.' (Margaret, LA4)

'We're always very, very clear about the chances of getting in. The choice you're going to make, how realistic that is.' (Kate, LA9)

'I mean it's being frank and realistic isn't it, that harsh information' (Rory, LA10)

Almost all were critical of the title 'Choice Adviser', arguing that parents are only ever able to express a 'preference' rather than a 'choice' when applying for schools:

'We get a lot of that – 'why are you called a Choice Adviser? I've got no choice!'' (Kate, LA9)

'I'm sort of reluctant to say Choice Advice ... I think it's been quite a bone of contention, naming the service Choice Advice, because parents don't really have a choice. They've got the right to express a preference, but I [laughs] I just found it a bit misleading calling it Choice Advice' (Laura, LA7)

In this sense, some critical awareness could be seen among Advisers about the limited role the service could play. However, inequalities between ‘good schools’ and ‘bad schools’ (Gray and Wilcox, 1995) tended to be viewed as a ‘grumble’ or a ‘necessary evil’ (Ball et al, 2011a: 618) rather than a problem which might be challenged, and the Choice Adviser role tended to be seen as helping working class and disadvantaged parents ‘make the best out of a bad situation’. Advisers did not engage in discussion about *why* schools are unequal (see below for further discussion), and there was little sense that choice itself might feed into an exacerbation of inequalities between schools. Many held contradictory views in line with policy contradictions – on the one hand emphasising the importance of not ‘getting parents’ hopes up’ but on the other speaking enthusiastically about the ‘power’ of the Choice Advice service, ‘empowering’ parents to aspire. Statements about ‘reaching out’ to disadvantaged parents, the ‘need for the service’, ‘working with families’, ‘providing support’ and ‘making a difference’ were frequent, and Advisers talked in terms of indicators or what Lipsky (2010) has described as ‘mass processing’ – numbers of parents visited, numbers of phonecalls taken, numbers of school open evenings attended – all under an assumption that provision of advice in itself would create ‘fairer access’ within the system:

‘When I went for the job it was all about this sort of level playing field. That was what appealed to me. It was all about enabling those parents that would perhaps consider schools that they would not have otherwise. The service enables them to access the information, make informed decisions. It was very much about those families that would struggle otherwise, just to level up the playing field for them, that’s the key’ (Kate, LA7)
‘It was about the equitable experience of parents and the transfer and the transition process. It’s difficult even for reasonably well educated people to navigate their way through it. For some other people it must be horrific’ (Alan, LA8)

‘The spin off hopefully is going to be about more families that exercise their preference. But our role really is deeper than that. Our role is about getting to those parents as early as we can, so that we can be more secure in our understanding that they understand what that’s all about. It’s not just about poking a piece of paper underneath somebody’s nose and saying you haven’t chosen a school yet, can I help you fill that in’ (Claudia, LA6)

Here we see an emphasis on *equity of experience during the school choosing process* but within a context of managed expectations and without mention of the schools that children subsequently attend (regardless of which are ‘chosen’). Still, in 2009 the DCSF issued a letter to all Advisers across England, praising ‘the commitment and hard work of Choice Advisers in helping to make a reality of fair access to schools, often for the most disadvantaged’.³ Other Choice Advisers emphasised a cultivation of skills and confidence for parents in their work, encouraging disadvantaged families to ask questions they had never previously asked – about themselves, about their preferences, about their children and their local schools. Ultimately it was expected that such engagement and encouragement would empower parents to make ‘aspirant’ applications to schools they would not previously have considered:

³ Letter from DCSF sent to all Choice Advisers, 20th July 2009.

'It is about information giving, but that is only the very, very top of what we do' (Pat, LA2)

'I thought it was about was making working class parents think more like middle class parents, to be more middle class in their choosing. To aim higher, that's what I thought Choice Advice was about, aim beyond your local school, cos it's likely that where you live, your local school may not be the best school for your child' (Stacey, LA1)

'Actually parents just feeling confident enough to say 'right, this is my choice, and I'm going to take it seriously and I'm not going to just listen to the primary school, I'm going to look at my child, see what they need, visit and make an informed choice'. I think a lot of parents don't feel empowered enough to do that' (James, LA6)

'It's empowering the parents. That's what we do. It's about empowering them' (Devi, LA6)

'A lot of it is about empowering them to make decisions for themselves, and that's something we've really had to do quite a lot with Choice Advice. Because we've seen such huge numbers of parents, you know, every kind of admissions round, that it's important to get them to do some of the work themselves, if they feel able to. So a lot of it's confidence building, and making parents aware that the system is just a system, you don't need to be terrified of it, this is what to expect' (Alan, LA6)

'I think a lot of parents worry about what they've told their children, they've told the young people 'you know I've told you you're going to go to that school, and I promise you I'll try my damndest to get you in that school, we'll make sure you are'. And once the reality sets in, actually there's a set of procedures and regulations which will prevent this happening, it is very good actually to help the parent be able to talk with their child, to talk about how things have changed' (Archie, LA3)

However, again, the contradiction emerges that for disadvantaged families, aspirations to the most 'desirable schools' will be dashed because spaces at those schools will go to those living in affluent areas – a difficulty described in terms of 'procedures and regulations'. One Adviser did suggest a possibility for radical potential within the Choice Advice role, arguing it may be 'politically dangerous' but also desirable to create collective 'middle class' dissatisfaction among working class families which may lead to a collective challenging of neighbourhood divisions between 'good schools' and 'bad schools'. However, this Adviser also consciously argued at the same time that her role was to 'bring expectations down', only encouraging parents to 'get what they want within the structure', perhaps more in line with Lipsky's (2010) description of street-level bureaucrats as agents of social control. Potential challenging of differences between schools as described by Stacy below might involve creative interpretation of the Choice Adviser role in terms of encouraging collective voice and critique of inequalities which underlie variations in school 'quality'. However, political 'danger' may also imply simply encouraging some parents to exit local provision on grounds that it (or its pupils) are unsatisfactory, for example by setting up their own Free Schools and leaving others behind:

'I think a lot of my ways are reactive to the structure, so helping parents get what they want within the structure, but ... I show parents the Ofsted reports for the schools that they're in, and it's quite politically dangerous I think, because you're opening up the possibility that their local school's not the best school, if you say actually your local school is only satisfactory, and the school next door is good' (Stacey, LA1)

'You have to ask what responsibility we have of resourcing that unhappiness. Because if a parent doesn't know what to do next, I mean what does one parent who doesn't have their school do? They don't do anything. They don't organise. They don't form a collective and fight the headteacher. Where does that dissatisfaction go for those parents? Actually it raises a big question. If you're serious about connecting their dissatisfaction to some kind of structure or opportunity. If you don't create some forum for parents' dissatisfaction to put positive pressure on school admissions, on the schools themselves, on the government nationally to not cancel BSF⁴ ... I think you do create [the unhappiness], but you shouldn't stop there. Really the Choice Adviser role, if you were going to be serious, maybe I'll write to them about this, is say right, this is what you do, you write a letter to all the parents who missed out because of where they happen to live, who couldn't get in to the school they wanted, you bring them all together and you form a group. And they all come to a meeting and they sit down with the local MP, Michael Gove, and the head of planning and admissions, and you hear what they have to say about whether or not they think this is good enough.'

'They've all got parental desire and power. The only place that that breaks down is [where] parents are unrealistic and refuse to listen about the limits of the system. And actually from a Choice Advice, from a political perspective those parents are acting how we say they should. They are aspiring, but from my perspective, I'm trying to bring their expectations down ... there's a kind of dual thing going on where you're trying to get them to act strategically but you're also trying to bring down their expectations' (Stacey, LA1)

Teaching parents to shop

Another theme emphasised by interviewees as being part of the Choice Adviser role was an instilling in disadvantaged parents of a sense of individual consumer entitlement, teaching them how to 'shop around' for schools and encouraging a more neo-liberal sense of agency as regards education. Some Advisers highlighted important contributions they felt they had made in this respect:

'Definitely in the last two years it's been a massive increase of people who have sort of sat and thought, 'well actually I want my child to go to that school because it is a better school with a better class of qualification, education, curriculum, whatever' (Rory, LA10)

⁴ BSF stands for Building Schools for the Future – this was the previous Labour Government's programme for investment in new school buildings in England. It began in 2005 and was cancelled by the UK Coalition Government in 2010.

'They just want what we all want, the best for their child. You know, and they've done as much research, and why shouldn't they have what they want, why shouldn't it fit in with their life, why shouldn't their child have the best education in the best school, why can't that happen' (Margaret, LA4)

Advisers listed a range of consumerist 'tips' for parents – starting research early, talking to children about their strengths and weaknesses, visiting 'at least three' schools, writing lists of questions, challenging schools over their reputations and treating claims about quality with some scepticism:

'Don't just go to one school, go to a variety of schools. One of the things I always say to parents is visit one in each section of the city, and then you're sort of getting an overview' (Margaret, LA4)

'Remember that when you're going into the schools it's like you're selling your house. They'll have their best curtains up, their best food on offer, and everything else. So we tell them what to look for' (Marion, LA4)

'Schools can be economical with the truth, with various things ... they can in some cases be very defensive and say 'oh yes, we do that and we do this, and of course this is the best school in the world'' (Archie, LA3)

Such a sense of entitlement – the idea that parents deserve and should seek 'the best' – has been challenged by theorists such as Swift (2003), Brighouse (2000) and Clayton and Stevens (2004). Within an unequal society where hierarchies of schools exist, places in 'top' schools – that is, those with the most advantaged pupils and the benefits that such schooling brings (e.g. positive pupil peer effects, school popularity leading to better funding and morale) – will always be limited. Where winners exist in accessing these schools, losers will also always exist. Clayton and Stevens have posited an idea that there is a duty for parents to accept some degree of *educational inadequacy* in order to secure equitable schooling for children, and so it might be considered that while encouraging working class parents to aspire to the most socially advantaged schools might promote improvements to education for some, overall it will feed into a wider system of winners and losers. Research by Wilkins (2010) has highlighted complex and contradictory feelings among mothers where consumerist desires to seek 'the best' for their children come into conflict with wider senses of community responsibility.

Moreover, in a context where disadvantaged parents have little real 'consumer power' in terms of school choice and so show rational ambivalence towards it, such a sense can be considered a limited market definition of empowerment or agency compared with other definitions which might promote collective voice or action (Vincent, 1996: 470)⁵ and a challenging of wider social inequalities underlying the existence of 'desirable' and 'undesirable' schools. 'Good parents' are discursively produced (just as policy has produced the 'good student' – see Archer and Francis, 2007; Maguire et al, 2011), imposing middle class value systems on working class families, 'normalising' them (Foucault, 1979) and misrecognising them as 'deficient' (Fraser, 1997; Coldron et al, 2009; 2010).

⁵ Wright (2011) has more recently discussed how an 'ideological fantasy of empowerment' has continued under Coalition Government neo-liberal education reforms in England – part of what he terms a 'long revolution'.

Such an imposition shifts policy emphasis away from structural social inequalities and towards individual choosers. Responsibilising discourses imply that where their children do not succeed at school, this is because parents have failed to choose well enough, so pupils 'end up' being allocated to 'the nearest school with places' (a prospect typically regarded as giving cause for concern). Underlying discourses here is a manipulation of parental fears about 'risk to the realisation of children's optimum educational achievement' (Vincent, 2012: 16), but also an implicit acceptance that schools do not offer equal opportunities:

'Do not compromise. Each of those schools must meet your child's needs. If it's a school that's not oversubscribed it still has to meet your child's needs and your child has to be happy to go there' (Pat, LA2)

'When I go in to a presentation I do say to them 'it's so important'. And I say to them 'if you were buying a house for a million pounds, would you just buy the house and not go and look at it?' And they say 'no'. And I say 'but your child's priceless. His or her future is priceless. How could you not go and visit where they're going?' Because their education is going to be the thing that's going to make sure that they are successful ... And you need to make sure. As a parent it's one of the most precious gifts you can give them is their education. And you know, you can see the lights going on. They've never thought about it before. And I also say to them 'don't listen to what other people tell you about a school. Go, because they may not have chosen wisely, and that's why their child's failed there' (Pat, LA2)

Some Choice Advisers did regard their promoting school choice for working class and disadvantaged parents as being the starting point of a longer term process – reconnecting disaffected parents who see education as being marginal to their lives (Vincent et al, 2008) and encouraging them to invest effort in their children's educational futures. Such an approach might indicate some creative interpretation of the Choice Advice role and an exercising of discretion where Advisers do 'the best they can under adverse circumstances' (Lipsky, 2010: xv), seeing the limitations of choice as a political concept but also adopting an expansive approach to what Choice Advice means:

'It does change the way parents look at their children as well. That they feel as if they can contribute. Because a lot of the vulnerable parents feel they're not adequate enough to do that, but you can sort of give them that confidence and self esteem, you know build that' (Devi, LA6)

'Making them feel comfortable is important to me as well. You know, that they don't feel pressurised, and they feel that choosing a school can be a good thing, a positive thing for them, and that they get to feel a sense of achievement themselves as parents. Because that begins motivating them, they can start to work with their children... and take an interest in their education' (Claudia, LA6)

However, expansive interpretations of the Choice Adviser role were ultimately limited. Vincent (1996) has pointed to problems inherent in empowering groups of parents where empowerment is mediated by front-line professionals who tend towards co-opting service users into oppressive

discourses and structures. As Vincent notes, such professionals ‘may be highly effective in helping individuals develop particular skills, which may, in turn, raise their self-confidence and esteem. This process might enable people to live more comfortably within their existing situations, but the structural constraints remain’ (Vincent, 1996: 469). Engaging parents with children’s education at the time of choosing schools is also no guarantee that such engagement will continue long-term, and in this sense Advisers might be considered as alienated from the parents they meet – working merely on ‘segments’ of their lives rather than helping the ‘whole client’ (Lipsky, 2010: 76).

Ways of talking about quality, choice and disadvantage

One key theme emerging throughout this article is the extent to which Choice Advisers interviewed struggled with notions of school ‘quality’ and with reasons why academic performance might vary between the ‘best’ and ‘worst’ schools. Euphemistic, depoliticised references to ‘good’ or alternatively ‘oversubscribed’ schools (sidestepping questions about *why* schools are oversubscribed) were frequent, masking important difficulties in grappling with the validity of information passed on to parents. In some senses, an unspoken awareness could be detected among Advisers that variations in academic performance between schools are to a large degree explained by pupil intake – the social characteristics of children attending schools rather than actions on the part of schools themselves.⁶ However, at the same time, recognising such a fact posed a problem for Choice Advice – Advisers were certainly aware they must talk to parents about something more than simply which schools were the most ‘middle class’. Power and Frandji (2010) have drawn attention to problems of cultural injustice inherent in judgements of schools which reflect largely levels of poverty among pupils attending schools.

Discussions above also made reference to the words of one Choice Adviser who described limited working class access to the most ‘desirable’ schools as being a problem to do with ‘procedures and regulations’. Examples of ‘bland, homogenising discourse’ (Reay and Ball, 1997: 98) extended beyond discussions of quality, with discussions about the problems of school choice being framed in a series of neutral and depoliticised technical phrases such as ‘admissions criteria’, ‘catchment areas’, ‘capacity’ and ‘distance’:

‘There is a huge, huge ceiling to choice which is admissions criteria, and capacity. Those two things’ (Stacey, LA1)

‘In Britain, you can choose any school, but the distance affects you’ (Archie, LA3)

Where less technical terms were used, references were made to parents making choices on the basis of ‘behaviour’ and ‘results’ or schools being ‘academic’, again sidestepping connections between such aspects of schools and socio-economic disadvantage. Words such as poverty and inequality were avoided – rather they were an uncomfortable ‘aside’ to policy concerns, or part of an old order way of speaking about things that is no longer ‘in the true’ (Foucault, 1972).

⁶ Indeed, academic research has produced few conclusive answers about what constitutes ‘school quality’. For a source on limited school effects relative to extensive ‘home background’ effects in explaining pupil achievement, see Mortimore, 1997.

'[Parents care about] a funny mixture between genuine results, things like behaviour which is one of the biggest things that parents seem to actually care about, their perception of how well ordered and how good the behaviour is at the school. So yeah, results and then behaviour' (Barbara, LA5)

'We have three faith schools where you can go either down the faith route, or a small proportion of children are chosen from examination. So if you haven't got a faith or you're of a different faith but you want that school, there is another avenue you can go down, which is the academic avenue' (Pat, LA2)

Although Choice Advice is a service targeting the least affluent, Advisers tended to refer to 'parents' as being a group with common interests, identities and problems. Ideas that some experience greater agency or a classed structural advantage over others were acknowledged, but also challenged as being either simplistic or 'hard-hearted'. In line with government documentation – and despite the title of this article (which is part of a quote from Stacey, LA1) – social class was mentioned only very infrequently, reflecting again a Third Way focus whereby inequalities and divisions within society are 'more effectively explained at the level of the individual rather than in terms of a particular group or class' (Gillies, 2005: 836; see also Savage, 2000). Instead, Advisers pointed to multiple ways in which parents might experience 'vulnerability' around school choice:

'How do you say to somebody, I'm sorry, you're not in the right bracket, you earn too much money, or you're in a two parent family, or you know, for whatever reason we cannot help you ... We as a service find that incredibly hard to do... the majority of people are very vulnerable when they're going through this' (Marion, LA4)

'I think if they're coming in quite upset anyway they might be a bit aggrieved if you ask about income ... I don't really look at people and think 'oh they're middle class' or not. I just see people living in the area' (James, LA6)

'I think they all have the same things in common. They're all concerned about their child and it's terrifying really' (James, LA6)

'I went to an appeal with one lady who was really well spoken, I thought she'd be fine at the appeal ... but it turned out she cried from start to finish. And I was really glad that I was there for her, because she couldn't get any words out. So not everyone is going to fit into that vulnerable group, but I think everyone could come into that category at some stage' (Laura, LA7)

Challenging 'hot knowledge' and wider parental 'snobbery'

Building on considerations above of Choice Advisers' difficulties discussing school 'quality', one arguable sense in which a creative interpretation of policy on the part of Advisers might have taken place is in attempts to challenge 'snobbery' where parents rejected schools on the basis of reputation or too narrow a set of criteria. Advisers went to great lengths to ensure that parents considered a range of 'educational factors' instead of simple hearsay when it came to choosing

schools, encouraging them to make visits rather than simply dismissing schools without visiting. 'Facts' were used to dispel urban myths, and a diverse plurality of values and perceptions about what might count as 'valuable' was encouraged:

'The messages I try and get out are – find out for yourself, go and visit the schools, don't rely on hearsay, yeah look at league tables and other performance data if you want, and Ofsted reports if you want, but the main thing is to go and look for yourself' (Alan, LA8)

'Parents don't seem to ever talk about Ofsted to me, I'm always the one showing them Ofsted reports, saying 'interesting your catchment area school which is undersubscribed has the same Ofsted rating as the school you desperately want to go to but have got a low chance of getting in to ... now, I can't tell you which is the better school, but that's interesting isn't it'' (Stacey, LA1)

'We call it the playground mafia, they can make or break the reputation of a school just by word of mouth. And you know we do a lot of that firefighting, you know. And a lot of 'well have you looked at the performance data'' (Kate, LA9)

'What we were finding was actually people who worked in the feeder schools were saying to parents, 'you don't want to go to that school.' And whoever works in the primary schools are – I want to say the gods – everybody just listens to them. And the number of times that we say 'who has told you that'. That's just a load of rubbish – go and have a look' (Margaret, LA4)

'I do believe that as a parent you know your child and you know what you value, and walking into a school you get a sense of the balance of pushing for academic achievement, being a relaxed atmosphere, technology, numeracy, buildings, discipline and respect' (Stacey, LA1)

'That's where parents' ethos and values meet with the politics of it, when they walk in to a school and they decide for themselves. Do you know what, maybe this school is brilliant, but I don't like the fact they're putting all this pressure on the kids to constantly be aware of the targets in order to get their A-Cs up. It doesn't feel right to me. And I'm not going to tell a parent that that is wrong' (Stacey, LA1)

'There'll always be the playground gossips and everything, but this is all part of what we've got to... we've got to get rid of that culture when choosing schools cos their information is wrong' (Archie, LA3)

In this sense, Choice Advisers might be considered as challenging what Reay and Ball (1997: 90) have termed 'normative constructions of parental choice which are based on middle class, not working class, choice making'. This challenge may include an attempt to reduce 'cultural injustices' faced by disadvantaged schools and instead to promote a 'politics of recognition' for such schools (Power and Frandji, 2010). The ethical importance of giving 'impartial' advice was also stressed (as it has been in policy – see Exley, 2009), with Advisers interpreting this word as meaning no one school should ever

be presented as being 'better overall' than any other. Impartiality on the part of Choice Advisers was contrasted with the 'partial' views of headteachers:

'Schools can be economical with the truth, with various things, not necessarily around admissions, but they can in some cases be very defensive and say 'oh yes, we do that and we do this', and 'of course this is the best school in the world'' (Archie, LA3)

'The impartiality part of Choice Advice [is important] cos parents will ask you 'is this school good, should I put my child in this school', and you can't say 'oh yes, you know, that school's good, definitely put them in that one, that's your first preference.' You have to say, you know, 'all of our schools are good, this is what this school does, this is what this school does.'" (Amy, LA3)

'We don't sit there obviously and say 'ooh that's a good school, that's a bad school', cos that's not our role' (Amy, LA3)

'I don't focus on any particular schools, and I actually use names of TV schools ... because I want to be impartial, and I don't want to sell a particular school' (Laura, LA7)

Interpretations here were part of a desire among Choice Advisers to encourage a less hierarchical educational marketplace, with parents choosing and making decisions between an *equal but diverse plurality* of schools (see Adler, 1993). However, within the current English context, such an approach targeting working class families but not others might also preserve classed differences in choice making, managing expectations for some and encouraging them to be happy with their 'lot' while others continue to struggle for – and gain – greater 'positional advantage' (Hollis, 1982; Adnett and Davies, 2002):

'The public sector plays a critical part in softening the impact of the economic system on those who are not its primary beneficiaries and inducing people to accept the neglect or inadequacy of primary economic and social institutions' (Lipsky, 2010: 11).

'Really it's about challenging kind of reputations that parents may have heard, and getting them to really consider schools that were seen as bad, or had a bad reputation, and getting them to actually go and have a look' (James, LA6)

'When they're looking at appeals and they didn't get the school they want, we're always saying 'why not go and have a look at the school, your local school, the one that you think's rubbish'' (Archie, LA3)

Research by Ball and Vincent (1998) has drawn a distinction between 'hot knowledge' and 'cold knowledge' used by different parents to differing degrees in the choosing of schools. While 'cold knowledge' comprises 'formal, abstract knowledge' intended for public dissemination such as government league tables or school inspection reports, 'hot knowledge' is that which is more personal and affective, based on experience or rumour and passed on a 'grapevine' of parental social networks. While knowledge promoted by Choice Advisers might be considered in the realm of 'cold knowledge', 'hot knowledge' is precisely that which is rejected. Reputation, gossip and rumour are

dismissed as being 'non-impartial'. However, they are also what many affluent parents use to supplement 'cold' knowledge and to encourage collective action among families 'like them', ensuring that social distance is maintained between their own children and disadvantaged 'others'.

Discussion and conclusions – passive or active policy subjects?

Throughout this paper, limited critical perspective and some contradictory advice on the part of Choice Advisers has been noted. While on the one hand, Choice Advisers interviewed disliked their job titles (and indeed they actively sought different ones), on the other they emphasised the extent to which Choice Advice as a service might promote agency and empowerment in school choice terms. While 'realism' for parents was stressed, questions about *why* this was important were either sidestepped or discussed in depoliticised terms, avoiding discussions about class and inequality. Agency was conceptualised in individual market or consumer terms, without consideration of wider forms of collective voice or action that might promote a genuine challenging of inequalities feeding into the production of 'good' (socially advantaged) and 'bad' (socially disadvantaged) schools.

However, how far did Choice Advisers have the scope or the autonomy to respond with creative or critical discretion to policy, even where they may have *recognised* the problems and limitations of Choice Advice? Since the outset of the service in 2006, due to policy funding constraints the role of Choice Adviser within local authorities has been a relatively junior one, involving part-time, flexible work. Advisers when interviewed expressed longstanding difficulties with pay, long hours going beyond their percentage of FTE, lack of office space and a sense of struggling to cope with increasingly overwhelming workloads in light of increasing numbers of parents 'needing help with choice'. Frustrated by a structural absence of such choice despite a receipt of advice, many parents saw Choice Advisers as *representing* contradictions inherent in policy, contributing to what Lipsky (2010: 76) has termed an inauthentic 'myth' of altruism or advocacy in public services; an 'appearance of responsiveness' rather than a real responsiveness to citizens, and so Advisers were subjected to significant parental anger:

'It feels like people are blaming you for not getting the schools they want as well. I've had a few parents on the phone saying how disgusted they are, and can they speak to someone who knows what they're talking about, and so you sort of have to... you do take a bit of abuse ... it can be hard like when I've been speaking to groups of parents about appeals, when all they really want is someone to shout at. And I can sort of understand that, cos it must be really disappointing not getting the school that... and it doesn't matter how much you explain to them, they're still really angry about it, so that's really hard sometimes' (Laura, LA7)

'Street level bureaucrats often experience their jobs in terms of inadequate personal resources, even when part of that inadequacy is attributable to the nature of the job rather than rooted in some personal failure. Some jobs just cannot be done properly, given the ambiguity of goals and the technology of particular social services (Lipsky, 2010: 31).

The Choice Adviser role in local authorities is typically an individualised and isolated one, with only one or two Advisers per authority, and so collective voice or identity among those doing the job was

weak. Shared dissatisfactions were not articulated into collective complaints, and Advisers looked towards CAS&QAN – a supportive body but also a disciplinary regulator of their work, tracking activity and undertaking ‘light touch’ inspections – for a point of contact and a greater sense of meaning about their job. CAS&QAN functioned as a source of authoritative knowledge about Choice Advice, giving answers to questions, defining ‘best practice’, identifying certain local authority services as ‘policy models’ (Ball et al, 2011b: 630) and ensuring the ‘right’ interpretations of government policy:

‘I do my job, and ... I mean I’m on my own.. it’s a big job to do on your own, to develop a service, and take it up to a standard, and work with as many people as we do’ (Pat, LA2)

‘I really like CAS&QAN. The best thing they do is, you know these White Papers that the government do, and you end up with a 56 page... and you just think ‘oh my god’. What they do is they summarise ... and on their website, they condense that into a small paragraph. What they do is condense it so far down because they know how busy you are, and they know you haven’t got the timbe. And they will advise you what to read, what bit, what appendix’ (Margaret, LA4)

Perhaps most significantly, however, Choice Advice as a service was also formally ‘under threat’ in 2010 as a result of planned central government cuts to local authority budgets. During fieldwork for this project, contracts were being emphasised as temporary and there was a deep sense of job insecurity among Choice Advisers as ‘targets of the taxpayers’ revolt’ (Lipsky, 2010: 39). Shortly after fieldwork for the project was completed in early 2011, earmarked funding from central government for Choice Advice was cut altogether. Although at the time of writing ‘scaled back’ Choice Advice services do operate in most local authorities across England, cuts to funding did at the time of fieldwork mean a real likelihood of redundancy for many.⁷ Relating to the part time, flexible nature of the work (not to mention the ‘emotional labour’ it typically involved), Choice Advisers tended to be women, though the role was carried out both by men and women of varying ages.

In such circumstances, ‘compliant’ subject positioning on the part of Choice Advisers without a clear sense of critical or creative response to policy contradictions is hardly surprising. Thinking about a lack of critical response in particular, during a time of government cuts and in a period of job insecurity it is certainly understandable that few would speak out about a sense of contradiction or powerlessness they may have felt, particularly to a researcher they viewed as ‘evaluating’ the service but also perhaps within policy circles or even among each other. Writing about teachers, Ball et al (2011a) have theorised that the scope for those enacting policy within institutions to adopt creative and active policy positions rather than passive ones is also constrained by a sense of being overwhelmed and doing no more than simply ‘coping’ or ‘keeping up’ with one’s work: ‘being tired and sometimes overwhelmed ... work against a systematic consideration of contradictions, although these are sometimes noted in passing. To some extent the problems that these contradictions post

⁷ Though a requirement for local authorities to provide school choice advice to parents in some form does remain within the new School Admissions Code (DfE, 1st December 2011). At the time of writing, Choice Advice services remain in many authorities across England, although the Choice Advisers Support and Quality Assurance Service (CAS&QAN) has been abolished.

are 'solved' by the impossibilities of the job. A lot of the time teachers do not 'do policy' – policy 'does them' (Ball et al, 2011a: 616).

Overall then, and in conclusion, Choice Advisers might be viewed more as passive policy subjects than as agents of change in the English educational marketplace, bearing the brunt of government contradictions and lacking the creative freedom, time, security or collective voice to articulate a critical challenging of any key difficulties inherent in school choice policy. Advisers 'muddle through' in an impossible job, their idealistic commitments compromised by 'corrupted worlds of service' (Lipsky, 2010: xv), giving contradictory advice and talking in neutral, sanitised terms about 'empowerment' (agency) on the other hand but 'realism' (structure) on the other. Being in the front-line of policy delivery makes them a 'human face' for what often seems a faceless policy, taking the blame for a flawed idea – that parental 'empowerment' or agency can be promoted by turning individuals into market consumers and providing them merely with information and advice about schools – at the same time as trying to reconcile its inconsistencies.

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