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Are quasi-markets in education what the British public wants?

Sonia Exley

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Abstract

In a context of inconclusive evidence on the extrinsic successes of quasi-markets, policy defences of school choice and competition in education have often discussed the intrinsic, empowering value of choice for consumers, arguing that school choice for parents is 'what people want'. Discourses often imply that choice is desired for its own sake rather than merely as a means by which families can escape what are deemed to be poor quality schools. Support for an idealistic, abstract notion of 'choice' is also taken to imply support for quasi-markets overall and is not considered alongside possible competing values that people may hold at the same time as they value choice. Additionally, views of parents are often examined without considering possible differences in views between parents and non-parents. Contributing to debates about how far a public desire exists for quasi-markets in education, this paper draws on data from newly designed questions fielded as part of the 2010 British Social Attitudes survey. The paper finds that while choice 'in the abstract' is supported widely by both parents and non-parents (albeit slightly more so by parents), a valuing of choice among the British public appears to be more instrumental than intrinsic – potentially problematic given evidence on the extrinsic benefits of quasi-markets is mixed. Support for choice is tempered among parents and non-parents by clear opposition to vouchers, school diversity, government spending on transport costs to facilitate choice and by strong support for the idea of sending children to the 'nearest state school'.

Key words: quasi-markets; school choice; attitudes; education

Introduction

Proponents of quasi-market reforms in education have long written about the extent to which these empower parents, allowing them to choose schools for their children based on individual needs, talents and preferences, armed with information and an all-important power of exit. Since the mid-1970s, academics such as Le Grand (Le Grand and Robinson, 1976; Le Grand, 2003; 2007) have argued that a post-war organisation of welfare based on 'command and control and professional trust' (Le Grand, 2003: 107) to some degree failed disadvantaged families. Service providers within the classic welfare state have been characterised as unresponsive and 'knaveish' as well as altruistic or 'knightish', often treating socially disadvantaged service users as 'pawns' and possessing little incentive to improve service quality. While more advantaged groups have typically been better able to exercise voice (Hirschman, 1970) as a means of ensuring their needs are met within unequal

struggles for welfare resources, disadvantaged families have had weaker voices and so it is argued that alternative mechanisms – market discipline, choice and competition – are needed to turn powerless pawns into sovereign ‘queens’.

Market-oriented principles in education suggest that giving parents a choice of schools for their children on the basis of published performance indicators and attaching funding to pupils (rather than giving it direct to schools) will force education providers to compete, generating responsiveness to all consumers and facilitating system-wide educational improvement. Quasi-markets in education were set up in Britain under the 1988 Education Reform Act and the 1981 Education (Scotland) Act. Under a Labour Government from 1997, ‘voucher-style’ reforms in England were taken further as part of a planned ‘modernisation’ of public services (Powell, 2008), with new types of school introduced in order to facilitate diversity (West and Currie, 2008), arguably further enhancing choice. More recently under the Coalition Government in England, ‘Academies’ and ‘Free Schools’ have been expanded in a context of what is claimed to be ‘international evidence of the galvanising effect on the whole school system of allowing new entrants in areas where parents are dissatisfied with what is available’ (DfE, 2010: 11).

Advocates of quasi-markets in social policy argue that they are both ‘extrinsically’ and ‘intrinsically’ valuable (Dowding and John, 2007). However, in a context of inconclusive evidence on the extrinsic benefits of such reforms, pro-market enthusiasts have often focused additionally on the intrinsic value of ‘choice’, arguing that consumerism in public services is ‘what people want’. Claims about the extent to which quasi-markets are desired firstly often assume that people value choice for its own sake and not just because they think it will help them instrumentally to secure better quality services. Second, questions in surveys also typically ask only about support for choice *in the abstract*, not about support for linked notions which are ‘part and parcel’ of choice agendas in policy (for example school diversity, demand side financing or ‘corrective measures’ needed to ensure choice for all) or indeed support for competing and contradictory ideas that people may value at the same time as they value choice. Third, research on market reforms in education has usually focused only on the views of parents, neglecting possible differences in attitudes between parents and non-parents. Responding to gaps in knowledge regarding attitudes towards quasi-markets in education, this paper draws on data from a newly designed module of survey questions fielded across Britain as part of the 2010 British Social Attitudes (BSA) survey.

Quasi-markets as extrinsically beneficial within education?

Beginning with the possible ‘extrinsic’ benefits of quasi-markets in education, it is often argued by quasi-market enthusiasts that choice and competition within school systems are legitimate because they facilitate quality and efficiency, leading to instrumental welfare gains for pupils (see for example Le Grand, 2003; Glennerster, 2002; Hoxby, 2000). However, a recent comprehensive review of evidence on the efficiency effects of school competition across four countries (England, the US, Sweden and Chile – see Allen and Burgess, 2010) has in fact shown evidence for the benefits of competition to be rather weak and inconclusive. While mild positive effects can be seen in some instances (Bradley and Taylor, 2007; Gibbons et al, 2008; Bayer and MacMillan, 2005; Bohlmark and Lindahl, 2007), other studies show negligible or no effects (Levacic, 2004; Burgess and Slater, 2006) and some even shown negative effects of school competition on efficiency (Bifulco and Ladd, 2004). Causal

links rather than simple associations are difficult to prove (Allen and Burgess, 2010) and even where improved exam performance can be seen in schools, this may reflect partly increased 'gaming' on the part of professionals (Thrupp and Hursh, 2006; Burgess et al, 2005). Sceptics such as Lipsey (2005) point to efficiency problems relating to government spending on quasi market reforms, in that creating choice for consumers always requires running public services at a surplus.

Potential improvements generated by quasi-market reforms in education are also challenged over the possibility that they may come at the expense of equity, again challenging their legitimacy. Research by Bohlmark and Lindahl (2007) reports a mild positive impact of school competition on performance overall in Sweden, but reports that the benefits of this are felt almost entirely by those from more educated family backgrounds. For multiple reasons relating to the unequal distribution of different forms of capital within society (Bourdieu, 1986), parents within educational marketplaces are unequally able to exercise choice. While middle-class families living in affluent areas are often presented with multiple 'desirable' schooling options, others are structurally and geographically less fortunate and so their choices are constrained (Burgess et al, 2009; 2011; Harris, 2011). Middle class parents also possess greater information and 'system knowhow' than that possessed by working class parents at the same time as working class families hold different values regarding school choice (Coldron et al, 2010; Ball, 2003) and may also experience negative effects of 'cream-skimming' (Ladd and Fiske, 2001; West et al, 2006; 2009). Advocates of school choice often discuss choice processes as though these reflect horizontal pluralities of parent preferences within a context of horizontally diverse schools. However, research has shown that parental concerns about schools tend to be narrow, involving 'bandwagon effects', a concern with avoiding social 'others' and competitive struggles for places at the top of socially segregated school hierarchies (Bartlett, 1993; Adler et al, 1989; Coldron et al, 2010; Ball, 2003). Where inequalities between schools are acknowledged by choice advocates, these are often presented as reflecting unequal school 'quality' rather than differing social compositions of pupils between schools,¹ so it is viewed as correct that some should lose pupils and funding, despite associated sunk cost problems (Glennester, 1991) where pupils remain stuck in 'failing' schools.

Weighing up evidence, Le Grand has acknowledged a number of conditions which quasi-markets 'will have to meet if they are to succeed as instruments of social policy' (quoted in Greener and Powell, 2009a: 557). In 2006 the *Education and Inspections Act* in England introduced measures designed to counter quasi-market problems in education (DfES, 2005; PMSU, 2006; Stiell *et al*, 2008; House of Commons, 2006; West *et al*, 2009). These included:

- extended government funding of school transport costs for children from disadvantaged backgrounds (enabling them to travel further away to school and so enhancing choice for disadvantaged families);
- 'choice advisers' intended to provide support and information about school choice to disadvantaged families (thereby enhancing 'system knowhow' among these families);
- an enhanced mandatory code of school admissions attempting to control and limit possible problems of 'cream skimming' in schools.

A fourth policy advanced was that of 'fair funding', moving towards what Le Grand (2003) has termed a 'positively discriminating voucher' (incentivising schools to admit more disadvantaged pupils and again curbing problems of possible 'cream skimming'). Schools

with more disadvantaged pupils have for many years received greater funding (West, 2009) but the culmination of 'weighted' and specifically voucher-style policy in England in recent years has been the 2011 Pupil Premium:

'£2.5 billion of extra money by 2014–15 that will follow poorer children directly to the school they attend' (DfE, 2010: 4)

However, critics continue to contend that 'corrective measures' such as these are not only expensive but also possibly insufficient for overcoming problems of unequal power and residential segregation between consumers (Coldron *et al*, 2010). While quasi-markets have been considered valuable partly because they facilitate a power of 'escape' from underperforming schools, such escape will always be exercised more by some than others and there will always be limits to how far popular schools can expand. At the same time, implications exist for schools losing pupils and funding, often in disadvantaged areas. Evidence of resulting improvement in these schools is far from clear and there exists some evidence suggesting that social polarisation between schools may become exacerbated when quasi-market systems replace traditional systems of 'neighbourhood schooling' (even accounting for segregation between neighbourhoods). Causal links between school competition and segregation are difficult to establish (Allen and Burgess, 2010) and debates exist regarding the most suitable measure for capturing segregation over time (Goldstein and Noden, 2003; Ladd and Fiske, 2001; Gorard *et al*, 2003). However, associations have been noted between areas with greater school competition or school autonomy and greater school segregation (Allen, 2007; Allen and Burgess, 2010).

Public support and the intrinsic value of choice?

Beyond debates about the extrinsic benefits of quasi-markets, however, there also exist arguments emphasising the idea that choice and diversity in education are nevertheless important because they hold *intrinsic value*. Advocates of enhanced choice argue that it is a crucial component of citizens' autonomy, empowerment and wellbeing. Academics such as Glendinning (2008) have stressed the importance of 'taking choice seriously' in areas such as care for disabled and older people, where autonomous participation in decision making for vulnerable individuals about services they will receive is central to their citizenship.

Beliefs about an intrinsic value of choice in education imply that it ought to be valued subjectively and popular among parents. Many authors discuss an increasing liberal individualist perception that school choice is a 'right' (Swift, 2003). Article 26 of the UN Declaration of Human Rights states that 'parents have a prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children' and indeed recent UK government policy has launched a call to evidence over the possibility that a 'right to choose' in public services might be enshrined in legislation (Cabinet Office, 2012: 16). The 2005 White Paper in England *Higher Standards, Better Schools for All* argued that:

'There are those who argue that there is no demand for choice; but this ignores the reality that the vast majority of parents want a real choice of excellent schools' (DfES, 2005: 8).

According to Le Grand, 'certainly most parents are aware of the possibility of choice and approve of it' (2003: 112) and Coldron *et al* (2007) and Flatley *et al* (2001) report high levels of satisfaction among parents in England regarding school choosing processes and outcomes. Evidence from the US and New Zealand suggests that choice is valued by most parents, in particular those who are disadvantaged or from minority groups (Le Grand, 2007; Bositis, 1999; Thomas and Oates, 2005). However, although choice does seem to be popular on the basis of such evidence, further questions must be asked about what this popularity means. From research cited it is not clear whether choice is being valued *intrinsically* by parents or whether support is based simply on a belief that choice may be *instrumental* to securing better schools. Further research is needed to ascertain how far parents value school choice and diversity intrinsically. If they do not, given inconclusive evidence about the extrinsic benefits of choice, we might argue the legitimacy of quasi-market reforms is weakened.

Furthermore, even if parents do value choice intrinsically, does such support capture a sufficiently complete picture of attitudes such that we might claim there exists support for market-oriented principles generally, not simply 'choice'? Within surveys, answers to questions about abstract concepts such as choice which have multiple interpretations in different contexts (Greener and Powell, 2009b; Glendinning, 2008) will always depend on the extent to which such concepts are presented as 'motherhood and apple pie'. Where respondents are asked about support for choice without being given context or without having to weigh choice against possible competing ideas, many may indicate support even where they may *disapprove* of linked notions which are 'part and parcel' of market reforms in education. One such possibility here is that while choice in the abstract may be viewed as intrinsically valuable, when placed in the context of a tax burden necessary to ensure 'choice for all' (creating surplus places within school systems – for example through the planned expansion of popular schools or the setting up of new schools (Cabinet Office, 2012: 24) – and then covering transport costs for disadvantaged families), public belief in the intrinsic value of choice may not translate into national support for quasi-markets. A second possibility is that, within a context of competitive school differentiation, many may believe the benefits of choice will not be felt by all, and that inequalities potentially exacerbated by markets may damage core values of equal access for all to good quality state education. Taylor-Gooby and Wallace (2009) have described national unease in Britain around government welfare reforms pushing towards marketisation. They argue that governments take a limited view of citizens as individual 'rational instrumental economic actors', failing to appreciate complex expressive aspects of social action based on affective and normative values held regarding what public services ought to 'mean'. Examining attitudes towards the NHS, Taylor-Gooby and Wallace highlight commitments towards ideas of universality and care for the individual. NHS reforms promoting markets, although purported by government to be 'empowering consumers', are viewed by many running 'counter to the moral framework associated with the NHS'. If such a mistrust of markets can be seen in education as it is in healthcare, many may display commitments to traditional ideas of neighbourhood schooling as a means by which core values in state education might be realised. This would clearly conflict with quasi-market principles. A third possibility regarding 'choice in context' is that fears about uneven quality or social mixes between schools (even if there is a belief that markets improve education overall) may lead some to believe that although choice has intrinsic value, it can be a burden. Psychological downsides to choice have been presented by Schwartz (2004) who has argued that choice can generate anxiety and an unwanted

sense of responsibility among citizens for quality of services received. Acknowledging a 'burden of choice' thesis, Perri 6 (2003) has argued that 'even people who feel dissatisfied (personally, or in the short term) because of the burden of choice might still feel that choice was important (generally, or for themselves) in the longer term' (Perri 6, 2003: 243). However, these ideas need to be tested. Statements are also often made about citizens' willingness to travel further to receive public services, when ultimately 'any assumption of distance is fallacious' (Greener and Powell, 2009a: 568).

Finally, arguments about the intrinsic value of choice for parents as service users may also risk appearing as the politics of a sectional interest group without wider legitimacy if support for enhancing choice cannot be found in the population overall. Is parental choice in education something that is valued by all? If it is, does support extend to quasi-markets generally, not simply 'choice' in abstract terms? Further research is needed comparing the attitudes of parents and non-parents, because it is possible that quasi-markets may be valued more by some than others.

Robust evidence on attitudes to quasi-markets in education so far

Analysing data from the 2007 BSA Survey, Curtice and Heath (2009) found a clear distinction drawn within the public mind overall between attitudes towards *choice* and attitudes towards *school diversity* – that is, the idea of schools moving away from 'one size fits all' provision and instead cultivating distinctive characteristics to respond to diverse consumer preferences. As indicated above, school diversity was actively promoted in England under New Labour through the creation of multiple new school forms, often in partnership with the private and third sectors (Exley, 2007; West and Currie, 2008). Since 2010, 'opening up' education to increased contestability and a more diverse range of providers has also been heavily promoted in England by the Coalition, with plans for a mass expansion of Academies and Free Schools exercising strong autonomy and operating outside local authority control (DfE, 2010; Exley and Ball, 2011; Cabinet Office, 2012). Despite school diversity being an arguable 'necessary condition' of choice (Audit Commission, 2004: 3), while around eight in ten in Britain view choice on its own as desirable, diversity and competition between schools is met with much less approval. Two thirds of all respondents disapprove of a system where 'schools which don't attract enough pupils would be closed and teachers would lose their jobs', with just eight per cent in support of such a system. More than seven in ten believe 'secondaries should provide the same kind of education for every child' and only 19 per cent support the idea of 'schools varying so that parents can choose what's best' (Curtice and Heath, 2009: 66). Only one third of people in Britain agree that charities should be able to run schools and only two in ten believe private companies should be able to run schools. Regarding this latter finding, it is notable that across Britain a policy distinction is drawn between state schools run for profit and those *not* run for profit, with the latter encouraged heavily in policy but the former disallowed. In countries such as Sweden and Chile, autonomous 'state-independent' schools are run by private profit making companies (Arreman and Holm, 2010; Elacqua et al, 2006). Debates currently exist in England about whether profit making schools ought to be allowed to operate (Wilby, 2012).

On the basis of findings reported above, Curtice and Heath (2009: 58) remark that 'choice might be regarded as one thing ... competitive quasi-markets quite another' and patterns here do seem to confirm that while people support choice 'in the abstract', they also disapprove of schools diversifying, perhaps because they fear that responsibility for finding

'quality' in a differentiated schooling system would be a burden, or perhaps because they fear competitive differentiation between schools may compromise core principles of equal access for all to good quality schools. One notable finding regarding the latter is that while low income groups are those in the BSA survey *most* likely to support school choice in an abstract sense, they are also those *least* likely to support competitive diversity between schools (Curtice and Heath, 2009).

Research questions and methods

Arguments and evidence presented above suggest that there are a number of gaps in knowledge regarding attitudes to quasi-markets in education. Bold statements are made by governments regarding the extent to which people 'want' quasi-market or 'voucher-style' reforms. However, methodologically rigorous, randomly sampled quantitative data exploring detailed nuances within public attitudes has so far been lacking. Robust data that does exist often examines the views only of parents or examines views of the population as a whole without comparing parents and non-parents. Unlike many polls examining choice in public services, the 2007 BSA survey did examine specific attitudes towards quasi-markets *in education*. However, questions were limited in number so it has been difficult so far to explore attitudes in depth.

In 2010, an ESRC-funded module of 30 survey questions testing public attitudes towards quasi-markets in education was designed and piloted then fielded as part of the 2010 BSA Survey. This survey module aimed to build on previous BSA data, repeating some past questions but also asking new questions in order to explore attitudes in detail. The module sought to explore:

- **Support for choice in the abstract:** how far do people believe choice ought to be a basic right for parents?
- **Support for choice in context:** does parental choice remain important in the public mind when people are asked about government spending priorities or about 'corrective measures' to help ensure choice for all within a quasi-market system? Beyond this, does support for choice conflict with any competing ideas about how state education ought to be organised?
- **Support for choice as intrinsically rather than instrumentally valuable:** do people value choice beyond a simple securing of quality education? If people could be guaranteed quality schooling, would they still want choice?
- **Support for choice among parents and non-parents:** are parents more enthusiastic than non-parents about quasi-markets, choice and diversity?

Fieldwork for the 2010 BSA survey took place from June-November 2010. Questions about school choice were asked to two-thirds of the full sample, involving face-to-face interviews with 2,216 adults.ⁱⁱ

Choice as a right but not a spending priority

Respondents in the 2010 BSA survey were asked for the first time whether they thought parents 'should have a basic right to choose their child's school' (see table 1). Such a statement was supported widely by respondents, with two thirds agreeing and fewer than

one in ten disagreeing. Findings here back up the idea put forward by academics such as Le Grand (2003; 2007) and Perri 6 (2003) that parental choice in education as an abstract ideal is indeed a popular notion.

However, as suggested above, support for choice in the abstract must be placed in context. First, if school choice is viewed as being a 'right' for parents, we might expect that facilitating greater choice within school systems would also be viewed as important. Second, we might further expect that given a clear lack of choice for many as regards 'desirable' schools in Britain (particularly for those living in disadvantaged areas) there would also be support for 'corrective measures' ensuring choice becomes a reality for all (not just those who can afford to travel or move house to live nearer better schools).

When BSA respondents in 2010 were presented with a list of priorities for schools and asked to select which one they felt should be 'top' priority (see table 2), 67 per cent answered that 'making sure that all children, however able they are, do the best they can' should be top priority. A further 16 per cent believed that 'making sure children from poor backgrounds do as well as those from better off backgrounds' should be most important, compared with just 4 per cent who believed 'making sure parents have a lot of choice about the kind of school their child goes to' should come first. Data in table 2 does not preclude the possibility that people in Britain think creating choice should be a priority for government; they merely do not think it should be *top* priority. However, table 2 also shows what respondents think should happen when 'a parent on a low income wanted to send a child of theirs to a school some distance from their home, because they thought that school was better than the local school' but could not afford to pay the bus fare. Public support in 2010 for the government paying bus fares was just 33 per cent, with 67 per cent believing instead that 'the child should go to a local school'.

Tables 1 and 2 present a contradiction. On the one hand people do seem to believe that school choice for parents should be a basic right, but on the other, they do not seem to believe securing such a right for all is sufficiently important to warrant government spending. In line with hypotheses about 'choice in context', what may be evident here is the way support for choice becomes undermined when the possibility of a tax burden created by quasi-markets is introduced. Choice may be viewed as valuable, but in practice it is also a 'luxury good' and perhaps (examining the first part of table 2) too indirect a means by which to ensure improvements in education for the most disadvantaged. A luxury good hypothesis could explain decreasing support for government spending on choice between 2007 and 2010, given economic downturn in Britain over the same period.

Competing normative values – support for the 'neighbourhood school'

Data presented in table 3 challenges further the notion that choice is viewed as a 'right'. BSA respondents were asked for the first time how far they agreed that 'in Britain today, parents in general should send their children to the nearest state school'. Commitments relating to 'the neighbourhood school' in state education in Britain are linked to 1960s social democratic notions of 'common' or 'comprehensive' education where it was viewed as ideal that children would be educated alongside others living in their local area regardless of ability, arguably facilitating cohesion and balanced social mixes of pupils between schools (Pring and Walford, 1997). Advocates of choice (e.g. Hoxby, 2003) have since challenged the idea that 'neighbourhood schools' could ever truly facilitate good social mixes of pupils, because extensive residential segregation of those experiencing deprivation/ affluence will

always lead to neighbourhood schools being segregated. However, given evidence about the possibility that choice itself may exacerbate segregation, potentially making inequalities between schools worse rather than better, many remain wedded to the idea that 'local schools' are the best hope of promoting equity and cohesion within education (Pring, 2008; Local Schools Network, 2012).

Data in table 3 show that 63 per cent in Britain agree that parents ought to send their children to the nearest state school. Such a finding supports Taylor-Gooby and Wallace's (2009) suggestion that public values and actions involve an expressing of more than simply individual economic actor logic. Taylor-Gooby and Wallace are critical of ideas as implied by government initiatives such as NHS 'choose and book' that welfare service users will desire choice not just in a context of inadequate local quality but also whenever a series of options is presented. Within state education and policies for parental choice it might be argued that a similar instrumental individualist model has been applied. However, core values regarding how education should be organised undermine claims about support for choice – in this case a normative belief that the 'local' school matters. Evidence of thinking such as this can be found in research on middle class families choosing local urban comprehensives (Reay et al, 2008), These families espouse discourses of community and multiculturalism, even if such is part of 'an individualistic solidarity' (p.244).

Where BSA respondents in 2010 did not agree that parents should send their children to the nearest state school, a subsequent question asked whether they 'would agree ... if the quality and social mixes of pupils between schools was more equal'. Responses indicate that a further 22 per cent 'would agree' in a context of greater equity between schools, and overall only 6 per cent disagree unconditionally with the idea that parents ought to send their children to the nearest state school. Table 3 suggests something further about attitudes, therefore – that choice is valued less for its intrinsic worth and more for the opportunity it presents for parents to 'escape' local poor quality or segregated pupil intakes. In a context where nearly two thirds of the British public believe that parents ought to send their children to the nearest state school and a further 22 per cent *would* agree if schools were more equal, it seems unconvincing to claim that an educational marketplace is what the public 'wants'.ⁱⁱⁱ

Desire for markets or a desire for 'escape'?

Building on notions of a 'right to escape', the 2010 BSA survey examined for the first time public attitudes towards different reasons parents may cite for avoiding their nearest state school. Table 4 shows that only a minority in Britain believe it is acceptable for parents to avoid their nearest school on the basis of perceived poor quality (where a school has low examination performance relative to other schools). However, this minority is a significant one at 40 per cent, so concerns about uneven quality between schools are likely to play some part in explaining support for choice in a context of simultaneous support for the neighbourhood school. Significantly, it can also be noted that reasons for avoiding the nearest school which gain majority support (or close to it) among the public are those focusing on quality or a lack of specific provision – for example where a pupil has special educational needs, is 'gifted' or a specific academic subject is not being taught. Only one in four believe it is acceptable for parents to avoid the nearest school on grounds of pupil social backgrounds, suggesting concern about segregation and parental exit from schools. Of course, it can also be argued that 'proxies' such as exam results might be cited

euphemistically by respondents as valid reasons for ‘exit’ when the reality is that many are (or would be if they had children) susceptible to avoiding schools on the basis of social compositions. Literature comparing parents’ stated and revealed preferences when choosing schools typically shows the way parents downplay how far school peer group characteristics affect their decision making processes relative to ‘academic’ characteristics of schools (Burgess et al, 2009; Schneider and Buckley, 2002). Nevertheless, it remains notable that the latter is at least met with disapproval in survey responses.

Support for a right to choose can finally be considered against attitudes toward quasi-market reforms where ‘everyone chooses’. BSA respondents were asked the following question regarding ‘voucher-style’ reform:

It has been suggested that the government gives all parents a 'voucher', which they can use to 'buy' their children's education at whatever state school they want to send them to. Schools would only get paid for the number of pupils they teach. Please say how much you support or oppose this idea.

Table 5 below shows that just one in four support the idea of voucher-style or quasi-market reform in education, with nearly 50 per cent opposed (two in ten are ‘strongly opposed’ – higher than the proportion strongly opposed in 2007). Opposition to vouchers may reflect specific public ambivalence towards the idea of a ‘physical’ voucher (what has been termed a ‘strict’ voucher scheme by Perri 6, 2003) which may seem cumbersome. Sparkes and West (1998) have highlighted bureaucratic and administrative difficulties encountered within the ‘strict’ 1996 Nursery Vouchers scheme in England which was abolished after just one year (replaced by a ‘quasi-voucher’ system).

However, objections to voucher ‘visibility’ are unlikely to account for all opposition. First, it is possible that ‘formula funding’ intrinsic to quasi-markets whereby schools compete and ‘only get paid for the number of pupils they teach’ is something engendering public objection. Curtice and Heath (2009) reported that in 2007 opposition to the idea of schools losing pupils and facing closure was strong, and in 2010 opposition to such ‘market discipline’ seems again to be strong. Second, it is possible that people may object to the idea that *all* parents would be given a voucher and so would not just have a ‘right’ but would be *compelled* to choose, reflecting tensions in quasi-market discourses between user empowerment and responsibility (Needham, 2011). If findings reported in this paper do indeed reflect the notion as proposed that, within education, most people value choice instrumentally rather than intrinsically, ultimately preferring quality in their local schools, it is unsurprising that many would object to the idea of having ‘no choice but to choose’ (Needham, 2008). Findings are particularly notable here given the operation of what is largely a quasi-voucher system in English education, and indeed the operation of quasi-voucher systems in education in many parts of the Western world and beyond (Forsey, 2008).

Parents compared with non-parents

Data presented above suggest high levels of support in Britain for choice ‘in the abstract’. This support is widespread and not just limited to parents – previous analysis (Exley, 2011) confirms that although there is a higher tendency among parents to believe in a ‘right to choose’, with seven in ten parents supporting such a statement, six in ten non-parents also

support this right. Within the public overall, however, support for choice does appear to be based on a belief simply in escaping poor quality, given most also believe parents ought to send their child to the nearest state school.

Are parents more likely than others to believe school choice is intrinsically valuable? Choice for its own sake and competitive school diversity may not be popular among the public overall, but they may at least be supported by those with children. Support among parents can be classed as the politics of a sectional interest group, but we might also argue that the voices of those with direct experience of how services run are those which ought to count most in policy design.

Table 6 shows findings from logistic regression analysis seeking to explain opposition to voucher-style reforms (as in table 5). A large number of possible explanatory variables were included in this analysis: respondent age; gender; social class; educational qualifications; household income; religion; political party identification; newspaper readership; and region within Britain. A variable was created for inclusion determining whether respondents had: children under 16 living at home; children over 16; or no children. Finally, a series of standard attitude scales from the BSA survey were also included in the model, examining how far individuals were: 'left' or 'right' wing; 'libertarian' or 'authoritarian'; and 'pro' or 'anti' state welfare in their views.

Table 6 reports only independent variables from the regression emerging as significant. From this table it can be noted that no independent effect of parenthood is identifiable, meaning that *parents are just as likely as non-parents to be opposed to voucher-style reform*. Previous analysis has also shown that parents are just as likely as non-parents to believe people ought to send children to the nearest state school (Exley, 2011).^{iv}

If parenthood is not a significant predictor of support or otherwise for quasi-market reforms, then what is? Choice advocates regularly discuss the benefits of quasi-markets for those who are less affluent, and within table 6 it is notable that people in professional/managerial classes are more likely than those in routine occupations to oppose the idea of vouchers. However, findings regarding income groups are inconclusive, with respondents in the second lowest group being less likely than others to object to vouchers, but no differences in attitudes between those in the highest and lowest income groups. Levels of education also do not emerge as significant in predicting attitudes towards vouchers.

What does emerge as clear in table 6 is that while parenthood generally may not play a clear role in predicting attitudes towards vouchers, family experiences in other respects do. Where a respondent's parent or sibling has attended a selective school, this is associated with markedly greater opposition. Objection to vouchers here may relate to a belief that 'escape' from neighbourhood schools should only be limited to 'grammar-school style' academic selection. However, previous analysis (Exley, 2011) also indicates that having parents who attended selective school is also associated with respondents having more egalitarian views, so findings may suggest an objection to voucher-style reforms on grounds that these could harm egalitarian values in education. While parents in general are no less likely than others to object to vouchers, those who have chosen to send their children to private schools are less likely to be opposed. Support for general markets in education may have driven such parents to 'go private' in the first instance, or alternatively their views may be held 'post hoc'. One clear final predictor of attitudes towards vouchers is political beliefs. Identifying with the Labour or Green party, being more 'left wing', less 'authoritarian' and more 'pro welfare state' are all associated with stronger opposition to vouchers.

Conclusion

In light of mixed evidence on the extrinsic benefits of quasi-markets in education, this article sought to explore the possibility that choice and quasi-markets might nevertheless be deemed worthwhile within social policy because they are intrinsically valued and what the British public 'wants'. Within the article an attempt was made to move away from discussing support for choice 'in the abstract', examining whether such support extends to supporting quasi-markets generally or a belief that choice for all ought to be a priority, and whether it may clash with competing normative beliefs about education. The article sought to disentangle an intrinsic valuing of choice from a simple valuing of educational quality. Finally, analysis explored whether quasi-markets might be supported more by parents than by others.

Findings presented confirm that among *parents and non-parents* in Britain there exists wide support for an abstract notion of choice in education. However, such support is tempered in that choice seems not to be viewed as a priority and it seems to be valued more instrumentally than intrinsically – a finding that is potentially problematic given inconclusive evidence on the extrinsic successes of quasi-markets. Competitive differentiation between schools is met with widespread disapproval, perhaps because people are concerned that excessive school diversity may compromise core values of equal access to good quality schools in state education. Most prefer the idea of 'the nearest state school' with even social mixes of pupils and even standards of quality, only valuing choice (indeed perhaps even seeing it as a burden, albeit a necessary one) where this is not the case.

Placing findings in the context of the 2012 Cabinet Office Report on *Open Public Services*, the idea of a 'right to choose' in education becoming enshrined in national legislation as mentioned earlier in this paper is something which is likely to enjoy support, albeit in an abstract sense, among the British public. However, the same cannot be said for growing numbers of Free Schools and Academies in English education, or indeed for increased 'contestability' among a 'diverse range of innovative providers'. Support for policies such as 'Choice Champions' (Cabinet Office, 2012: 17), where it exists, will be likely to be based not on an intrinsic valuing of choice, but instead on a public hope that choice policies will lead to parents having better access to good quality local schools. Where such access does not materialise (and, on the basis of existing evidence regarding the extrinsic benefits of school choice, in many instances it may not), a significant challenge will be posed to the democratic legitimacy of market-based policies in education as they are currently designed.

ⁱ Research shows that just 10 per cent of variance in attainment between pupils can be accounted for by school effects (Mortimore, 1997).

ⁱⁱ Of 2,216 respondents, a supplementary self-completion questionnaire including further questions about school choice was returned by 1,870.

ⁱⁱⁱ Appleby and Alvarez-Rosete (2005) show that in healthcare, choice is viewed as less important than matters of quality or access for all. In Sweden, marketisation of public services (Blomqvist, 2004) has been expected to have 'feedback effects' on attitudes but instead has had little impact on enduring support for state-provided welfare (Svallfors, 2011).

^{iv} A more detailed discussion of subgroup differences in attitudes towards school choice can be found in this publication.

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TABLES

Table 1 'Parents have a basic right to choose their child's school', 2010

	%
Agree strongly	20
Agree	47
Neither agree nor disagree	21
Disagree	8
Disagree strongly	1
Can't choose	1
Base	1870

Table 2 Attitudes towards choice as a policy and spending priority, 2007 and 2010

	2010	
	%	
Priorities for schools		
Make sure all children, however able they are, do the best they can	67	
Make sure that parents have a lot of choice about the kind of school their child goes to	4	
Get the number of children who leave school with no qualifications down as low as possible	7	
Make sure that children from poor backgrounds do as well as those from better off backgrounds	16	
Don't know/ not answered	6	
Base	1870	

What should happen when a parent cannot afford bus fare to a far-away school?	2007	2010
	%	%
The child should go to a local school	47	63
The government should pay the bus fare	49	33
Don't know/ not answered	4	4
Base	2022	2216

Table 3 Belief that parents should send their children to the nearest state school, 2010

	%
Agree	63
Agree, but only if quality and social mixes of pupils between schools was more equal	22
Neither agree nor disagree	9
Disagree	6
Base	2216

Table 4 Attitudes towards reasons for avoiding the nearest state school, 2010

	Always/ usually acceptable
The nearest state school's exam results aren't as good as other schools'	40
The nearest state school has many pupils from backgrounds different to the child's own background	27
The child has a particular gift for music or sport	53
The child has special educational needs	76
The child's parents are very keen for the child to learn a specific academic subject that is not available at the nearest state school	46
Base	2216

Table 5 Attitudes towards 'voucher-style' quasi-market reform, 2010

	2007 (%)	2010 (%)
Strongly support	4	4
Support	22	21
Neither support nor oppose	26	25
Oppose	32	29
Strongly oppose	14	18
Don't know	2	3
Not answered		
Base	2022	2216

Table 6 Opposition to voucher-style reform

Category (reference categories in brackets)	Odds ratio	Standard error	Coefficient	p value
Baseline odds	2.44	0.54	0.89	0.099
Age	1.012	0.01	0.01*	0.014
Party identification (none)				
Labour	1.34	0.15	0.29*	0.049
Green/ Other	1.78	0.25	0.58*	0.024
Educational experiences				
R sent child to private school	0.62	0.22	-0.48*	0.026
R's parent went to selective school	1.64	0.17	0.50**	0.003
R's sibling went to selective school	1.64	0.18	0.49**	0.006
Social Class (routine/ semi routine)				
Professional/ managerial	1.37	0.15	0.32*	0.037
Household income quartile (less than £1,000 per month)				
£1,001-£2,200 per month	1.43	0.14	-0.35*	0.010
Religion (no religion)				
Other non-Christian	0.51	0.259	-0.68**	0.009
Attitude scales				
Left-right attitudes	0.85	0.08	-0.16*	0.032
Pro-anti welfare attitudes	0.82	0.09	-0.20*	0.034
Libertarian-authoritarian attitudes	0.72	0.09	-0.32**	0.001

N: 1767

Nagelkerke R-squared: 0.12

* = significant at 95% level ** = significant at 99% level