

Runnymede Faith Schools and Community Cohesion Consultation

A response from the Family and Parenting Institute

1. Introduction

The Family and Parenting Institute (FPI) is the UK's leading centre of expertise in families and the upbringing of children. We advocate for improved family and parenting services and we press for policy change to help address the challenges that families are facing.

FPI has recently been involved in a joint policy exercise with the Families and Social Capital ESRC Research Group based at London South Bank University. The broad aims of the exercise were to develop policy implications from the findings of the research team and to communicate these to an audience of policy makers and practitioners working in the field of family support. One of the policy reviews arising from this collaboration focused on the social capital of children during the transition period from primary to secondary education. This review endeavoured to marry together findings from the Families and Social Capital *Locality, School and Social Capital* research with policy initiatives and recent legislation.

This response from FPI to the Runnymede consultation on faith schools will focus on findings from the South Bank research and the FPI policy review. Although we are not responding to the specific questions posed in the consultation, we nevertheless feel that our comments may be of interest. The research and policy review are attached and can also be viewed on our website:

<http://www.familyandparenting.org/pages/page.php?id=236>.

2. Community Cohesion

Current education reform contains potentially conflicting aims of placing local schools at the heart of communities and services for local families *and* increasing choice for parents to enable more children to attend a 'good' school out of the immediate home vicinity. However, the South Bank research identified that parents' choice of secondary school often involved balancing competing desires for the child.

The emphasis within the Every Child Matters (ECM) agenda is the creation of schools as local hubs for education, family services, childcare and activities for older children, thereby feeding into local community cohesion and regeneration. However, the prioritising within the *Education and Inspections Act 2006* of parental choice of schools based primarily on how 'good' it is and not on how local it is will inevitably affect children attending schools with poorer outcomes, especially those in more deprived areas. The South Bank research identified that children more likely to struggle to make friends in the first two years of secondary school were those who moved alone to a school that neither they nor their parents had selected.

The South Bank research exposed interesting class and ethnicity differences in friendship networks during the first couple of years of secondary education. The implications of these differences are important across many aspects of social policy, not least of which is the aim of the ECM agenda to establish schools at the heart of local communities and family services provision.

Parents from minority ethnic communities were less likely to be drawn into the life of the school or the community through the social capital of their children. These children tended to have friendship networks at school that were separate from family and community. These parents were also within the group less likely to be part of the social networks that evolve around the primary school. Therefore certain groups of parents, who would potentially benefit from the provision of family services provided through extended schools, will be amongst those with the least connection with the school and its extended networks.

White children attending local secondary schools were more likely to have locally-based, and hence, more family-based friendship networks. Conversely, those children going to sought after and selective schools had

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friendship networks that were family-based but not necessarily local, leading to potential resources and social capital being taken out of the local community. This affects not only the local school, but will also impact on community cohesion through the disconnection of resource rich young people with their locality and will reduce the social capital available.

The South Bank research highlighted the concerns that some parents have in allowing their children to travel long distances to school independently, suggesting that intervention is needed not just in negotiating the schools admissions policies, but also for some families, assistance in facilitating increased independence for young people. The realities of children and young people having to travel some distance to attend a school raise different dilemmas for parents around keeping children safe that may not be addressed through current thinking on education provision. It requires engagement with community safety initiatives and initiatives to deal with out of school bullying.

With regard to bullying by other pupils on journeys to and from school, the *Education and Inspections Act 2006* allows for the head teacher of a school to determine measures, which may include the making of rules and provision for disciplinary penalties, which could cover the conduct of pupils at a time when they are not on the premises of the school and are not under the lawful control or charge of a member of the staff of the school.

Parents in the studies identified the difficulties of teaching children to be streetwise as preparation for the transition of traveling independently to secondary school, whilst adhering to locally accepted norms of good parenting. Recent legislation and Government policy positions may have added to concerns over acceptable behaviour of young people and parents' ability to parent adequately, for example through the introduction of the Respect Agenda and youth justice legislation.

3. Schools Admissions

Children's ethnicity and religion are shown within the South Bank research to have an impact on parental engagement with informal peer networks, with just under half of Muslim parents knowing the parents of their children's friends, compared to slightly less than three-quarters of non-Muslims. A strong, emergent message was that informal social networks among parents are an important part of the process of understanding and making a school choice and are instrumental in aiding successful applications to more prestigious schools. For whatever reason Muslim parents are not part of the more powerful social networks and their children are potentially disadvantaged by non-participation in these networks.

The current changes to admissions policy set out in the *Education and Inspections Act 2006* and the introduction of Choice Advisors may enable more parents to engage with the admissions process; however it will be hard for the Advisors to reach parents who have little contact with the primary school. Positive academic support for children from minority ethnic groups through policy initiatives such as the black pupils achievement programme may ultimately have some impact on educational achievement and expectations, but this is likely to have little effect on whether their parents participate in the informal supportive networks amongst parents at primary school and therefore will not have an impact on the choice of secondary school.

A significant proportion of children who attended a school where they had previously not known anyone were new comers to the area and other vulnerable children. These children were found to be more likely to attend poorly rated schools. The *Education and Inspections Act 2006* makes provision for schools to act in accordance with the Admissions Code, but this will have little impact on children and young people from families who are transitory or recently arrived as refugees and who do not apply for a school place at the allotted time.

Government intervention that is focused on parental choice will do little to improve opportunities for the most disadvantaged children. Choice and diversity of provision do not guarantee equality. The emphasis on choice within finite provision will inevitably result in only limited options being available for those who are last to choose.

4. Interaction and Relationships

The South Bank research showed that children's friendships are often instrumental in aiding their parents to meet other parents and become part of a social network. These networks, through which they benefit from informal advice on choice of secondary school and gain support from peers in relation to the application process, then become crucial for children during the transitional period from primary to secondary school.

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The South Bank research also identified the transition period between primary and secondary school as a decisive time in the development of peer relationships for children and for maintaining relationships initiated at primary school. The researchers noted that children were more likely to hold on to friendships from primary school, subsequent to going to a different secondary school, if their friends were part of a wider parental social network. Those children with a strong friendship base were better equipped for making new friends at secondary school and widening their social networks.

The research suggested that the primary school class set up and the resulting friendship networks continued to have the most impact on friendship patterns in the early years of secondary school, with children rarely citing religion as a common factor in their friendships. Primary school children rarely referred to ethnicity as an aspect of sameness or difference and the likelihood of having friends from a different ethnic background was largely dependent on the ethnic mix of their class. At secondary school age there was an emergent awareness of ethnic differences or similarities.

The South Bank research identified school as one of the main opportunities children have of bridging ethnic and religious divides in making friends. Attendance at a school with ethnically homogenous classes lessened the likelihood of that happening. As part of the Government's commitment to provide choice and a diversity of education provision, the *Education and Inspections Act 2006* provides for the continuation of faith schools and the possibility of religious groups, amongst others, setting up Trust Schools. However, this research suggests that parental prejudices, allied to the choice agenda, reduced the chances of children from different backgrounds being in the same primary class. In the areas covered by these researchers, this was particularly true of Catholic schools. Diversity of provision does not necessarily ensure diversity *within* provision and attention needs to be given to ensuring that social isolation for some groups is not an inadvertent outcome.

5. Concluding Thoughts

The South Bank research highlighted the complexities of parents' and children's lives that are inextricably linked to feeling safe within their local community and the importance of acting within the locally accepted norms of good parenting. That parental choice of secondary school is often based on competing desires for the child, in which obtaining a 'good' education is only part of the process is an area that needs to be acknowledged within current thinking on education provision.

Parental social networks emerged as crucial to children and young people's well being throughout this research. The choice of a 'good' school and the social capital necessary to maintain friendships with children from early childhood, as well as expand their friendship base are all-important elements in a successful transfer from primary to secondary school and appear to be dependant in many regards on parental relationships with other parents. How best to support informal parental networks and how to compensate for those parents who are excluded from them, are pertinent questions for both policy makers and practitioners.

Within an educational system in which parental choice and diversity of provision are promoted as beneficial to procuring better educational outcomes for children, the danger of social isolation that this may inadvertently encourage needs to be recognised within policy decision making. Choice and diversity of provision do not guarantee equality. The emphasis on choice within a finite provision will inevitably offer only limited options for those who are last to choose. The importance of ensuring that all schools are brought up to an acceptable standard cannot be over-stated if educational reforms are to be part of the drive to improve outcomes for all children.

Carena Rogers
Policy Adviser, Family and Parenting Institute
March 2007