



School admissions: the facts behind current controversies

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School admissions is an area of education that can arouse strong personal emotions and is often in the news – not surprisingly, given the importance of schooling for the life chances of a young person.

Recent controversies in the media have included the use of lotteries for allocating places, issues around the appeals process, placement on the basis of religion, the use of different measures of ‘distance’ from a school, parents making fraudulent applica-

tions and the sanctions that should be applied to them, and local authorities (LAs) allegedly ‘snooping’ on parents to check whether they actually live at a given address.

During the election campaign, school admissions made the news again when a father, annoyed at his children not obtaining their preferred school choices in London, shouted questions in the direction of Gordon Brown!

Fortunately, over the years the NFER has been able to keep its finger on the school admissions pulse, and to collect evidence on ‘what really happens’ through a number of research projects in this area. This means that we can refer to evidence rather than media controversies, which are often based on just one or a few cases.

Clearly, obtaining a place for a child in a ‘good’ school is vitally important both for the child and for his or her parents. It is also important, for local political reasons, for

LAs to demonstrate that admissions are fair and that parents have an appropriate degree of consultation and choice. But it needs to be remembered that most LAs

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have tried and tested processes for school admissions and most parents are satisfied with the school places allocated. The whole process, in fact, can be relatively mundane and non-controversial and is usually based on a well-established chronological cycle of admissions-related events.

The controversies, although emotive and very important for those involved, tend to occur in a relatively small number of cases. In part, this may be because there has been greater coordination of school admissions in recent years, and because the School Admissions Code has been updated and clarified, so that it provides more guidance.

From a research point of view, it might

be useful to take a different angle. One of the most interesting questions that can be posed about school admissions is neither from a parental nor a local authority perspective. It can be stated as follows: ‘what is the best mix of pupils within a school for providing a basis for school improvement?’ For example, is a school more likely to improve pupils’ (value-added) attainment outcomes if the school population contains pupils from a range of different abilities and/or from a range of different socio-economic or ethnic backgrounds? Is it easier to improve attainment outcomes with a heterogeneous pupil population or a more homogeneous one?

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This is a controversial question, partly because it may imply the desirability of ‘social engineering’ of school intakes to optimise attainment outcomes, and partly because it risks reviving the comprehensive versus selection debate, but it is probably a question that definitely deserves further research.



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