

**How much choice is enough?**

**The intrinsic (dis)value of secondary  
school choice in England and Scotland**



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## **Declaration**

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I can confirm that chapters 6, 7 and 9 (specifically, the references they make to interviews conducted in ‘Scotstown’) draw on data collected and analysed as part of previous study for an MSc in Social Policy (Research) that I undertook at the London School of Economics and Political Science in 2017.

## Abstract

Proponents and opponents of choice in public services disagree not only over whether it produces better outcomes, but also over whether it is *intrinsically* valuable. I develop a novel theoretical framework (drawing on literature from philosophy and psychology) to determine whether choosing public services increases or reduces users' subjective welfare, freedom and autonomy.

I then apply this framework to secondary school choice, comparing Scotland (where most children attend a default assigned school) and England (where families are expected to formally apply to multiple schools). I do so by means of a mixed-methods study, combining thematic analysis of qualitative in-depth interviews with parents and children from 57 families in five cities (two in England, three in Scotland) and an online survey of 987 parents (801 in England, 186 in Scotland).

While the overwhelming majority of families want some degree of choice of schools, those in Scotland are no less satisfied with the level of choice that they have. Indeed, greater school choice is associated with lower perceived empowerment and welfare. English families are more cynical and fatalistic about the process, and find it more inconvenient, time consuming, stressful and anxiety-provoking than those in Scotland. These patterns are mirrored at a sub-national level, with families that consider more schools and do more research having more negative experiences.

Elements of school choice can be moderately enjoyable, particularly for more engaged families and those in England. However, these benefits are dwarfed by the psychological burdens of school choice. To reduce these burdens, policymakers should limit uncertainty, informational complexity and the frequency of rejected applications – as the Scottish system successfully does.

This thesis refines the theoretical debate over choice in public services, adds to our empirical understanding of the costs and benefits of choice in practice, and contributes to discussions of fair school admissions policy.

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## 1. Introduction

School choice is “perhaps one of the most ardently discussed issues in the current education policy debate”, according to the OECD (Musset 2012, 4). More generally, the question of whether users of public services should have greater choice of providers remains one of the major controversies in contemporary social policy (6 2003; Le Grand 2009; Propper 2016). Yet for all the attention the topic has received, there remains a mismatch between the theoretical arguments around choice, and the empirical evidence that research has so far produced.

There are two different sorts of reasons offered both in favour of choice in public services and to oppose it. There are disagreements over the *instrumental* value of choice – whether or not it has better consequences, in terms of improved outcomes, quality, efficiency or allocation of services. However, there are also disputes over the *intrinsic* value of choice – whether or not users are better off merely by virtue of being allowed to choose. On the one hand, having more choice might increase people’s autonomy and sense of empowerment. On the other hand, choice might be felt as a burden, causing stress, anxiety and inconvenience.

The vast bulk of empirical studies evaluating choice in public services have tended to focus on instrumental arguments, particularly the impact on outcomes and inequalities. They have little to say on whether the anticipated intrinsic benefits or feared intrinsic costs actually obtain. Yet without better evidence on the intrinsic (dis)value of choice in public services, our understanding of the policies is incomplete. That means we are ill-equipped to judge whether choice policies should be maintained, expanded, modified or rolled back.

In this thesis, I explore intrinsic costs and benefits in the area of secondary school choice. I do so by exploiting the different policy approaches taken in Scotland and England. The Scottish government has tended to play down school choice. Every child in Scotland is allocated a school by their local authority. The vast majority accept this default, and only 13% of families ‘opt-in’ to choice by applying to an alternative school. By contrast, policymakers in England have made great efforts to support and facilitate school choice. Every family is required to fill out a formal application form, and active engagement with the decision is encouraged. Over 60% of families opt for a school that is not their nearest.

This thesis seeks to establish the extent to which English families are intrinsically better or worse off as a result of the greater level of choice that they are offered. Specifically, I address the following research questions:

*RQ1: In what ways does the process of secondary school choice produce intrinsic value or disvalue in England and Scotland?*

*RQ2: Is there a difference between England and Scotland in terms the types, extent or intensity of intrinsic value or disvalue experienced by families choosing a secondary school?*

I have taken a mixed methods approach to answering these questions. I have carried out thematic analysis of qualitative in-depth interviews with parents and children from 57 families in five locations (two in England, three in Scotland). I have combined this with a quantitative online survey of 987 parents: 801 in England and 186 in Scotland.

## **1.1 Why Do We Need This Study?**

Much of the debate around choice in public services makes reference to intrinsic value or disvalue with little in the way of empirical evidence. Often it is merely asserted that, for example, giving people choice increases autonomy, or that it causes stress and inconvenience. The few studies that have been carried out have been small-scale, or focused on more functional, low stakes decisions (often with hypothetical examples). None have captured people's experiences in the process of choosing. None have looked at school choice specifically.

This is clearly a problem for those who believe that the argument for choice depends on its intrinsic value. If the very reason to give people choice is to increase their autonomy or subjective welfare, then it obviously matters whether such increases do in fact occur. Yet even those who favour choice for instrumental reasons may have cause to care about its intrinsic costs. As we shall see, the benefits of school choice in terms of improving academic attainment are small and uncertain at best. If these come at the cost of stress, anxiety and inconvenience to the families required to choose, the instrumental benefits may not be worth the hardship they entail. At the very least, we can begin to understand the trade-offs involved in policies that encourage choice.

More generally, there is a case to say that researchers have neglected the process of school choice in recent years. Interest in the topic peaked in the 1990s, in the aftermath of the 1988 Education Reform Act. Yet experiences of school choice may now be rather different, with the initial reforms having 'bedded in' (Gorard 1999) and subsequently been refined. School choice has certainly been overlooked in Scotland, where the only prominent primary study is from Adler

et al (1989), who carried out interviews in 1984 to understand the impact of the 1981 Education (Scotland) Act. As long ago as 1997, Adler (1997, 304) suggested that “the time has come to replicate our research”, anticipating that the significance of parental choice had grown. Yet, perhaps reflecting the political deprioritisation of choice, the topic has received minimal attention in the past 35 years.

This thesis therefore makes a specific contribution to the debate around school choice, adding evidence on intrinsic value and disvalue to what we already know about instrumental costs and benefits. It also updates some of the evidence that we have about how school choice operates more generally in England, and particularly in Scotland. Finally, it produces a novel theoretical framework for analysing intrinsic value and disvalue in public services that can be a starting point for further research in other areas beyond schools.

## **1.2 Chapter Outline**

The thesis is structured as follows. Chapter 2 provides background context. It describes the international trend towards choice in public services. It outlines and contrasts the different approaches to school choice and admissions between Scotland and England. It also summarises what we know about the impact of school choice on instrumentally valuable outcomes, such as academic attainment and social integration. Finally, it examines the role of intrinsic value and disvalue in the choice debate, showing that many commentators make reference to such considerations in arguing for or against choice policies.

Chapter 3 contains the theoretical and conceptual analysis of the thesis, clarifying what we mean by intrinsic value and disvalue and how can identify it. I begin by attempting to draw the distinction between intrinsic and instrumental value. I then develop a theoretical framework that sets out the empirical conditions for judging whether a particular choice has intrinsic value or disvalue, drawing on discussions of choice, welfare, freedom and autonomy in philosophy, social policy and psychology.

Chapter 4 reviews the literature on school choice in England and Scotland in light of this theoretical framework to summarise what we already know about its intrinsic value and disvalue. While this provides hints and glimpses of relevant material, I show that none of the empirical questions raised in chapter 3 can be satisfactorily answered from the existing evidence.

Chapter 5 describes the primary research I have undertaken and the associated methodological judgements and limitations. I consider the merits of comparing Scotland with England, and the extent to which such comparison can ground causal inferences regarding the impact of policy. I outline the approaches taken to recruitment, data collection and analysis. I also discuss how I have combined richer, more considered interview data with survey responses from a larger and more representative sample, utilising the strengths of each method to build up a more robust picture of school choice in each country.

Chapter 6 is the first of four empirical chapters, addressing whether families in Scotland and England receive the purported intrinsic *benefits* of choice. I find a strong desire for choice in both countries, and that most families feel they have adequate choice. Moreover, aspects of school choice can be enjoyable, and this is the case more often in England. However, I find that the greater formal choice English families have does not seem to translate to greater perceived empowerment. To the contrary, those in England tend to be more cynical, fatalistic and disempowered. I also find that in the vast majority of cases, school choice does not seem to make a substantial contribution to freedom or autonomy.

Chapter 7 then considers the evidence that families endure intrinsic *disbenefits* from choice. I show that school choice can be inconvenient, time consuming, stressful and anxiety-provoking. I also show that English families are considerably more likely to suffer these negative experiences. Some families struggle with genuine dilemmas, where they struggle to choose between multiple attractive options. However, stress and anxiety more often result from the difficulty of evaluating and reconciling conflicting sources of information, perceived pressure and the uncertainty of not knowing the outcome of the application process.

Chapter 8 moves down from the aggregate national levels to look at how experiences of choice, both good and bad, vary between different types of family within Scotland and England. Many of these sub-national differences mirror the contrast between England and Scotland. Those English parents that look and behave like Scottish parents, doing less research, considering fewer schools and facing less uncertainty, find the process less stressful, inconvenient and anxiety-provoking than other English parents. The reverse is true for Scottish parents that look and behave like English parents. Chapter 8 also shows that the intrinsic costs of school choice compound certain forms of social disadvantage, with parents that are non-white, foreign-educated or living in deprived neighbourhoods finding the process more stressful. On the other hand, university-educated parents find school choice more stressful than non-graduates.

Chapter 9 profiles interview participants from seven families in greater depth to provide a clearer and more detailed picture of how choosing a school affects people. In so doing, it makes vivid how significant the burdens of school choice can be, and strengthens the case for taking intrinsic disvalue seriously when evaluating school choice policies.

Chapter 10 summarises the findings and discusses the extent to which they should be taken to reflect the causal impact of different policy approaches between England and Scotland. It reiterates the thesis' contribution to knowledge and identifies avenues for future research. Finally, it considers policy implications in light of these findings: whether they undermine the project of school choice altogether, how they affect the attractiveness of existing proposals for reform, and how admissions policies in England and Scotland might be altered to mitigate some of the issues identified.

## **2. Background Context**

In this chapter, I provide necessary background context for the rest of the thesis. I begin in 2.1 by describing the international trend towards greater choice in public services. I then provide details of the specific measures in place in relation to school choice in England and Scotland (2.2). In 2.3, I summarise evidence from previous evaluations of school choice. These generally find greater choice to have had limited effect on academic outcomes and to have worsened segregation. However, this evidence fails to address the belief that school choice may have intrinsic benefits or costs, a belief I show in 2.4 to be widely held and articulated in public, political and academic debates over school choice.

### **2.1 The Trend Towards Choice in Public Services**

Over recent decades, in a number of countries, there has been a clear trend towards greater user choice of public services (Tummers, Jilke, and Van de Walle 2013). Specific policies vary, but in England measures include: choice of doctors, hospitals and treatment within the health service, the right to buy and choice-based lettings for social housing tenants, government-funded voucher schemes to pay for nursery and social care, as well as school choice (6 2003; Greener and Powell 2009).

Choice and competition are seen as part of the broader ‘New Public Management’ (NPM) movement (J. Clarke and Newman 1997; Hood 1991). NPM represented an intellectual shift in how government employees were seen and treated. Bureaucrats were no longer viewed as benevolent planners capable of effectively directing centralised systems, professionals no longer treated as well-intentioned experts serving the public good. Instead, NPM conceived of them as limited in their capacity to manage complex systems, potentially self-interested, paternalistic and lacking innovation. The remedy NPM proposed was to apply structures, incentives and techniques from the private sector. Some services, such as utilities and public transport, were privatised. Those that remained within the public sector were opened up to competition, through user choice and contracting out. Stricter performance measures, increased flexibility in hiring and rewards and greater focus on results over procedures were also intended to develop a more ‘business-like’ culture.

In theory, choice and competition are expected to improve public services through three channels. First, by *improving the allocation* of users to service providers. Choice allows students zoned for worse schools to move to better ones. ‘Better’ in this context might mean generally better for any student – for example, if a school has more qualified and competent teachers. However, ‘better’ can also mean better suited to the particular needs and characteristics of the student – for example, choice might allocate students requiring more discipline to stricter schools, and more self-sufficient students to more permissive schools. Second, by *incentivising providers* to improve so as to attract or retain users. Third, by *exposing the worst providers*, chosen by so few users as to force their closure or reform (for example, by being taken over by a different administration). This, might, in turn spur new and better providers to enter and take their place.

At the same time, sceptics of choice caution that users may not be capable of discerning and responding to differences in quality between providers. Evidence on provider performance may be inadequate and users’ time, mental energy and ability to interpret this evidence may be limited. Worse still, these constraints may be greater for disadvantaged families, with the result that choice and competition worsen equity.

## 2.2 School Choice Policies in Scotland and England

### 2.21 What is School Choice?

School choice is among the most prominent examples of NPM, introduced in some form in over two-thirds of OECD countries over the past 30 years (Musset 2012). However, the term is somewhat ambiguous, and we can distinguish three different senses in which a family can be said to have school choice:

- *Formal school choice* relates to the administrative process of school allocation and the extent to which families are given the opportunity to express their preference of schools
- *Substantive school choice* relates to the range of options that are realistically available to a family through formal and informal means. For example, they may be formally permitted to apply to a school, but unlikely to get a place there because of oversubscription criteria. Or they may be unable to make a formal application, but able

to choose it through a less formal process (for example, by moving to the catchment area)

- *Perceived school choice* relates to a family's subjective assessment of the range of acceptable options and their ability to get them.

In a policy context, 'school choice' refers to three different types of measure. First, it can refer to policies to increase the number and accessibility of school options within the fully state-funded sector (state school choice). Second, it can refer to policies to facilitate access to private schooling as an alternative to state schools (voucher schemes). Third, it can refer to policies to increase the diversity of school options (supply side policies).

## *2.22 Secondary School Choice and Admissions in England*

The focus of this thesis is on the first of these, state school choice. However, the government in England has pursued all three to varying extents. The 1980 Education Act created a statutory right for parents<sup>1</sup> to select a state secondary school for their children, though local educational authorities were initially given fairly wide discretion to reject such requests if they believed compliance "would prejudice the provision of efficient education or the efficient use of resources" (Adler, Petch, and Tweedie 1989). It is the 1988 Education (Reform) Act that is seen as signalling the start of widespread formal school choice in England (Allen and Burgess 2010; Gorard and Fitz 2000; Lupton 2011), abolishing caps on student numbers in schools below physical capacity and requiring local authorities to publicise information about schools in their area (Miriam David, West, and Ribbens 1994, 7–8).

Since 2000, the national admissions code has standardised the school application process across England. Initially providing guidance, it has hardened into a set of mandatory requirements over several subsequent revisions (Coldron et al. 2008). The code requires local educational authorities to have coordinated application processes and to provide a composite prospectus of local schools, including criteria for entry and popularity (i.e. whether they are oversubscribed).

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<sup>1</sup> Wherever I refer to 'parents' in this thesis, I will usually be using it as shorthand for 'parents and guardians', although all of my adult interview participants were in fact parents (I do not know the parental status of survey participants).



The key policy development for our purposes is open enrolment. This removed any presumption that students would attend a pre-allocated ‘zoned’ school<sup>2</sup>, allowing them instead to apply to any school they wish. This has been a gradual process – in 2000, open enrolment was already in place in 75% of English local authorities, but 13% still allocated children to a school (Coldron et al. 2008, 26). From 2008, a common application form was introduced nationally, requiring all parents to explicitly express a preference as to which school their child will attend (Department for Education and Skills 2007). The process now, across the whole of England, is as follows:

- Parents submit one application to their local authority for all state secondary schools
- They may apply for state schools outwith their local authority, and such applications will be treated no differently to applications to schools within their local authority. In 2020, 8% of secondary school pupils were offered a place at a school in a local authority where they do not reside (Gov.uk 2020)
- Parents are asked to rank at least three, and as many as six, schools (the maximum varies by local authority) in order of preference, by a common national deadline of 31<sup>st</sup> October
- All local authorities are required to make a single offer of a place to all students on ‘national offer day’ –1<sup>st</sup> March
- Parents have the right to appeal to an independent panel

In 2020 82% of pupils were offered a place at their first preference school, and 96% received one of their preferences – figures that have broadly stable over recent years (Department for Education 2019a).

*Figure 2.1: Secondary school offers for academic year 2020/21 by preference (Gov.uk, 2020)*

1st Preference	82.2%
2nd Preference	8.7%
3rd Preference	3.0%
4th-6th Preference	1.6%
Non-Preferred School	4.1%
No offer	0.4%

If a school is undersubscribed, any application to that school must be accepted. Oversubscription criteria are set by the organisation that runs the school – this may be the local authority, or the school’s governing body or trust in the case of independently-run state schools.

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<sup>2</sup> Throughout this thesis I use the terms ‘zone’ and ‘catchment’ interchangeably.

However, their discretion is strictly limited by the admissions code. Selection on the basis of academic ability is only permitted for pre-existing selective schools, which comprise 5% of all state-funded secondaries and are concentrated in certain parts of the country, most notably Kent, Buckinghamshire and Lincolnshire (Department for Education 2020b). Schools may not interview applicants, nor may they favour those who rank the school higher on their application form (Department for Education 2014).

It is common to give priority to children with siblings already at the school, looked-after children, and children with social or medical needs. Religious schools may use evidence of faith (for example, a letter from a minister) as an oversubscription criterion. Some secondary schools give priority to applicants from linked 'feeder' primary schools. Some local authorities and schools operate a system of 'banding' whereby applicants' prior attainment or performance is considered to ensure that the school contains a spread of different abilities proportionate to the school's applicants, or the national or local ability range. Schools are also permitted to allocate 10% of their places on the basis of aptitude in sport, arts, languages or technology, if they are specialised in any of those areas. Random allocation ('lotteries') must not be used as a principal oversubscription criterion, but can be used once other criteria are exhausted (Department for Education 2014).

In most cases, the dominant oversubscription criteria are geographical. Some schools offer places to the applicants nearest the school, creating a de facto catchment area. Other schools give priority to the those within an official, predetermined catchment area. Nevertheless, school choice does have a meaningful effect on the distribution of pupils. Only 39% of English pupils put their nearest secondary school as their first choice (Burgess, Greaves, and Vignoles 2019), and around half end up attending their nearest school (Allen 2007).

As well as limiting local authorities' and schools' ability to reject applications, the government in England has sought to reduce some of the practical barriers to choice. Successive governments have made it easier to compare schools, for example through standardised testing and by publicising league tables (Leckie and Goldstein 2017; West and Pennell 2000). Low income families are entitled to free transport to their three nearest schools (Gov.uk n.d.). The previous Labour government provided 'choice advisers' offering independent advice, support and guidance to help families make informed choices (Stiell et al. 2008). While funding for the programme has been substantially cut back, some local authorities and charities continue to provide such services. At the same time, English schools have been incentivised to compete for

students by having their funding more closely tied to student numbers (Institute for Government 2012).

School voucher policies, synonymous with school choice in certain countries (Musset 2012), have made less impact in England. In 1980, the Assisted Places Scheme provided government-funded means-tested assistance for pupils to attend selective private schools. However, the programme only funded a relatively small proportion of school students – around 75,000 over 17 years (Power, Sims, and Whitty 2013) (there are over 3 million secondary school students in any given year), and was scrapped in 1997.

There has been no shortage of supply-side reforms in England. Decisions over budgeting, staffing, curriculum and discipline have been increasingly delegated to school governing bodies rather than local authorities (Adler 1997; Teelken 2000). The academisation and free school programmes have encouraged schools to be removed from local authority governance altogether (West and Wolfe 2018). The Specialist Schools programme, introduced in 1993, provided funding for schools accredited in up to two of ten areas, including arts, language, music, science, sports and technology (Exley 2007). By its end in 2010, the government claimed the programme was no longer required as specialism had become “firmly established”, with over 95% of schools participating (politics.co.uk n.d.).

### *2.23 Secondary School Choice and Admissions in Scotland*

In contrast to England, formal school choice plays a far less prominent role in the Scottish education system. Adler et al (1989, 39) suggest there was less appetite for school choice in Scotland than England, at least among educational experts and professionals: from 1974 to 1979, the *Times Educational Supplement* referred to parental choice over 200 times, but its Scottish edition did so only 12 times. Nevertheless, the 1981 Education (Scotland) Act introduced a degree of choice by requiring local authorities to accommodate parental requests unless accepting additional pupils at a school would i) necessitate appointing additional teachers; ii) entail significant building extensions or alterations; or iii) likely negatively affect order, discipline or educational well-being (Adler 1997). Since then no further moves have been made to expand formal school choice in Scotland. Indeed, the Scottish government has explicitly tried to downplay the role of choice in its education system – stating for example, that “No one in

Scotland should be required to select a school to get the first rate education they deserve and are entitled to” (Cope and P’Anson 2009, 83) (see also Education Scotland (2013, 22)).

The school application process is very different to England. The default assumption in Scotland is that children will attend the school that they are zoned for – usually, but not always, their nearest school. In some local authorities, students are granted places at two zoned schools – one Roman Catholic and one non-denominational, and allowed to choose between them. In all authorities, those that would prefer a non-catchment school must ‘opt in’ to choice, by making a separate ‘placing request’ for each alternative. While local authorities are required to make parents aware of this option, they vary in the extent of their efforts to do so. A study of the implementation of the 1981 Act in one authority found that parental choice “has been regarded as an issue of minor importance...to be tolerated” (Adler, Petch, and Tweedie 1989). A comparative review of educational markets concludes that “School choice is possible” in Scotland “but not particularly encouraged” (Teelken 2000, 24). The placing request must be addressed to the relevant local authority, and so parents may have to deal with multiple forms and deadlines if they are applying to schools in different authorities. Though the deadline for placing requests varies by local authority, all offers must be made by 30<sup>th</sup> April.

Around 13% of Scottish families make a placing request.<sup>3</sup> Thus, in contrast to England, where every family is required to formally register a choice, in Scotland the vast majority – around 87% – do not explicitly express a preference. For oversubscribed schools, local authorities have discretion over how to prioritise placing requests, but may favour children with special needs met by the school, siblings already at the school and those whose family circumstances make the school more convenient (e.g. parents working or relatives living in the area). Ultimately, though, as in England, distance from the school is the usual tiebreaker (Dundee City Council Education Department 2014; The City of Edinburgh Council n.d.). Around 80% of placing requests are granted.<sup>4</sup>

The Scottish government has done little to facilitate choice between state schools. In sharp contrast to the English Department for Education, which has a website devoted to helping “Find and compare schools” (Gov.uk n.d.), Education Scotland provides performance data in a dispersed format that makes direct comparison of schools difficult (Education Scotland n.d.).

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<sup>3</sup> I made freedom of information requests to every local authority in Scotland, asking them how many students had made placing requests in the past five years. 30 out of 32 responded. On average, in 2017/18 and 2018/19, 13% had, similar to the 14% in Scottish government data for 2008/09 (Gona and Haynes 2010).

<sup>4</sup> Freedom of information request data suggests 80% of placing requests were granted in 2018/19, the same as Gona and Haynes report for 2008/09. The figure was higher in 2017/18, however, at 86%.

Indeed, the Scottish First Minister has explicitly stated her desire to avoid creating “crude league tables” (McIvor 2015), though this has not prevented the media from using public data to compile their own rankings (McLaughlin 2019; The Times 2019). Moreover, there has been minimal supply side reform in Scotland – almost all Scottish state schools remain under local authority control, with relatively little incentive to specialise. Unlike England, Scotland has no academically selective state schools, though there are six specialist schools that select a proportion of their students on the basis of aptitude in music, sport or dance.

For all the differences between England and Scotland, it is worth noting that neither system is particularly extreme by OECD standards in terms of their level of formal choice (Musset 2012). On the one hand, there are countries such as Greece and South Korea, where all students within the state system attend their catchment secondary school without the ability to apply to an alternative as in Scotland. On the other hand, there are systems under which choice is not as circumscribed by geography as in England – for example, Belgium has experimented with ‘first come, first served’ school applications (Smithers and Robinson 2010).

### **2.3 Evidence of the Impact of School Choice on Outcomes**

A number of empirical studies have sought to evaluate the impact of school choice reforms, such as those in England, in terms of their outcomes. These have generally focused on academic performance and inequality (though as we shall see in the next chapter, there are many other outcomes that school choice could be used to promote). The consensus is that any effect on academic outcomes is uncertain and modest in size. Moreover, increased choice seems to be associated with a more segregated, and so less equitable, system.

An OECD review of the international evidence concludes that “only a few studies find a link between increased choice and enhanced student outcomes, and when they do exist, the effects are quite small and not always statistically significant” (Musset 2012, 30). An influential systematic review of US studies reports a significant positive relationship between competition and academic outcomes in a third of studies, but that many of these are relatively small effects that are not robust to alternative model specifications. Overall, it concludes that “The positive gains from competition are modest in scope with respect to realistic changes in levels of competition” (Belfield and Levin 2002, 79). Summarising research from England, Sweden, the USA and Chile, Allen and Burgess (2010, 26) claim that “evidence to support the idea that competition in education will raise attainment is not overwhelming”.

Evidence of any positive effect is particularly weak in England, where several studies have compared the performance of schools in areas of more competition (and hence greater effective choice) with areas of less competition (Sahlgren 2013). Estimates of the effect on academic results of a school being in an area with higher population density vary from positive (Bradley, Johnes, and Millington 2001), to minimal (Gibbons and Silva 2008) to zero (Levačić 2004). Schools that are close to a local authority boundary, and so might be expected to face less competition (since children are less likely to apply to schools outside their local authority area) perform no worse (Gibbons, Machin, and Silva 2008). Similarly, local authorities that have split into smaller authorities, and so become less competitive, have not seen a significant negative effect on pupil attainment (Burgess and Slater 2006). Areas with more faith and autonomous schools, which might be expected to be more competitive, have no better attainment (Allen and Vignoles 2016).

The literature also indicates that school choice worsens segregation. The OECD lists studies from Australia, Chile, Denmark, Germany, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Spain, Sweden, and the US that all find increases in inter-school segregation by ethnicity, socioeconomic status or ability (Musset 2012, 36). In England, Gorard & Fitz (2000) find no increase in overall segregation following the Education Reform Act. However, other studies find that levels of school segregation are higher than levels of residential segregation (Allen, Burgess, and Key 2010), and that the gap is greater in areas with more choice and competition (Allen 2007). Both indicate that choice does in fact contribute to segregation (R. Harris 2010), even if this has been offset by other factors at a national level.

Advocates of school choice can make four responses to this evidence base. First, they might hold the line on the empirical controversy, because they believe that the studies with positive findings are more reliable, or because they expect future studies to support their view. Second, they might argue existing studies focus on the wrong outcomes – perhaps school choice has led to happier students in environments that better match their personalities. Third, they might insist that the disappointing results to date are because choice reforms have not yet been properly implemented (Sahlgren 2013). It is possible that with better, more user-friendly school information, more spare capacity so that more families can get their preferred schools, preferential treatment given to applications from disadvantaged families, and greater incentive for schools to grow and for new schools to open, choice will be more effective at improving quality, efficiency and equity (Allen and Burgess 2010; Montacute and Cullinane 2018). Fourth, most relevant for our purposes, they may respond by turning away from outcomes. As Dowding and John (2009, 219) put it, “Even if choice does not increase efficiency, and even if it increases

inequity, some might argue that increasing choice in public service could be justified on the grounds of its intrinsic value”.

## **2.4 The Intrinsic (Dis)value of School Choice**

### *2.4.1 Intrinsic Arguments for School Choice*

In making the case for greater choice in public services, there has always been a line of thought that has focused on the intrinsic value of choice, as well as its instrumental benefits. David Halpern, a leading proponent of public service choice within Tony Blair’s Prime Minister’s Strategy Unit, claims that “There are strong arguments for saying that extending choice and greater responsibility is both a good in its own right and an effective means to an end” (McAteer 2005, 80). In their government-commissioned review of secondary admissions, Coldron et al (2008, iii) take as a premise that “An effective system would also, as far as possible, enable parents to educate their children according to their beliefs, fulfilling the need to protect individual liberty, the dimension of justice of autonomy”. Gorard (1999, 27) identifies the “liberty argument” that “choice is a freedom and therefore a good thing by definition” as one of three types of argument for school choice, alongside equality and ‘economy’ (choice will alter incentives to drive up standards). Ben-Porath (2009, 528) sees school choice as promoting “two important policy goals” – to “improve control of individuals over the realisation of their preferences, and thus enhance autonomy as self-determination” as well as improving quality through competition. Dowding (1992, 313) also stresses the importance of control: “Surely one of the reasons for valuing increased choice in areas of state provision is that it is supposed to increase the control of the citizen over that provision”.

On this basis, Gintis (1995, 493) concludes that “it is a mistake to evaluate the competitive delivery of educational services on the basis of traditional educational performance measures alone, since consumers value the ability to choose, independent from any measurable effects of such choice on standard measures of educational performance”. Similarly, Goodwin (2009, 270) argues that the case for school choice “does not depend on its potential to dramatically alter school composition or performance, but on the extension of rights and devolution of power to service users”. For Kelly (2010, 331), “Fundamentally, school choice is about freedom”. Le Grand takes up the theme of empowering public service users through choice, arguing that this

is an effective way of respecting their autonomy as ‘deliberative and purposive users’. In his view, “the principle of autonomy requires that users are treated less like pawns, the weakest pieces on the chess board, and more like the most powerful piece, the queen” (Le Grand 2009, 10–11), an argument echoed by Klein and Miller (1995).

For all these endorsements of the view that choice in public services has intrinsic value, the argument remains curiously under-explored. Typically, the idea is mentioned in passing or taken as self-explanatory. Yet as we shall see, it is far from obvious or uncontroversial how or why choice in public services should have intrinsic value. Is choice desirable because it promotes welfare, autonomy or both? Is public service choice in fact the sort of choice that promotes these values? Specifically, in the case of school choice, is it intended to empower children, parents or both? None of these questions are straightforward – as we shall see, they require us to delve into ongoing debates in philosophy as to what has ultimate value, the relationship between choice, freedom and autonomy and the moral status of children. Chapter 3 explores these questions in more depth, expanding upon the argument that school choice has intrinsic value, to understand the different versions of the claim and identify their premises and assumptions.

#### *2.42 Intrinsic Arguments Against School Choice*

At the same time, a number of commentators have suggested that choice in public services might in fact have intrinsic *dis*value. Assessing our options, it is argued, can be difficult, complicated and overwhelming. This leads us to feel anxious and stressed as we choose, and regretful once we have made our decision. Choice entails responsibility, and this responsibility is felt as a burden. A vast literature in social psychology is devoted to these phenomena, variously labelled ‘choice overload’, the ‘overchoice effect’ and the ‘tyranny of choice’ (Scheibehenne, Greifeneder, and Todd 2010). A number of books have sought to theorise and popularise the findings, most notably Schwartz’s *The Paradox of Choice* (2005) and Iyengar’s *The Art of Choosing* (2011). Clarke’s *Challenging Choices* (2010) approaches the same issues from a sociological angle.

The original experiments demonstrating the negative psychological effects of choice related to relatively minor consumer decisions – the difficulties caused by choosing from a wide array of pens, chocolates, coffee and (most famously) jam (Iyengar and Lepper 2000; Scheibehenne,



Greifeneder, and Todd 2010). However, some have argued that the implications of these findings are far reaching. Many of the underlying processes may apply to more fundamental decisions – choosing a job (Iyengar, Wells, and Schwartz 2006), life partner (D’Angelo and Toma 2017) or even whether to keep a loved one on life support (Botti, Orfali, and Iyengar 2009) – where the higher stakes can mean greater psychological pain. Moreover, with less consequential choices, “even the trivial decisions add up. If the experience of disappointment is relentless, if virtually every choice one makes fails to live up to expectations and aspirations, then the trivial looms larger and larger, and the conclusion that one cannot do anything right becomes inevitable, and potentially devastating” (Schwartz 2009, 397). In this way, the difficulties of having to make so many choices, and so many consequential choices, has been linked (admittedly speculatively) to depression, anomie, anxiety and suicide (Schwartz 2009, 397–98).

The tension between these warnings of the dangers of choice and a political agenda pursuing the expansion of choice in public services has not gone unnoticed. Discussions of choice overload in the media invariably consider the policy implications of the theory (Jeffries 2015; Lott 2015; Wilby 2004). For example, Wilby (2004) recommends *The Paradox of Choice* to the government, claiming that “Education and health take you on to a wholly new level of anxiety...The anxiety that Schwartz describes becomes almost unbearable, and the greater the choice, the greater the anxiety”.

A number of academic articles have also referred to choice overload and similar theoretical ideas in the context of public service choice. Some have expressed scepticism that the psychological phenomenon is particularly relevant. Le Grand (2009, 48) argues that “Schwartz is right to draw attention to the problems associated with too much choice. However, one cannot leap from an acknowledgement of these problems to the assertion that people do not want choice at all”. In his view, some choice is better than none, and the question is whether the level of choice is excessive. Dowding and John (2009, 227) suggest it is unlikely to be, given the relatively small number of options: “What does this type of psychological cost mean for the introduction of choice into public services in the UK? Perhaps not much: after all, choice over hospitals has increased to three or four”.

At the same time, they also recognise that the seriousness of the decision might matter as much as the number of options: “the psychological costs of choosing might be great, not only because of the variety, but also the complexity and the importance of the decisions...there is a great deal more stress involved in choosing a medical treatment, or school, than is involved over a choice

of jam” (Dowding and John 2009, 227–28). For some scholars, these psychological costs are enough to cast doubt on the very project of increasing choice in public services. Barnes and Prior (1995, 54), argue that “we may resent the burden of having to make a difficult and anxiety-provoking choice”, and that “Far from providing a source of power, enabling individuals to shape their lives with confidence, choice is experienced as *risk*” (Barnes and Prior 1995, 54). They conclude that “Prioritizing the extension of consumer choice in public welfare services is a policy objective of, at best, narrow application with severely limited benefits in the form of increased user empowerment, and at worst a recipe for disempowering people already experiencing disadvantage, stress and uncertainty” (Barnes and Prior 1995, 58). This argument is echoed by Macaulay and Wilson (2008), who explicitly link Barnes and Prior’s arguments to Schwartz’s research.

Others argue for a more nuanced approach, suggesting that the desirability of choice may vary across different contexts and domains of policy. Botti & Iyengar (2006) argue that policymakers should “not include an additional option unless there is a substantial chance it will increase consumer welfare”. Schwartz & Cheek (2017) suggest that policymakers weigh the psychological burdens of choice against people’s desire for choice, the likely effect on their well-being and the effect on their freedom before expanding choice.

There has been some discussion over whether choice is likely to be harmful or beneficial in the specific context of school choice. Bevan & Fasolo (2013, 57), who are generally sceptical of choice in public services on psychological grounds, nonetheless suggest that schools are better suited to user choice than other services. This is because they envisage a market where children have very different needs and tastes which will be clear to their parents, who can choose between a variety of schools and have ample opportunity to learn about school quality (Bevan and Fasolo 2013, 57). As later chapters will show, these are questionable assumptions about how choice actually operates in the UK.

Others suggest that school choice may be more problematic than choice of other public services. Tooley (2000, 126) argues that the costs of acquiring information, making judgements and bearing responsibility “seem to be particularly relevant in the case of choice of education”. As we have seen, Dowding and John (2009, 227–28) cite school choice as an especially stressful decision. Botti & Iyengar (2006, 26) single out school choice for concern because such decisions “are usually highly consequential, involve a large number of alternatives, and may entail the consideration of aversive options”. Schwartz (2009) focuses on the potential for regret in school choice, arguing that giving families more options will lead to higher expectations for their

schools, disappointment when these expectations are not met, leading people to blame themselves for failing to find a good enough school.

## 2.5 Conclusion

England and Scotland have taken very different approaches to school choice. In Scotland, active formal choice is an aberration, with the vast majority attending their catchment school. In England, by contrast, there is no presumption that children will attend their local school, comparing schools is made easier and schools are encouraged to specialise and compete for students. Evaluations of school choice policies like the ones adopted in England suggest they do little to improve academic outcomes and worsen segregation. In the face of such evidence, proponents of school choice can and do argue that the value of school choice is in fact intrinsic. At the same time, opponents of school choice will argue that it has intrinsic *dis*value. The rest of this thesis attempts to adjudicate between such claims. It begins, in the following chapter, by defining intrinsic value and disvalue, and asking how we can identify it.

### 3. Why and when might choice have intrinsic (dis)value?

The question of whether school choice has intrinsic value or disvalue is, like all questions of value, partly philosophical. Consequently, in this chapter, I provide an overview of some of the major philosophical issues at stake. At the same time, I will argue that the intrinsic (dis)value of choice is not a *purely* philosophical matter, but that it also raises a number of empirical questions, questions that the empirical portion of this thesis will seek to answer.

The purpose of this chapter, therefore, is to establish the theoretical background for the empirical analysis to come. Specifically, it addresses the following question: why, and under what circumstances, might school choice be intrinsically good or intrinsically bad? To help address this question, I draw upon three distinct bodies of scholarly literature: i) theoretical discussions in social policy about the value of choice in public services, ii) philosophical debates about the value of choice, freedom and autonomy and iii) psychological explorations of the phenomenon and consequences of choice.

In this chapter, I begin by drawing the distinction between instrumental and intrinsic (dis)value. I then outline the main positions on the question of whether school choice has intrinsic (dis)value, so as to identify the empirical claims that they make or rely upon. These are the empirical claims that we will take forward and test in the chapters to come. I do not, however, attempt to adjudicate between normative claims, or to argue for a particular controversial normative position. I seek only to describe, clarify and explore the implications of the different normative positions in the literature.

#### 3.1 What is Intrinsic Value?

The central theoretical concept at the heart of this thesis is value (and its opposite, disvalue). By value, I mean - in the most general terms - anything that we can call good (or bad), anything that makes a state of affairs better (or worse) (Schroeder 2016). When considering the value of choice in public services, it is common to distinguish intrinsic from instrumental value (Curtice and Heath 2009; Dowding and John 2009; Exley 2014). Though the distinction is usually taken to be unproblematic, as we shall see the two are not always easily separated.

Dowding and John (2009, 219) provide the clearest elaboration in the literature of the difference between intrinsic and instrumental value:

*“We define choice as being instrumentally valuable in the sense that increasing choice in public services brings welfare gains through efficiency by the signals that choice gives to providers (generally though not exclusively through market or quasi-market processes). We define choice as being intrinsically desirable if it is desired for itself, even though why it is desired might be further explicated (for example, choice enhances individual autonomy). (In that sense any intrinsic value can be further justified instrumentally)”*

More pithily, they say that “Choice might be valued instrumentally: for what it brings; or it might be valued intrinsically: for what it is” (Dowding and John 2009).

The first of these definitions is incomplete. Dowding and John identify efficiency as the only instrumental value. Yet choice in public services may have any number of other positive consequences that I take are instrumentally desirable – for example, reducing inequality or social segregation or increasing convenience for the users. The second of these definitions is somewhat ambiguous. Where do we draw the line between ‘what choice is’, and ‘what choice brings’? Choice might ‘bring’ a person both enhanced autonomy and also the ability to attend a better school. The increase in autonomy may follow more immediately and may seem in some sense to attach more closely to the choice, but both can reasonably be seen as consequences of the choice. On what grounds can we say that one of these consequences is ‘intrinsic’, and the other ‘instrumental’?

I believe the most helpful way of making sense of the distinction is by distinguishing the value of *choosing* from the value of the *outcome* of choice. What we call intrinsic value, I suggest, is any value that flows from choosing – the fact that we can consider options X and Y, and the process of deciding between them. What we call instrumental value, I suggest, is the value that flows from X or Y actually coming about.

To see how these come apart, consider the following thought experiment. Imagine in world A, everybody has full choice of schools. By contrast, in world B, an omniscient planner can anticipate with perfect accuracy which school every person would choose and allocates it to them without giving them any say in the matter. The final allocation of schools is identical between world A and world B. If world A is in any respects better than world B, that represents the intrinsic value of choice. If world A is in any respects *worse* than world B, that represents the intrinsic *dis*value of choice.

Using this definition, we can see that choice could in theory have a number of positive or negative outcomes that would be classed as instrumentally (dis)valuable. Most obviously, the outcomes considered by the studies in 2.3: academic attainment and segregation. However, school choice could also be instrumentally valuable if it increases students’ ability to succeed

economically, participate in society, be critical and moral democratic citizens, form healthy personal relationships and find happiness and fulfilment (Brighouse et al. 2016). Alternatively, it would create instrumental disvalue if it reduces these things. I will not here attempt to list or categorise the various outcomes people might think have instrumental value. However, it is important to note that previous studies have only considered the impact of school choice on a limited selection of these instrumental goods.

Choice can contribute to producing these different forms of instrumental value or disvalue through each of the mechanisms described in 2.1. Educational attainment may be expected to improve because i) more students attend higher performing schools or schools better matched to their needs, or ii) because schools are better incentivised to improve educational attainment, or iii) because lower performing schools shut down and are replaced by better performing ones. Equally, the allocation of students, incentive structure of schools and entry and exit of schools may each serve to increase student happiness or parental satisfaction, if that is the basis for choice.

I described intrinsic value above as value that “flows from choosing”. This metaphor could be somewhat misleading insofar as it implies that intrinsic value is separated from the act of choosing, ‘following on’ in a linear fashion. Throughout this thesis, I will discuss a number of forms of value and disvalue that are like this, but it is worth noting that some forms of value may be integrally linked to the act of choice. For example, as we shall see (3.41), some philosophers believe that choice is *constitutive* of freedom, agency or autonomy: in the very act of choosing, the chooser embodies those values. I will not dwell long on such theories throughout this thesis, as they are often purely normative and as such not amenable to empirical evidence (although on some versions empirical evidence on the subjective value given to the choice by the chooser may influence our assessment of the relative value of the freedom)

It is not always straightforward to classify sources of value as intrinsic or instrumental. Consider the claim that school choice is valuable because parents and children are more likely to get a place at a school of their preference. The claim requires further explication for us to classify the value. Why does child A want to go to school A, and why is it valuable to grant this preference? If it is because child A will do better (according to whichever outcome) at school A, that is clearly instrumental value. If it is because child A wants to go to school A, that is also instrumental value. In both cases, the hypothetical omniscient planner could realise the value by allocating child A school A. However, if the value of granting preferences comes from the

child's active endorsement of the school, that requires them to actually make a choice, and is therefore intrinsic value.

The distinction may become even fuzzier when we try to apply it in practice. Choosers may struggle to disentangle the various reasons why they want what they want, and to strip away the context. For example, it may be difficult to decouple wanting choice out of a desire for control from wanting choice to be more confident of getting a well-suited option. The desire for control may be greater where a particular outcome is desired or feared more strongly. A certain fuzziness in the line between intrinsic and instrumental value may be unavoidable. Nevertheless, I believe the way I have drawn the distinction is clearer and more defensible than previous attempts.

In this chapter, and throughout this thesis, I focus on two main ways in which choice has intrinsic value or disvalue. First, the fact of choice or the process of choosing may itself enhance or diminish subjective welfare. Second, it can support or limit freedom/autonomy. In the sections that follow, I will elaborate in turn what I mean by 'subjective welfare' and 'freedom/autonomy', the different ways in which they might be conceptualised, and describe how these different conceptions of value relate to choice.

I focus on subjective wellbeing and freedom/autonomy because I believe they are among the most prominent and plausible accounts of why school choice could have intrinsic value. However, there are others which are beyond the scope of this thesis. For example, I do not discuss in detail theories that link the value of choice to the importance of parents (or indeed children) taking responsibility for their lives and discharging their moral duties, which may be seen as helping them to live better lives or contributing to creating a better society (Moschella 2012).

Nor do I explore in detail the possibility that the fact of choice or the process of choice could positively affect the way families relate to their school or the system more broadly. For example, they may be more committed to and engaged with the school because they have chosen it – a form of indirect intrinsic value that benefits not just the choosers themselves, but possibly the wider school community as well. In part, this is to restrict the scope of the thesis, but also because such benefits would be difficult to evidence under the empirical approach I use later in the thesis, which focuses on the point of choosing, rather than the possible impact of choice after schools have been allocated.

### 3.2 Why Might Choice Promote Subjective Welfare?

Subjective welfare theories, as the name suggests, involve the claim that something has value to the extent that it makes people better or worse off subjectively, according to their own perception. This can be cashed out in terms of ‘desire theories’ or ‘affective theories’.

#### 3.21 *Desire Theories*

According to desire theories, people are better off to the extent that their desires are fulfilled (Crisp 2017; Heathwood 2015). The world is a better place if people get more of the things they want, and the stronger a person’s desire for something, the better it is for them to have it. This implies that the intrinsic value of choice in any area, such as schools, depends on the extent to which people want choice over it (independent of any expectations that this choice will lead to better outcomes). This, in turn, leads to three empirical questions. First, do people want choice over schools?<sup>5</sup> Second, how strong is their desire for choice? Third, does this conflict with any other desires, and how strong are these opposing desires?

These three empirical questions are sufficient for those who locate value in satisfying *actual* desires. However, on some versions of desire theory, only *hypothetical* desires formed under idealised conditions count – what a person would want if they were fully informed and appreciative of the benefits and drawbacks of different courses of action (Brandt 1979, 110–29; Heathwood 2015). Since real-life desires are not so well-informed and considered, showing empirically that people actually want school choice is insufficient to show that it is valuable under idealised desire theories. Yet Crisp (2017) claims that under idealised desire theories, it is still a necessary condition for a person to actually have the desire in question for fulfilling that desire to have any value. On his view, despite the fact my palate could hypothetically be trained to enjoy *foie gras*, it does not benefit me to give me *foie gras* unless I already in fact have the taste. Thus, even under idealised desire theories, the empirical evidence on whether people actually desire school choice can be used to rule it in or rule it out as a possible source of value.

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<sup>5</sup> In principle, the desire could be either to have choice for themselves or for there to be a general policy of offering choice to all. The latter raises the question of external preferences (see section 3.5.1 below).



### 3.22 *Affective Theories*

An alternative way of conceptualising subjective welfare is by reference to people's feelings – through concepts like happiness, pleasure, satisfaction, fulfilment or suffering. We can label such theories 'affective' – they all entail the view that value consists in positive feelings, and disvalue in negative feelings. Precisely *which* feelings have value – the pleasantness of our experiences, our moment-to-moment emotional states, or our overall evaluation of our lives – is a matter of ongoing philosophical debate (Haybron 2011). For our purposes, the distinctions do not matter too much.

From an affective perspective, there are a number of ways a choice like school choice could have intrinsic value. Choosing – learning about alternatives, anticipating what they would be like, trying them out – can be enjoyable, which is why shopping can be a recreational activity (Dowding and John 2009; G. Dworkin 1982). While Barnes & Prior (1995) express scepticism that choosing public services can be as fun as shopping for holidays or clothes, we shall find that people do sometimes enjoy school open days for similar reasons.

Likely more relevant are the negative psychological effects of being denied choice (Bucelli 2017; Goodwin 2009; Le Grand and New 2015). It has been argued that people increasingly expect choice in almost all domains of their life, and so are liable to feel disappointed if these expectations are frustrated (Dowding and John 2009; Hargreaves 1996a). Self-determination theory (SDT) posits that humans have a basic psychological need for autonomy (Deci, Ryan, and Wright 2015). As with biological needs, to be deprived of autonomy is believed to be extremely detrimental to our wellbeing.

According to SDT, it matters greatly whether we feel our actions to be truly volitional or controlled by forces external to us. Insofar as we feel forced to pursue a course of action that we do not endorse or identify with, this has a negative effect on our happiness (Botti and Iyengar 2006; Moller, Ryan, and Deci 2006). At the extreme, this can feed into a broader sense of disempowerment and helplessness, sometimes with drastic consequences. Seligman (1975) finds that a chronic lack of control over one's life can lead to depression. A substantial literature links a lack of control at work to adverse mental and physical health outcomes (Baxter et al. 2009, 55). For example, civil servants with low job control are more likely to develop heart disease (Bosma et al. 1997).

It is important to note that SDT emphasises *perceived* control, rather than choice per se. The two often go together, but not always. For example, if the agent believes that their options are trivial or meaningless, if they feel overwhelmed by the number of options, or if they feel they are being forced to choose when they would prefer not to, choice can actually undermine perceived control (Moller, Ryan, and Deci 2006).

All of these arguments rest fundamentally on empirical, rather than normative, claims – aside from the relatively uncontroversial claim that, all else equal, increasing subjective welfare is a good thing. Thus, affective arguments that choice has intrinsic value in a particular domain raise a number of empirical questions: do people enjoy the process of choosing? Do they feel empowered by having a choice? Does having choice give them a sense of control, and does its absence feel like a lack of control?

### **3.3 Why Might Choice Reduce Subjective Welfare?**

At the same time, the strongest objections to choice on intrinsic grounds appeal to subjective welfare. As discussed in the chapter 2, many scholars - in psychology (Iyengar 2011; Schwartz 2005), sociology (M. Clarke 2010) and philosophy (G. Dworkin 1982) - have argued that the act of choosing often has a negative emotional impact on the chooser.

Such accounts have deep scholarly roots. One strand of thinking has long explored the information gathering and processing costs of choosing. Simon's (1967) recognition that people's cognitive limitations mean that there are costs to fully engaging with a decision, and so rationality is 'bounded', is at the heart of behavioural economics. A similar idea is central to Baumeister et al's (1998) psychological theory of 'ego depletion'. This posits that humans have a finite capacity for 'volitional acts', such as making choices or exerting willpower.<sup>6</sup> Choice, on this model, involves mental effort, which is a scarce resource. Another strand has focused on the mental conflict involved in having to give up an attractive option or face up to an unattractive alternative. This core idea is present, for example, in Festinger's (1957) theory of cognitive dissonance. It is extended in Lipowski's (1970) theory of attractive stimulus overload, which suggests that the growth in options in affluent postwar societies has led to more frequent confusion, anxiety and paralysis. Within philosophy, Dworkin (1982) outlines both the

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<sup>6</sup> It should be noted that recent research has called the empirical validity of ego depletion into question (Friesen et al. 2018).

‘decision-making costs’ (in terms of information and the time and effort of deliberation), and ‘psychic costs’ (fear of regret, the burden of responsibility, and concern over what choices say about one’s identity) of choice.

Across these diverse theoretical accounts, we can distinguish five distinct but overlapping mechanisms through which having a choice can leave people worse off subjectively. First, choice can be effortful, and so carries opportunity costs in terms of time, energy and cognitive resources (Baumeister et al. 1998). Many choices involve acquiring information (for example, researching options, physically exploring them, seeking advice from others), processing this information (reading, observing, reflecting on all this material), deliberation, and sometimes discussion or negotiation (for choices made jointly with others). Time and effort spent choosing could have been used for other important or enjoyable activities (Schwartz 2005, 120–24).

Second, choosing may involve confronting difficult, complicated and unpleasant trade-offs. It can be hard to evaluate and compare alternatives with costs and benefits across a range of domains, many of which may seem incommensurable. For example, School A may have the best location, School B the best ethos and School C the best results. Confronting these trade-offs – recognising that we cannot get everything that we want – can be disagreeable and cause emotional conflict (Botti and Iyengar 2006, 27; Schwartz 2005, 124–37).

A third important consideration is the idea of pressure, which can be felt as a psychological burden. To have to make a choice is to take responsibility for the outcome, and to be culpable for the consequences. The prospect of bringing about a suboptimal outcome, with nothing and nobody to blame but yourself, can heighten the stakes. The act of choosing can become inflected with the fear of making a mistake. (G. Dworkin 1982; Schwartz 2005, 147–65).

A fourth, associated, problem is regret. This operates prior to the choice being made, through the anticipation of regret, which leads to a fear of closing off opportunities. It manifests in a reluctance to act, wariness of committing to an option and missing out on the alternatives. It also occurs after a decision is made – the phenomenon of ‘buyer’s remorse’. We are constantly concerned that we might have done better, looking over our shoulder at missed possibilities (G. Dworkin 1982; Schwartz 2005, 147–65). Schwartz (2005, 148) observes that “Both types of regret – anticipated and postdecision – will raise the emotional stakes of decisions. Anticipated regret will make decisions harder to make, and postdecision regret will make them harder to enjoy”.

Finally, having choice may serve to raise expectations about how good the chosen option will be (Chernev, Böckenholt, and Goodman 2015; Schwartz 2009). Since the outcome is now under the chooser's control, and in principle they can find the option best suited to their preferences, it is natural to anticipate a better outcome. When it then comes to making a choice, these elevated standards may make the option set appear worse, which will make the choice process more frustrating and unpleasant. It may also increase disappointment with the outcome if it cannot meet these expectations. Worse still, there is the potential for a toxic interaction between the raised expectations caused by choice and its tendency to encourage regret. As expectations exceed possible outcomes, this makes disappointment more likely, and this disappointment is then exacerbated by the perception of responsibility for the outcome (Schwartz 2009).

On the other hand, it is also possible that choosers feel better disposed towards an outcome by virtue of having chosen it – a phenomenon described by psychologists as ‘choice-supportive misremembering’ (Lind et al. 2017).<sup>7</sup>

For these reasons, a large number of studies in social psychology have shown that greater choice *can* lead to lower satisfaction and higher regret. Yet this is clearly not always, or even typically, the case. In a meta-analysis of 50 experiments, Scheibehenne et al (2010) find that *on average* increasing choice has no positive or negative impact. The best way to account for this finding is to recognise that it is not choice per se that is bad for subjective welfare, but *too much* choice or the *wrong sorts of choices*.

While the psychology literature tends to focus on the overwhelming assortments of jam or jeans (Iyengar and Lepper 2000; Schwartz 2005), this is not simply a function of the number of options. In general, as the number of options increases, we would expect the process of choice to become more difficult, time consuming, cognitively taxing, pressurised and regret-inducing. Yet it is easy to imagine cases of unproblematic choice from a large array of alternatives – there may be 100 options, but we know exactly what we want. Conversely, it is easy to imagine genuine dilemmas where there are only two options, but it is incredibly difficult and draining to decide between them. In some cases, *any* choice may be too much. For example, Botti et al (2009) explore the impact on parents of having to decide whether or not to withdraw life support from their newborn children. There were only two options, but parents who made the decision

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<sup>7</sup> If a person's subjective evaluation of an outcome is better or worse because they chose it, is that intrinsic or instrumental (dis)value? I am inclined to say it is intrinsic because the (dis)value is independent of the outcome itself (i.e. the child may go to the same school they would have been allocated), and it is only the *perception* of the outcome that has changed.

themselves were more likely to feel negative emotions, including guilt and anger, than parents whose doctors decided on their behalf.

If not just the number of options, what else determines whether a person has too much choice? Chernev et al's (2015) meta-analysis of 53 studies identifies four aspects of choice which are associated with lower satisfaction or confidence in the outcome, greater regret, greater tendency to defer choosing and greater likelihood of switching after the choice is made. First, the difficulty of the decision task: having to process more information or being more rushed for time. Second the complexity of the choice set: the absence of a dominant option, or options not being easily comparable in their attributes. Third, having less background knowledge and weaker pre-existing preferences. Fourth, having a more specific and binding choice.

Other factors beyond the scope of Chernev et al's analysis have been found to influence a person's experience of choice. Most prominent among these is the extent to which they maximise or satisfice. How best to operationalise the concepts is a matter of ongoing debate (Cheek and Schwartz 2016; Misuraca and Fasolo 2018). In the broadest terms, though, maximising involves seeking the optimum alternative. By contrast, satisficing involves determining the minimum acceptable outcome or attributes and choosing the first encountered option that fulfils these requirements. Put another way, maximising is seeking the best, whereas satisficing is looking for something good enough. While the original distinction between satisficing and maximising relates in the first instance to alternative approaches to individual choices, the general tendency to more often maximise or satisfice across different choices has also been identified as a personality trait. Maximisers have been found to be more perfectionist, more prone to counterfactual thinking and regret, less optimistic and more neurotic. Likely as a consequence, maximisers have been shown to be less happy, more hopeless, less well-adjusted and at greater risk of depression and suicide (Cheek and Schwartz 2016). Choice therefore appears to be worse for maximisers, who experience more negative affect and stress during the decision process (Cheek and Schwartz 2016).

To sum up, there are five ways in which choice (including school choice) can reduce subjective welfare: it can be demanding in terms of time and cognitive resources, it can involve confronting unpleasant trade-offs, it can create pressure, it can create regret (both anticipated and postdecision) and it can raise expectations. Evidence suggests that these negative consequences are not associated with all (or even most) choices. However, they are particularly likely when the choice is demanding and difficult, where the chooser has less clear and informed preferences

to begin with, where the decision excludes more options and is more binding, when the chooser is a maximiser rather than a satisficer, and when the alternatives are less desirable.

### 3.4 Why Might Choice Support Freedom/Autonomy?

#### 3.4.1 Freedom as Options

For some, it is almost axiomatic that more choice is better than less. In defending school choice, Hargreaves (1996b, 133) describes as “common-sense” the claim that “*other things being equal*, choice is preferable to lack of choice”. According to certain conceptions of freedom, a person’s freedom by definition is a function of the number of options they have (Dowding 1992, 301; Sugden 2003, 797–803). Any choice that increases their options, therefore, is valuable because it enhances freedom (including offering a choice in the first place, which increases their options from zero).

Other theorists reach a similar conclusion by different routes. Carter (1999; 2004) claims that a person’s freedom depends on the extent of their available action. Insofar as providing choice makes particular actions available, it increases freedom. Hurka (1987) argues that there is value in agency, defined as having a causal impact on the world. For Hurka, agency can be negative as well as positive. If I choose option A over options B, C and D, I am causally responsible not only for A occurring, but also for not-B, not-C and not-D. Choice provides more options, and the more options I have, the more outcomes I can block, and the greater my agency.

At the same time, it is widely accepted, even by those who believe that all choices have some value (Carter 1999, 119–25), that some choices are more valuable for freedom than others. Most accounts suggest that the value of a choice depends on two factors. First, its *significance*: how important are the goals, desires or activities it allows people to pursue? In this vein, Norman (1981) argues that a choice of careers is more valuable than a choice of washing powders, because a person’s career matters more to their life. Second, the *quality of the options* the choice provides. This is typically a function of the desirability of the options, and their diversity – how different they are from each other and existing options. Sen (1990) claims that a person choosing between the options {great, terrific, wonderful} is freer than a person choosing between {bad, awful, dismal} because they have more desirable options. Bavetta & Guala (2003) argue a person

choosing between two identical cans of beer, differing only in terms of their bar code, does not have sufficiently diverse options for their choice to be valuable. Thus even if all choices increase freedom, there are some that may be of modest or minimal value. Indeed, many philosophers maintain that certain choices are so trivial or meaningless as to have no value at all (Dowding 1992; Raz 1988).

How, then, are we to determine the significance of a choice or the quality of additional options? There are three main approaches (though these are not mutually exclusive and hybrid views are common). The first is by reference to the agent's goals and preferences. The significance of a choice is its significance to the chooser, by their own lights (Arneson 1985). For example, Berlin (2002) suggests that the value of an option depends (in part) on its importance to the agent's "plan of life". This approach implies the quality of an option depends on the likelihood of the agent choosing it – options that they would never seriously consider are worth less than options the agent finds more attractive (Sen 1991). On this view, the value of providing school choice depends on a) the significance that people place on choosing schools (Section 3.4.4 considers in more detail what this might mean); and b) their satisfaction with the range of providers they have to choose from.

The second approach is by reference to societal norms and preferences. Berlin (2002) argues that the value of a choice depends on "what value not merely the agent, but the general sentiment of the society in which he lives puts on [it]". This implies school choice is significant if society at large, not just parents or children, see it as significant. Similarly, Sugden (2003) argues that the quality of an option depends on the distribution of preferences in society. The choice between provider A and B has some value if at least one person comparable to the chooser would prefer A and one person comparable would prefer B. The more evenly balanced preferences are between the two options, the more valuable the choice.

The third approach is by reference to independent objective values. On this view, it is just a matter of fact that certain choices and options are significant and valuable, and others are trivial, whether or not people recognise them as such (Lloyd Thomas 1981; Taylor 1985). There is a potentially infinite range of views on what is objectively meaningful, so this can be cashed out in any number of idiosyncratic ways. I will not begin to try and explore all the possibilities here. However, the most common value that people refer to is autonomy.<sup>8</sup> For example, Raz (1988,

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<sup>8</sup> Alternatively, some accounts emphasise dignity or respect as the key values at stake, but these accounts typically pass through autonomy i.e. treating people in a respectful or dignified manner entails allowing to make them autonomous choices. See section 3.4.3.

246) says that the distinction between “valuable and worthless” freedoms depends on “their contribution to the ideal of personal autonomy”. I explore the implications of this claim, and the relationship between choice and autonomy in the following section.

We have established that school choice policies may increase freedom. Whether this increase is substantial, minor or entirely negligible depends on both philosophical and empirical questions. First, it depends on whether, as some philosophers contend, any and every choice enhances freedom. Second, it depends on how we are to judge the quality of the choice. If it is by reference to the goals and preferences of the agent, then we need empirical evidence to understand whether families choosing schools judge the choice to be significant, and how satisfied they are with their range of options. If it is by reference to societal attitudes and preferences, again we need empirical evidence to understand these: how significant does the public see school choice as being, and how diverse are preferences over schools? If we are to judge the quality of choice by reference to independent objective values, that raises the philosophical question of what these values are. As we shall see in the following section, this investigation may, in turn, generate further empirical questions.

### *3.42 Choice and Autonomy*

Arguments that choice in public services has intrinsic value often emphasise the role of choice in promoting autonomy (Ben-Porath 2009, 528; Dowding and John 2009, 219; Klein and Millar 1995; Le Grand 2009, 10–11). To understand such arguments, and to identify which choices promote autonomy, we need to elucidate what is meant by autonomy. This is far from straightforward. As philosophers commonly remark, autonomy is a multi-faceted concept used rather differently by different thinkers (Arpaly 2002, 118; Feinberg 1989; Le Grand and New 2015, 19).

For our purposes, it is helpful to distinguish four separate connotations of autonomy that I will call self-government, narrative control, authenticity and agential authority. I describe these as ‘connotations’ of the concept, rather than separate ‘conceptions’ or ‘interpretations’ because they are not competing or mutually exclusive, but are in fact closely linked. However, different conceptions of autonomy will emphasise different connotations, and it is possible that some



conceptions may drop certain connotations entirely. Further, these are not exhaustive – autonomy has other connotations that are not relevant here.<sup>9</sup>

### *3.43 Autonomy as Self-Government*

The first relevant connotation of autonomy is self-government: the idea that individuals should have a sphere of decision making protected from outside interference, analogous to states' rights to self-determination (Feinberg 1989). One way of thinking of this is that autonomy is freedom from paternalism. Self-government is believed to be important because it recognises our capacity to judge what is in our own good. By contrast, intrusion into our domain of legitimate decision making is problematic because it involves a “substitution of judgement” (Shiffrin 2000). Some other agent (such as the government) decides that we lack competence, that they are more capable than us, and so their judgement should take priority over ours (Brighouse 1997; Klein and Millar 1995; Le Grand and New 2015; Scanlon, Jr. 1986). These substitutions of judgement, it is argued, fail to show adequate respect or to recognise our dignity (Darwall 2006; Goodin 1981). As Dworkin (1982, 60) puts it, on this view what has intrinsic value is not having choices per se, “but being recognized as the kind of creature who is capable of making choices”.

Yet as Conly (2014) points out, there are many cases in which substitution of judgement does not seem demeaning or morally problematic. For example, if I take my car to the garage, and the mechanic replaces a faulty brake light without checking with me first, they have done me a favour, not disrespected me. Similarly, I am perfectly content for my surgeon to substitute their judgement for my own in deciding how best to operate on me.

There seem to be three relevant features of these cases which explain why relinquishing choice does not entail disrespect. First, they involve technical expertise: mechanics and doctors have access to knowledge that means they will be better decision makers than me. Second, people recognise their own lack of expertise and so are willing to delegate decisions to others. It is more plausible to cast their decision to change the brake light as a disrespectful substitution of judgement if I am knowledgeable about cars and tell the mechanic not to change anything without consulting me, than if I know nothing about cars and have given them carte blanche to

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<sup>9</sup> These include material independence (having the resources to get along in the world without depending on others), psychological independence (not being unduly influenced or manipulated by others) and agent autonomy (psychological self-control) (Arpaly 2002).

do as they see fit. Third, in these cases, the judgements involved do not relate to ultimate goals or projects – they relate to means, rather than ends. By going to a doctor or mechanic, I have already signalled that I want to improve my health or my car’s functioning. By contrast, if the doctor decides to give me a blood transfusion even though this conflicts with my religious beliefs, they are making a more fundamental judgement by prioritising my physical health over my spiritual faith.

Pulling this together, we can outline certain conditions under which the failure to provide choice is not a demeaning substitution of judgement. To the extent that:

- technical experts are better placed to exercise their judgement than those directly affected by the decision
- those affected accept this expertise and acknowledge their own lack of the necessary skills to choose well
- the choice involves selecting the best means to an end, rather than prioritising or choosing between fundamental goals and projects

the absence of choice is less normatively problematic. Consequently, one objective of this thesis is to determine the extent to which these conditions obtain in relation to school choice.

### *3.44 Autonomy as Narrative Control*

The second connotation of autonomy is what I will call ‘narrative control’. It is encapsulated by Brighouse’s (1997, 504–5) claim that “A good life needs to be led from the inside, as it were, endorsed by the person who leads it”.

Mills (1998) provides an elaborated account of autonomy as narrative control.<sup>10</sup> She argues that fundamentally, “We want a sense that we are the authors of our own lives, that our lives, if you will, are stories that we write rather than just read. We want a sense of our lives as something we do and not something that merely happens to us” (Mills 1998, 163). An autonomous life is one in which the agent sees themselves as taking an active, rather than passive, role.

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<sup>10</sup> She refers to it as ‘narrative authenticity’, but I have altered the label to avoid confusion with what I will refer to as ‘autonomy as authenticity’.

The desire for narrative control means that “We want to believe that the central facts of our lives – whether or not we have children, where we are educated, what career we follow, with whom we join as partners – contain in them some fundamental element of our own selection and decision” (Mills 1998, 154). This does not entail a general presumption in favour of control (as the principle of self-government above does), but more narrowly a *belief* (not necessarily the reality) that the *central facts* of our life are at least *partially* under our control.

Notice that this is a highly subjective account of autonomy. Mills is keen to emphasise the *perception* of control because she believes that these sentiments apply even in the many cases where our options are highly limited by external circumstances. She argues that choice can nevertheless be valuable because it gives us the opportunity “to endorse things as they are, to make peace with what is and what perhaps cannot be otherwise” (Mills 1998, 164). In such circumstances, choice allows us to ‘make sense’ of our lives, and to form our own narratives around them.

Equally, control only matters insofar as it relates to the ‘central facts’ of our lives. From Mills’ account, it is clear that this means only choices with what we might call ‘narrative significance’ have intrinsic value. Mills lists ‘where we are educated’ as a paradigmatic example of such a choice. However, which specific choices have narrative significance will vary substantially from person to person: which school a person attended may be pivotal in one person’s life story, but a footnote in another’s.

The idea of autonomy as narrative control leads us to two empirical questions about school choice. First, to what extent does choice enhance people’s perceived control over their lives? Second, what is the narrative significance, if any, of choosing a school? The two questions must go together: narratively significant events that we do not control can hardly contribute to our autonomy, but events we control without narrative significance are insufficiently meaningful to matter.

### 3.45 *Autonomy as Authenticity*

A third connotation of autonomy is the idea of authenticity (Arpaly 2002, 121–23; Buccelli 2017; Christman 2017).<sup>11</sup> On this view, autonomous choices are those that enable us to live our lives in accordance with our fundamental character and values, to live a life in which we are ‘true to ourselves’. For example, if I am a devout Christian, attending a school that helps me to express and develop my religious identity – for example, through prayer and theological teaching – might help me live more authentically.

Specifying which characteristics and beliefs are sufficiently fundamental to matter for authenticity is an invidious task (Mele 1995), and indeed some sceptics deny that there is such a thing as a ‘true self’ to be authentic to (Velleman 2005, 330–60). In general, though, we would expect a choice to have greater bearing on authenticity the more it relates to beliefs and characteristics with which the chooser strongly identifies.

However, it is also important to determine the *consequences* of the choice in terms of the chooser’s ability to live according to their beliefs and character. For example, if your religious belief only requires you to attend church on Sundays, the school you attend during the week is neither here nor there. By contrast, if you have a strong cultural preference not to mix with unmarried people of another gender, school choice is likely to be highly relevant. Thus, we have two further empirical questions: i) to what extent does choice relate to beliefs and characteristics that people strongly identify with? ii) how significant are the consequences of choice for people’s ability to live by these beliefs and characteristics?

In any case, notice that this account of autonomy as authenticity implies that the value of choice is instrumental, rather than intrinsic. If choice is intended to support authenticity, it is not the choice *per se* that is valued, but the contingent outcome. The value of choice depends on whether or not, in practice, choice aids people to live more authentic lives.

### *3.46 Autonomy as Agential Authority*

A fourth connotation of autonomy refers to the agent’s psychological processes and capacities – the considerations and desires that move them. Autonomy in this sense – what I will call ‘agential authority’ – refers to a form of self-control: the ability to deliberately reflect upon

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<sup>11</sup> Although some philosophers have taken pains to distinguish autonomy from authenticity (Velleman 2005, 338), the two are often run together, and I believe concern for authenticity is at least partly behind the belief that choice increases autonomy.

one's own motivations, decide upon a course of action and then execute it (Arpaly 2002, 118–19; Buccelli 2017; Frankfurt 1971). According to this notion, people can lack agential authority, and so autonomy, if they are prone to behave irrationally or impulsively, display weakness of will, or lack self-awareness.

Autonomy as agential authority focuses on internal rather than external constraints, and so does not have any direct relationship with choice. However, it has often been argued that choice has an 'educative' function, helping develop the necessary capacities for agential authority. Choosing may help us better understand ourselves, and what we really care about (Dowding 1992). It may also enable us to practice valuable skills such as reasoning, deliberation and critical evaluation (Bavetta and Guala 2003, 428; Conly 2017, 216; Mill 1985, 123).

This raises the empirical question of whether school choice does, in fact, generate self-knowledge. If so, we would expect preferences to shift, and values to be traded off over the course of deliberation. Further, it raises the question of whether this self-knowledge is pertinent only to school choice, or whether it might have relevance to other domains. We might also ask whether school choice offers effective practice of choice – to what extent do choosers gather information and rationally deliberate? Finally, it might be objected that in a society as apparently saturated with choice as the UK's, the marginal value of one more choice is negligible. Again, this is open to empirical debate. The high stakes of school choice may make it a better learning experience than everyday choices. For some, especially children and disadvantaged parents, meaningful choice may be the exception rather than the norm.

### **3.5 Does Parents Choosing on Behalf of Children Have Intrinsic Value?**

To this point, we have only considered theories regarding the (dis)value of choice in general. Typically, these assume that choice refers to an agent making decisions about their own life. Yet school choice has the distinctive feature that often the choosers (parents) make decisions on behalf of others (their children). This section considers how this distinction between chooser and user affects the applicability of the arguments considered so far to the specific case of school choice.

### *3.51 Subjective Welfare Theories*

On the face of it, the issue appears less relevant to subjective welfare theories. From a desire theory perspective, it merely adds another set of desires to consider – parents and children, both equally normatively significant. Similarly, from an affective perspective, it only adds more parties that can feel pleasure, fulfilment, stress, anxiety and other relevant emotions.

However, according to some versions of subjective welfare theories, there is a difference in the normative weight we ought to give personal preferences (things we want to happen to ourselves) and external preferences (things we want to happen to others).<sup>12</sup> For example, Dworkin (1990) argues that the external preferences of a repressive majority to outlaw homosexuality should not outweigh the personal preferences of a gay couple to be together. His solution is that we should morally disregard external preferences and give weight only to personal preferences.

This view is contested. Critics of Dworkin deny that any preference can be intrinsically bad (Smart 1961), or that there is a principled basis for excluding external preferences in this way (Ely 1983; Hart 1979). Others have sought to accommodate Dworkin's intuition by disregarding only 'antisocial' or malevolent preferences (Ely 1983; Harsanyi 1977, 62; Kymlicka 2002, 38).

If we accept Dworkin's argument, though, this implies that parents' desires for their children's wellbeing are external preferences, and as such ought to be morally disregarded (although Barry (1990) suggests that personal preferences ought to be extended to include one's family). Similarly, on affective theories, any welfare they derive from their children does not carry any normative weight. On this view, the only sorts of parental preferences or affective impacts with moral significance when it comes to school choice are self-regarding ones that bear directly on the parents: for example, the desire to avoid having to drive to a more distant school every morning, or their pride at raising a successful and well-adjusted child.

### *3.52 Freedom/Autonomy*

The fact that school choice often involves parents choosing on behalf of children has deeper implications for arguments based on freedom/autonomy. Generally, we talk of freedom and

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<sup>12</sup> Though the literature focuses on preferences, these arguments imply a corresponding distinction between 'personal welfare' and 'external welfare' for affective theories.

autonomy as *personal*: it is about increasing control over one's *own* life. Yet parents are making choices about how someone else will live their lives. It therefore seems puzzling to suggest that school choice might increase parents' autonomy, as for example Klein & Millar (1995) do.

There are three possible responses to this puzzle. The first is to insist that since the choice of school primarily affects children, they are the only relevant agents, but that they lack the capacity for autonomous choice. Therefore, school choice cannot be justified on the basis of autonomy. The second also maintains that children are the only relevant agents, but denies that they lack competence. Therefore, school choice promotes autonomy only insofar as students are the ones doing the choosing. The third position is that parents and children stand in a special relationship that means that parents have an autonomy interest in making decisions over their children. Therefore, school choice does in fact promote the autonomy of parents (and possibly also children).

The first position is adopted by Brighouse (1997; 2000) and Jonathan (1989), who argue that the notion of autonomy is a red herring in the school choice debate. Parents' autonomy is not at stake because "When they make choices concerning their children's education they are not making choices about how to live their own lives, but about how someone else will end up living his or her life. Granting them choice does not grant them power over themselves, but power over someone else" (Brighouse 1997, 505).

At the same time, it is widely held that children of this age lack the capacity for autonomous choice (Purdy 1992; Richards 2010), and as such there is no direct value in giving them a choice of schools. This lack of capacity has been attributed to a number of typical characteristics of children, with different accounts emphasising different (combinations of) characteristics. First, there is children's lack of factual knowledge and experience, and in particular 'background knowledge' of the range of possible ends and their likely consequences (Purdy 1992). Second, there is children's susceptibility to a range of cognitive limitations and biases – particularly impulsiveness, short termism, excessive confidence, poor emotional control, inadequate appreciation of risk and peer pressure (Richards 2010). Third, there is the instability of children's projects and objectives. Children, it is claimed, do not have settled 'rational life plans': a clear long-term vision of who and what they want to be, and how to achieve this. Instead, children are believed to be fickle: their ambitions change week-to-week (Purdy 1992).

Brighouse (2000) suggests that well-designed quasi-markets functioning through parental choice may *instrumentally* promote children's autonomy. Insofar as choice and competition improve the effectiveness of schools, this can enhance students' knowledge and rational capacities, and so

their ability to act autonomously in adulthood. On the other hand, it is possible that parents choosing on behalf of children may inhibit the children's autonomy. A common objection to school choice is that parents may use it to insulate children from ideas and beliefs that conflict with their own. For instance, Marples (2014, 32) characterises children as "vulnerable" and "gullible", and as such incapable of critically reflecting on belief systems inherited from their parents if they are merely echoed at school. Either way, school choice has no intrinsic benefit for autonomy on this view.

Those taking the second view, that children *are* capable of autonomous choice, believe that children do in fact meet the relevant standard of knowledge, cognitive ability and stability of life goals. As Cohen (1980) points out, some children are very capable in these regards, while many adults are not. In general, they argue for a lower standard of competence – requiring, for example, only the ability to plan for goals and understand basic causal relationships (e.g. that glass cuts and fire burns) in order to be considered capable of autonomous choice (J. Harris 1982). Moreover, they are less likely to see this competence as an 'all-or-nothing' characteristic, arguing that competence may vary across domains – for example, a child's choice to go out and ride their bike may be worthy of respect in a way that their decision to take up smoking is not (Coleman 2003).

Coleman (2003) argues that school choice is a domain where children ought to be considered competent. On his account, the relevant capacity in this domain is the ability to make rational choices regarding one's identity. Citing theories from developmental psychology, Coleman argues that in the course of adolescence children develop stable and strongly held enough commitments for their school choices to be worthy of respect. It is, however, important to note that Coleman's argument is directed at the US school system, where children often choose high schools at the age of 13-14. This may render it less relevant to UK secondary school choice, which occurs around the ages 10-12, since children of that age may not yet have crossed Coleman's threshold of competence.

The third response is to insist that giving parents the ability to make decisions regarding their children's lives in some way enhances or respects the parents' autonomy. Returning to the ideas of autonomy outlined above, it is striking that each of them can fit with the notion that parents' autonomy is linked to their influence over their children's lives. The notion of *self*-government does not fit naturally with choosing for others, but it is easy to see how parents might see the usurpation of their judgements for their children as demeaning. For many parents, it is plausible that their belief that they know what is best for their children is not much weaker than their



confidence regarding what constitutes their own self-interest. Similarly, it is highly plausible that the fate of a person's child might have substantial 'narrative significance' in their lives. Considerations of authenticity might also give value to parental decisions for their children. It has been argued that part of what it means to hold and live by a strong commitment or belief system is the ability to pass it onto one's children (Macleod 1997). Accounts of autonomy as agential authority may also be relevant if we believe that practicing the skills of choosing is educative even when the choice is on made somebody else's behalf.

There is clearly something strange in the idea that one person's autonomy is enhanced by allowing them to decide things for another. At the same time, all but the most radical critics of the family accept that it is legitimate for parents to have at least some authority over their children. Overriding or limiting this authority is often perceived and treated like a restriction on the parent's autonomy (Page 1984). As we have seen, some philosophers believe this is mistaken. Others, though, have sought to account for parental authority over their children, and how this relates to autonomy.

On the one hand, there are those that argue that parents, in some sense, own their children. Page (1984) claims that parents' rights over their children ought to be seen as a sort of property rights – while emphasising that property rights are often strictly limited and dependent on the type of property in question. For example, many believe it is acceptable to own a cat, but not to treat them cruelly. Others go further, and characterise parents' authority over their children as stemming from self-ownership. The 'extension claim' posits that there is a fundamental continuity between parents and children that means it is inappropriate to treat children as entirely separate individuals from their parents. For example, Nozick (1989, 28) believes that "children themselves form part of one's substance. Without remaining subordinate or serving your purposes, they yet are organs of you". The implication is that children form part of a parent's "wider identity" (Nozick 1989, 28). Similarly, Fried (1978, 152) argues that a person's child should be "regarded as an extension of the self". Where parents determine the life plans of their children, essentially "there is an identity between the chooser and the chosen for" (Fried 1978, 152). Like Nozick, Fried sees children as analogous to organs: as with our kidneys or blood, to lose authority over them is to have our basic integrity violated.

Both the view that children are the property of their parents and the extension claim are typically grounded in reproductive biology (as such they are inapplicable to non-biological parents (Page 1984)). Gilles (1996, 961) argues that the connection between parents and children results from the fact that "The child owes its conception to sexual intercourse between its mother and father,

and its birth to the reproductive labor of its mother”. Fried (1978, 153) claims that to alienate parents from the product of their reproduction is to imply that “parents’ reproductive functions are only adventitiously their own”. There are two ideas here. First, there is the biological continuity between parent and child. Prior to conception, it is relatively uncontroversial to say that people have ownership over their body parts, including their sperm and ova. The argument is that this ownership follows the gametes, through fertilisation and birth, until the child reaches maturity. The second is the idea that people ought to have a right of control over things that they produce, and that this extends to humans.

There are a number of objections to these arguments. First, the underlying premise (often associated with Locke) that self-ownership implies that we have special title to anything produced with our labour is heavily disputed within political philosophy (G. A. Cohen 1995; Richards 2010). Second, even if we grant that the facts of reproduction entail a special connection between parents and children, it does not follow that it is anywhere near as close as made out by the extension claim. Many insist it goes too far to suggest the relationship between parent and child is anything like the literal physical continuity between a person and their organs (Moschella 2012, 28). Most fundamentally, there is the objection that views of this sort fail to recognise that children are separate and independent beings, with interests of their own (Macleod 1997). As Marples (2014, 24) puts it, “Treating children as mere appendages to their parents is both to disrespect and undermine their moral status”.

The main alternative justification for granting parents authority over their children is the interests of the children themselves (Brighouse and Swift 2014; Macleod 1997). For example, Brighouse & Swift (2014) argue that children are best off when the key decisions about their life are taken by someone who knows them well, and has greater experience, knowledge and rational capacity, freeing the child to develop their own capacities without being burdened with too much responsibility. This view implies that parental authority is merely a contingent social arrangement that happens to best discharge society’s obligations to children. It denies that respecting parental authority over children reflects respect for parents’ autonomy, as the extension claim or the property claim would imply. Such a position does not imply that there are no benefits to parents to being able to raise a family and shape their children. It just means that this value is a matter of the parents’ welfare, rather than their autonomy.

### 3.6 How Does This All Fit Together?

This chapter has covered a large philosophical terrain rather quickly. It has touched on a number of normative questions and considered an array of philosophical positions. This section attempts to pull these together, and relate them back to the original question of when and why school choice might have intrinsic value. Most importantly, for our purposes, it attempts to align the relevant empirical questions for the rest of the thesis with different possible normative views.

In seeking to understand the intrinsic value or disvalue of school choice, we need to answer three types of philosophical question. The first are questions of ultimate value. Is it subjective welfare that matters, freedom, autonomy, or some combination? In practice, almost everybody believes that subjective welfare has *some* value – even those who oppose welfarist theories tend to do so on the basis that welfare can be overridden by other values, not that it does not matter at all. The reverse, however, is not true – utilitarians, for example, believe that subjective welfare is the only thing that has ultimate value, and freedom/autonomy matter only insofar as they contribute to happiness.

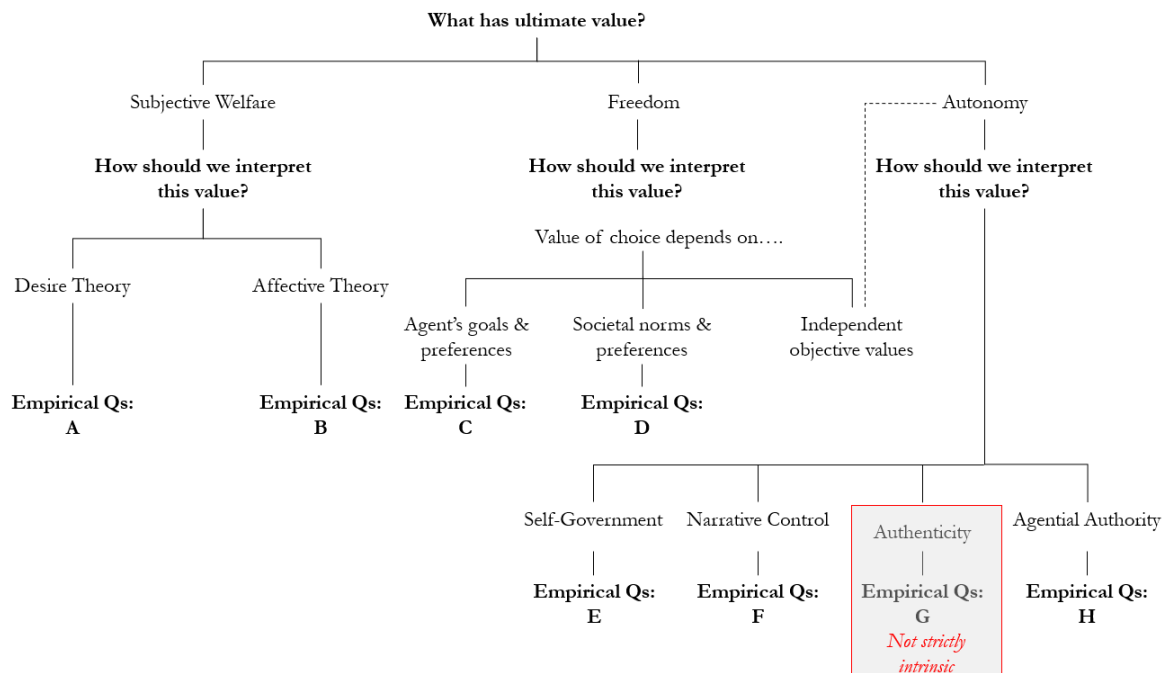
The second type of question relates to how we interpret these ultimate values. Is subjective welfare best construed through a desire theory or an affective theory? Does choice necessarily increase freedom? Does the contribution of increased choice to freedom depend on the beliefs and preferences of the chooser, society at large and/or independent objective values? Which connotations best capture what is valuable about autonomy: self-government, narrative control, authenticity or agential authority?

The third question relates to the moral status of parents and children. From a subjective welfare perspective, should parents' preferences for their children be considered 'external preferences' and morally disregarded? From a freedom/autonomy perspective: a) do children have the relevant capacities that mean there is value in respecting their choices?; and b) do parents stand in a relation to children that means parents' freedom or autonomy is at stake in choosing a school?

In this thesis, I have tried to remain agnostic as to how we should answer these philosophical questions. However, different philosophical positions give rise to different empirical questions when it comes to evaluating the intrinsic (dis)value of school choice. The diagram below represents the relationships between the different theories of value and the empirical questions

they entail. To reiterate, the branches on this diagram are not mutually exclusive alternatives: there is no inconsistency in believing there are multiple valid sources of value or interpretations of that value. I have not attached any empirical questions to the view that the value of a choice depends on independent objective values. This is because there are any number of possible objective values that could be adduced, each raising different empirical questions, some none at all. Other than autonomy, I have not attempted to list them.

Figure 3.1: Relationship between theories of value and empirical questions



### Empirical Questions A (Desire Theories)

- Do people want the ability to choose their school, independent of its consequences?
- How strong is this desire?
- Does it conflict with any other desires, and how strong are these?

### Empirical Questions B (Affective Theories)

- Does school choice increase subjective welfare?
  - Is choosing schools enjoyable?
  - Do choosers feel empowered?
- Does school choice decrease subjective welfare?

- Does school choice have substantial opportunity costs in terms of time, energy or mental resources?
- Does it involve trade-offs producing mental conflict?
- Is school choice felt as pressurised?
- Does school choice generate (the anticipation of) regret?
- Does school choice unrealistically raise expectations or improve experiences of outcomes?

#### **Empirical Questions C (Freedom judged by Agent)**

- Is school choice felt by choosers to be significant?
- Do choosers feel they have an adequate range of options?

#### **Empirical Questions D (Freedom judged by Society)**

- Do people in general believe school choice to be significant?
- How far do choosers vary in terms of which schools they prefer?

#### **Empirical Questions E (Autonomy as Self-Government)**

- How confident are people in their judgements regarding school? Are they willing to defer to experts?
- Does school choice relate to means or ends?

#### **Empirical Questions F (Autonomy as Narrative Control)**

- Do people perceive greater control over their lives as a result of school choice?
- What is its 'narrative significance' to their lives?

#### **Empirical Questions G (Autonomy as Authenticity)**

- Does school choice relate to beliefs or characteristics that people strongly identify with?
- Would the lack of school choice significantly undermine their ability to live in accordance with these beliefs or characteristics?

#### **Empirical Questions H (Autonomy as Agential Authority)**

- Does school choice offer effective practice of choosing, that develops self-knowledge and rational capacities, in a way that is not replicated elsewhere?

In phrasing all of the empirical questions, I have left it ambiguous as to whose welfare and freedom/autonomy we are concerned with. When I say ‘people’ or ‘choosers’, I could mean parents, children or both. Which of these it is depends, as we have seen, on the moral status of parents and children. If parents’ desires for their children are morally irrelevant ‘external preferences’, then the questions under A and B only relate to children. Otherwise, we should be concerned with both children and parents. The empirical questions E, F, G and H should apply to children only if they have the capacity for autonomy, and parents only if we believe that they have an autonomy interest in making decisions over their children.

The rest of the thesis will attempt to answer to these empirical questions. However, once we have answers to all these questions, one normative issue remains outstanding: how to weigh the different impacts of school choice on welfare, freedom and autonomy against one another. For some philosophical theories, most prominently utilitarianism, there is no issue here: all that is valuable is welfare. For those that recognise multiple sources of value, however, there is a question of how to balance these.

One possibility is that the importance of school choice for freedom and autonomy is so great that it cannot be traded-off against subjective welfare. In that case, school choice is a moral right, which “trumps” any consideration of other values (R. Dworkin 1981). Indeed, the ability to choose a school is sometimes presented as a ‘right’, typically of parents (Brighouse 1997; Hargreaves 1996b; Jonathan 1989). For example, Article 13 of the UN International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights 1966 states that “The States Parties to the present Covenant undertake to have respect for the liberty of parents and, where applicable, legal guardians, to choose for their children schools” (Walford 1996, 144). Similarly, Article 2 of the First Protocol to the European Convention on Human Rights commits states to “respect the right of parents to ensure such education and teaching in conformity to their own religious and philosophical convictions” (Walford 1996, 144–45).

The claim that school choice is a right does not add any additional considerations as to why it is valuable. It just means that the considerations in favour of school choice are particularly weighty. I will not attempt here to define the threshold at which the importance of school choice to freedom and autonomy is great enough for it to be considered a right.

If school choice is not a right, then the various considerations will need to be weighed together to determine its intrinsic value or disvalue (and that, in turn, will need to be weighed against instrumental costs and benefits). This is likely to be somewhat idiosyncratic process. Different people with different value systems will trade welfare, freedom and autonomy off against one

another at different ‘moral exchange rates’, in a way that is difficult to fully articulate or justify. The purpose of this thesis is to provide the relevant empirical evidence and to set out how this evidence supports or undermines different value claims, leaving the reader to make the necessary normative trade-offs according to their own philosophical beliefs.

#### **4. What is the existing evidence on the intrinsic (dis)value of school choice in England and Scotland?**

Chapter 3 reviewed the relevant theoretical and normative literature and synthesised it into a novel framework for analysis. In this chapter, I review the relevant empirical literature, applying that framework. Over the course of chapter 3, I showed that determining the intrinsic value or disvalue of school choice requires us to answer a number of empirical questions, depending on our normative position. In this chapter, I take each of those questions in turn to see how well we can address them using existing studies of school choice. We will find that the evidence on many of the questions is ambiguous, outdated or non-existent, which is why the original primary research that forms the bulk of this thesis is necessary.

I set out to review as much primary qualitative and quantitative research on the process (as opposed to outcomes) of school choice in England and Scotland as I could find. A full list of studies covered with basic details on methods employed is provided in appendix A. Only one of these relates to Scotland, so my discussion here will necessarily focus more on England. Given the volume of English studies, that the focus of this thesis is on the UK, and the fact other countries have quite different education systems and cultural contexts, I have not attempted to cover international evidence in this chapter. However, many of the general findings I discuss here do seem to be echoed in other settings. The greater engagement of high income and middle-class families with school choice is an international phenomenon (Waslander, Pater, and van der Weide 2010). The sense that school choice is illusory has been documented in the US (Roda and Wells 2013). Parents in Germany and Finland report feeling overwhelmed and pressurised (Kosunen 2014; Noreisch 2007). Research in New Zealand shows that children often feel heavily involved in the process (Mandic et al. 2018).

##### **4.1 The Desire for Choice (Desire Theories)**

According to desire theories, the intrinsic value of school choice depends on whether people want choice (for intrinsic reasons), how strong their desire is, and the extent to which it conflicts with other desires. In the following sections, I take all of these questions together, looking first at the extent to which previous quantitative surveys, and then qualitative interviews, can help answer them.



#### 4.11 Quantitative Survey Evidence

Proponents of the view that school choice has intrinsic value often point to its popularity in opinion polls (Dowding and John 2009; Le Grand 2009, 47–54). In the 2007 British Social Attitudes survey, 81% of respondents said parents should have ‘Quite a lot’ or ‘A great deal’ of choice over the state secondary school their child attends (surveys are usually ambiguous as to whether this means formal, substantive or perceived choice) (Curtice and Heath 2009). Support for choice was even higher among parents with children in state primary or secondary schools: 40% of such parents believed they should have a great deal of choice, compared to 28% for the rest of the population. In the 2010 edition of the survey, 72% of parents with children under 16 living at home expressed the view that parental school choice is a ‘basic right’ (Exley 2012).

Support for school choice is consistent among people of all backgrounds, and if anything is higher among those of lower social class, education levels and income, as figure 4.1 shows.

*Figure 4.1: Proportion that believe parents should have “A great deal” of choice over their children’s state secondary school (Curtice and Heath, 2009)*

<b>Social Class:</b>	
Managerial & professional	23%
Intermediate	31%
Small employers	35%
Lower supervisory	30%
Routine & semi-routine	32%
<b>Highest educational qualification:</b>	
Degree	23%
A level or lower	32%
None	36%
<b>Household income:</b>	
£50,000+	25%
£26-49,999	30%
£15-25,999	30%
<£15,000	34%
<b>National Average</b>	<b>31%</b>

Choice is also more popular among people living in urban areas, who are more likely to say that parents should have a great deal of choice over schools, and that such choices are a basic right (figure 4.2).

Figure 4.2: Support for school choice by geography

Type of Area		% saying parents should have a great deal of school choice (Curtice and Heath 2009)	% agreeing school choice is a basic right (Exley 2012)
Urban	A big city	33%	74%
	The suburbs/ outskirts of a big city		72%
	A small city or town		65%
	Rural	26%	64%

Significantly for our purposes, Scottish opinion appears to be less favourable towards school choice than the rest of the country. As figure 4.3 shows, Scotland is the only part of the UK where people believing school choice is a basic right are in the minority (though only just), and has lowest proportion of people saying users should have a great deal of choice. That said, we should not exaggerate the scale of difference between Scotland and England – the survey evidence makes clear that in both countries a large proportion of the population is favourable towards school choice.

Figure 4.3: Support for school choice by nation

Nation	% saying parents should have quite a lot/ a great deal of school choice (Patrikios and Curtice 2014)	% agreeing school choice is a basic right (Exley 2012)
England	82%	71%
Scotland	76%	49%
Wales	81%	58%
Northern Ireland	84%	

All of this survey evidence would seem to indicate widespread desire for school choice among parents. Yet as Exley (2014) points out, before we can conclude that this desire is intrinsic, we need to know *why* parents want choice, and the extent to which this desire is intrinsic. Those expressing favourable views towards school choice may be doing so for instrumental reasons: for example, because they believe that choice allows them to get their children into better schools or that it will improve overall attainment.

Despite their apparent approval of the principle of school choice, the British public also seem sceptical of measures to increase the diversity of the options from which they can choose. 72% say that secondary schools should provide much the same education for every child, although when asked specifically about subject specialisms (for example in music or maths), 58% support specialist schools (Curtice and Heath 2009). Most also oppose charities and private companies running state schools (Curtice and Heath 2009). 63% of people believe that “parents in general should send their children to the nearest state school”. A further 22% would say that most parents should send their children to the nearest state school, if the quality and social mixes of schools were more equal (Exley 2012).

What this suggests is that most parents want to have a choice of schools, but simultaneously believe that this choice should not be widely exercised. One explanation is that what is desired is the ability to affirm or ‘rubber stamp’ the allocation of their child to a school. Conversely, Exley (2014) suggests that what is valued is the ‘right to escape’ undesirable schools. Notice that if these interpretations are correct, the Scottish system, which allows the use of placing requests as a way to ‘opt out’ of the allocated school may be better in keeping with what parents want than the English system emphasising active choice.

There is also the question of *how strong* the desire is for choice. When school choice is presented alongside other possible objectives for the education system, very few people say that it should be a top priority, as figure 4.4 shows.

*Figure 4.4: Support for prioritising different educational objectives*

<b>Most important priority for schools to achieve:</b>	<b>2007 Survey (Curtice and Heath 2009)</b>	<b>2010 Survey (Exley 2012)</b>
Make sure all children, however able they are, do the best they can	70%	67%
Make sure that children from poor backgrounds do as well as those from better off backgrounds	12%	16%
Get the number of children who leave school with no qualifications down as low as possible	8%	7%
Make sure that parents have a lot of choice about the kind of school their child goes to	3%	4%

These results appear to suggest that having school choice is a low priority.<sup>13</sup> However, we should be careful not to draw excessively strong conclusions from a single survey question. First, the results may be affected by the set of objectives respondents were given to choose from, and the fact that they could only list one top priority – it is conceivable that school choice might for example, be fourth priority in a longer list of 10 objectives. Second, the question wording may have influenced responses – it asks about giving parents ‘a lot’ of choice, but some respondents may only care about parents having ‘some’ choice. Third, and most importantly, the relative priority given to choice does not tell us about its absolute importance. People may think choice is very important, just less important than ensuring all children achieve their potential, or they may think it is fairly unimportant – either interpretation is consistent with these survey results.

#### *4.12 Qualitative Interview Evidence*

Qualitative researchers have found rather more ambivalence among parents towards school choice. As in the surveys, several studies report positive sentiment towards the principle of choice. For example, Boulton and Coldron (1996, 299) find “universal endorsement of choice” among parents, while Thomas and Dennison (1991, 244) conclude that “parents thought it important that choice should be available”. However, this support sometimes came from puzzling sources: “Even those who said during the interview that having a choice was not important to them or had made no difference still saw increased choice as a positive move” (Boulton and Coldron 1996, 299). It is not obvious what we should make of such parents that support choice despite not perceiving any benefit for themselves. Perhaps they believe it is good for *other* families to have choice, or perhaps they value the *hypothetical* option of choosing. The existence of such attitudes suggests we should take care in interpreting survey support for school choice policies.

Consistent with Exley’s ‘right to escape’ thesis, Stiell et al (2008, 63) report that most parents accessing choice advice services “were very pleased at not being limited to choosing their catchment school”. Similarly, Woods et al (1998, 174) claim that “Few would want to revert to a system that bureaucratically allocates places at schools and that did not allow parents a degree

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<sup>13</sup> Some would argue that the question of whether to prioritise ensuring each child achieves their potential or whether to prioritise choice involves a false dichotomy, since choice is how we ensure such positive outcomes (Le Grand 2009, 46–48). Yet even if this is correct, it implies that the value of choice is instrumental, and what is valued is the outcome rather than the choice itself.

of choice”. The most unambiguous benefit of having choice is the ability to avoid being forced to attend an unwanted school.

At the same time, some studies have found hostility towards or outright rejection of choice among some groups. Carroll and Walford (1997, 12) report that “Some parents, whilst being aware of the right to express preferences for non-local schools, saw little value in choice”. One of Reay and Ball’s (1997, 97) participants claimed that “I feel we’ve got too much choice, there’s too many schools to pick from, in a way I’d rather not have the choice”. A parent interviewed by Stiell et al (2008, 64) was more vociferous still: “this whole ‘choice’ rubbish, it is rubbish...Go back to the days when you were expected to go down the road and that’s the school you’re going to”. Weekes-Bernard (2007, 5) discovered that “Very few BME [Black and Minority Ethnic] parents spoken to were aware of popular debates surrounding planned reform to increase parental choice, but for those parents and teachers who were aware, the overall view on the proposals was negative”.

As with surveys, qualitative studies have generally failed to distinguish intrinsic from instrumental reasons for valuing school choice. An exception is Oria et al (2007, 93), who suggest choice is entirely instrumental for “some parents [who] actually hope ‘schools were good enough that it wasn’t a choice’”: in other words, if they could be confident in securing adequate outcomes for their children, they would not want school choice. For these parents, however, a system equal enough for choice to be redundant is seen as a utopian ideal, and so engaging with school choice is seen as a necessary activity for responsible parents. Similarly, an Asian-Indian participant in Weekes-Bernard’s (2007, 52) study argues that “Parents don’t need more choice, we just need better schools”. In both cases the implication is not that parents actually desire choice for its own sake, but that they feel they must choose in order to avoid unpleasant consequences.

#### *4.13 What Do We Know So Far?*

The existing evidence indicates that many parents, perhaps a majority, want to feel like they have school choice. However, it does not provide us with a clear idea of why they want choice, and whether they want it for intrinsic or instrumental reasons. Nor does it tell us how strong this desire for choice is. Qualitative evidence suggests that at least some parents do not value choice particularly highly, or that they only want it for instrumental reasons, though it does not

tell us how widespread such views are. Finally, all of the existing evidence relates to adults, and so we do not know much about whether children want school choice, and how strong their preferences on the matter are.

## 4.2 Does School Choice Increase Subjective Welfare (Affective Theories)?

### 4.21 *Is Choosing Schools Enjoyable?*

In chapter 3, I considered the possibility that choosing schools might be enjoyable, in the same way that recreational shopping is. There is very little evidence on this in the literature. The closest I can find is from Ball and Gewirtz's observations of open days for girls' schools, which they claim "often generate powerful affective responses, positive or negative, from parents and daughters" (Ball and Gewirtz 1997, 209). Ball and Gewirtz do not elaborate in much detail, but discuss the sense of excitement, comfort or positive 'feel' around desirable schools – experiencing these may well be enjoyable for some parents and children.

### 4.22 *Do Parents Feel Empowered by School Choice?*

Self-determination theory implies that expanding choice will increase subjective welfare if people perceive greater control over their lives, and conversely, that they are not being directed by others. Yet a common theme in much of the qualitative literature is the notion that many parents feel school choice is an illusion, or somehow not genuine. Because the most popular schools tend to be oversubscribed, and schools with places available (by definition) tend to be less desirable, many feel as though they do not have any acceptable options. This sentiment is strikingly common across a number of studies:

*"The mothers I interviewed in both schools reiterated again and again that they had no choice, although none of the questions that I asked them raised the issue of school choice" (Reay 1996, 588)*

*"I didn't know how it worked so the school gave us an option, you know, you're in this area so this is the school, this is the school so you put your name and that's how we did it. So we didn't have much choice at all" – Migrant parent (Byrne and De Tona 2012, 28)*

*"It's a choice you're forced into; it's the only viable option on the whole form"* - Parent accessing choice advice (Stiell et al. 2008, 64)

*"I don't think there is any choice, if they're in the catchment for the school, then for 90% of parents that's where their child's gotta go"* – Parent (Butler and Hamnett 2010, 2444)

In many cases, this frustration is exacerbated by the gap between the policy rhetoric around school choice and the actual experience of choosing. While families are consistently told that they have a right, indeed a responsibility, to choose a school, in practice they feel that most options are blocked off, that they have little substantive choice:

*"there's supposed to be freedom of choice...if you haven't got religion, if you haven't passed your 11 plus and if you can't pay for private education, you're stuck with the local comprehensive, and there isn't a choice"* – Parent (Butler and Hamnett 2012, 1248)

*"I don't see the point in picking what school you want, to be given something else. It makes a mockery of parental choice"* - Parent (Woods, Bagley, and Glatter 1998, 84)

*"I have to pay for my daughter to travel, but I don't think it's fair. The government says you have got a free choice, well then they should let you have a free choice"* – Parent (Hammond and Dennison 1995, 107)

The consequence, for at least some families, is that they feel *disempowered* by choice: Reay and Lucey (2000, 89) claim that their participants were “buffeted and demeaned by market processes, which were controlling, rather than being controlled by, them”.

Surveys, however, seem to tell a different story, showing relatively high perceived choice. In a 2014/15 online survey of both primary and secondary school parents in England, 72% agreed that they had a genuine choice in deciding which school their child attended, with 18% disagreeing (Wespieser, Durbin, and Sims 2015, 2). Coldron et al's official government evaluation of the school admissions process – the most comprehensive study to date - surveyed parents on their satisfaction with the choice of schools in their local area. Nationally, in England, 81% were satisfied, with only 12% dissatisfied – although dissatisfaction was quite a bit higher in London, with 70% satisfied and 22% dissatisfied (Coldron et al. 2008, 155). Similarly, Woods et al (1998) find substantial regional variation in parents' sense of empowerment across the three local authorities that they surveyed: in the middle-class town of 'Marshampton', and in the deprived urban area of 'Northern Heights', 70% of parents said that they had a real choice of schools, whereas in semi-rural East Greenvale, that figure dropped to just over half. David et al (1994) approach the question from a slightly different angle, asking parents whether they felt

they had to compromise in their choice of school. They find that 23% compromised, whereas 77% reported getting their genuine first choice.

Overall, survey results suggest that a clear majority of parents do feel that they have meaningful choice of secondary schools, and consequently, feel at least somewhat empowered by school choice policies. This group seems to be less represented in qualitative research, which has tended to focus on a disgruntled minority – albeit a sizeable one at 20-30%. However, qualitative depictions of positive parental experiences of choice are not completely absent from the literature:

*“I feel more in control of my daughter’s destiny...I feel as though I have done something positive in guiding her through another stage of her life” – Parent (Woods, Bagley, and Glatter 1998, 85)*

*“I was thankful we could make a choice” – Parent (Stiell et al. 2008, 64)*

There are also those who emphasise that empowerment need not be a binary either/or feeling. David et al (1994) suggest that some parents may feel grateful for the limited choice they feel they have, even as they feel disappointed that they do not have more:

*“We found that parents (or rather mothers, given that we interviewed predominantly women) do, on the whole, feel that this issue of secondary school choice has a certain salience, although they may see it only as between limited options, rather than being able to make decisive choices. The choice can be seen as being like a choice not between apples and oranges but between kinds of apple – a crab-apple versus an orange pippin. In other words, parents have to make some kind of compromise rather than be in full control over their child’s life and future, including education” (Miriam David, West, and Ribbens 1994, 133)*

#### *4.23 Do Children Feel Empowered by School Choice?*

Several studies in England suggest that the majority of children feel involved in secondary school choice (Gorard 1997b). For example, Thomas and Dennison (1991, 244) find that 60% of children said that they made the decision, and only one in seven said they had no say. However, the extent of this involvement may vary between households: David et al (1994) and Gorard (1997b) find that in most cases, children and parents chose together and claimed to have the same preferences.



There is some academic debate over how significant children's role in the choice process actually is. Reay and Ball (1998) suggest that it varies by class. In working-class households, they observed that parents were more likely to defer to children's judgement, leaving "the child with a high level of apparent autonomy" (Reay and Ball 1998, 433). In part, this was because working-class parents felt less capable of choosing, and in part this is because they give more weight to considerations like friendship groups. In middle-class households, Reay and Ball (1998, 437) report that parents placed less stock in their children's opinions: "choice was presented as too important to leave to the vagaries of childish preferences". As a result, parents engaged in a process of "impression management", seeking to subtly persuade their children that the parents' favoured option is the best one – as one parent puts it: "not brainwash them, but you kind of...you make them think all along it's a good school. I suppose you sell...a parent can sell a school to a child" (Reay and Ball 1998, 437).

Gorard (1997b), by contrast, does not find any difference between middle-class and working-class households in terms of children's role in choice his sample of Welsh families. He suggests, instead, that the typical (though not universal) model is for parents alone to shortlist a certain number of acceptable schools, and then to involve the children in choosing between them – this involvement may run from seeking the child's opinion but parents making the ultimate decision, through to giving children 'free choice' from among the shortlisted schools.

None of this tells us whether children subjectively feel empowered by school choice. Some studies report similar frustrations among children as parents over not getting their preferences: "We didn't really make a decision. We just knew I would have to go there. There's no other schools" (final year pupil (Reay and Lucey 2003, 125)). Similarly, Heath finds scepticism regarding choice in both 'North Town', where most students attend their local school by default - "Students within the schools have no sense that choice of secondary school is a possibility" (Heath 2009, 546) – but also in 'East Town' where children are more active choosers - "Dialogue from the students conveyed a sense of not having any real choice in the process and of being powerless over it" (Heath 2009, 548).

#### *4.24 What Do We Know So Far?*

Overall, the existing evidence suggests that the majority of English parents and children do feel some sense of empowerment through school choice, but that a substantial minority feel disempowered. In general, there is little description in the literature of positive experiences of school choice – specifically, what it is like for those families that find school choice empowering or enjoyable. Nor is there much discussion of how the same people might simultaneously feel empowered or disempowered. We have no relevant evidence on Scotland.

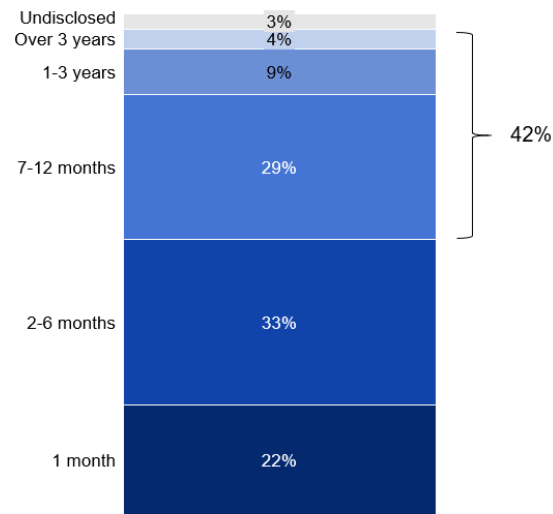
### **4.3 Does School Choice Have Substantial Opportunity Costs in Terms of Time, Energy or Mental Resources (Affective Theories)?**

#### *4.31 Parental Engagement*

Recall that one of the reasons choice might reduce subjective welfare is its opportunity cost, in terms of time and mental resources. For some families, the most significant element of school choice may occur outside the formal application process, with choice exercised through residential location. 3.5% of parents in the Millennium Cohort Study report having moved house to secure a place at their preferred school (Burgess, Greaves, and Vignoles 2019). A 2013 Sutton Trust survey found that 8-18% (varying by social grade) of English parents of school-age children had moved to live in the catchment area of a specific school, but 12-32% said they had “moved to an area which I thought had good schools” (Francis and Hutchings 2013, 25). That latter figure is in line with Coldron et al’s (2008, 141) survey of parents of first-year secondary school children, 22% of whom admitted taking catchment areas into consideration in their last house move. Puzzlingly, though, a 2018 update of the Sutton Trust survey produced lower figures, with 1-11% moving for a specific school and 4-14% considering schools as one factor among many (Montacute and Cullinane 2018, 22).

Focusing solely on the formal application process, choosing schools can take a long time. Coldron et al (2008, 139) found that 42% of parents spent over six months considering schools, while David et al (1994) found that 56% of London parents started the process more than a year in advance.

Figure 4.5: Length of time spent by parents researching schools (Coldron et al., 2008, p. 100)

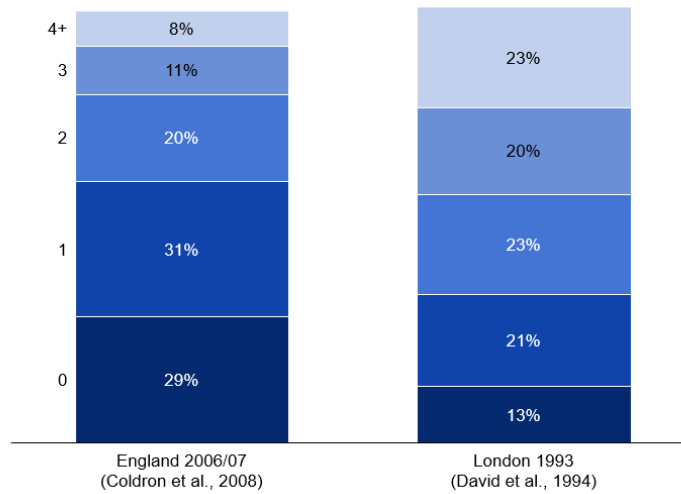


Most parents carry out at least some research. Coldron et al (2008, 91) and Flatley et al (2001) both find that 82% of parents used some formal source of information (prospectuses/league tables/inspection reports) to find out about schools. More recent Sutton Trust surveys have put the figure even higher – 89% (Montacute and Cullinane 2018, 15) and 94% (Francis and Hutchings 2013, 15) – although these are acknowledged to be overestimates because the surveys oversampled more affluent parents. 84% of English parents with school age children have read an Ofsted inspection report at some point (YouGov/Ofsted 2019).

However, it is clear that the level of activity involved in choosing a school varies substantially between different families. Coldron et al (2008, 100) report that 29% of parents did not visit any schools, and that the median parent visited only one.<sup>14</sup> On the other hand, 8% visited four or more schools. In David et al's (1994) much earlier survey of London parents, 13% visited no schools, and 23% four or more schools.

<sup>14</sup> Flatley et al's (2001, 76) earlier survey puts the figure a little lower, at 22%

Figure 4.6: Number of schools visited by parents (% of parents)



Overall, the average number of secondary schools applied for by households in England is now 2.4, but 35% only apply for a single school (Burgess, Greaves, and Vignoles 2019).

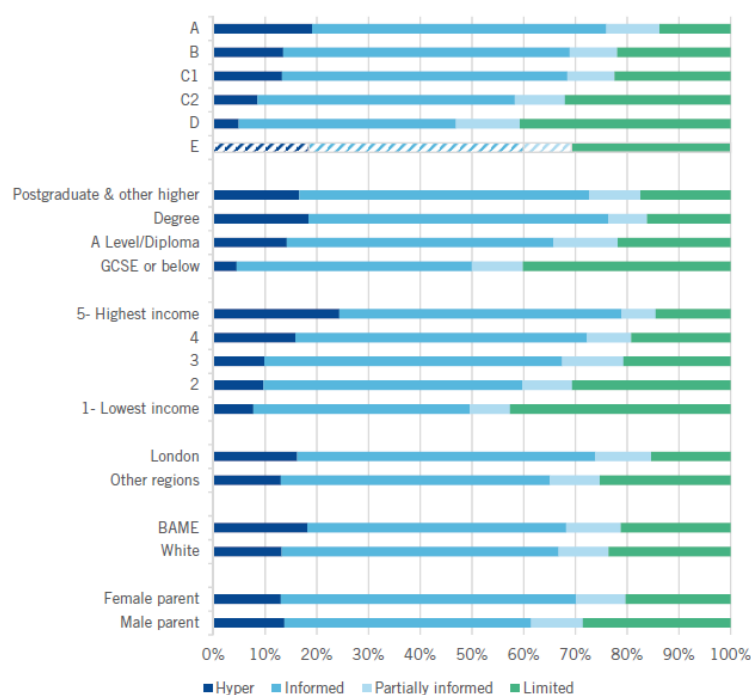
The Sutton Trust classifies parents into four groups, according to their level of engagement with school choice:

- ‘Limited choosers’ who do not use any formal sources of information, or rely on just one
- ‘Partially informed choosers’ who use more than one source, but tend to rely on experiential (e.g. word of mouth, school visits) rather than documentary sources
- ‘Informed choosers’ who use both documentary and experiential sources but less than five sources in total
- ‘Hyper choosers’ who use both types of sources and five or more different sources in total

In 2012, 21% of survey respondents (parents with school age children) were classified as limited choosers, and just over half as informed or hyper choosers (Francis and Hutchings 2013). In 2018, 25% were classified as limited choosers and a clear majority as informed or hyper choosers (Montacute and Cullinane 2018). However, the proportion of hyper choosers fell from around 30% in the first survey to 14% in the most recent version. While these numbers are indicative, they are not strictly representative as noted above.

The Sutton Trust surveys also highlight large differences in the level of engagement with school choice between parents of different social groups. Overall, parents with higher social class, education and income are more likely to do more research on schools, as figure 4.7 demonstrates.

Figure 4.7: Sutton Trust classification of parents by social group, education level, income, region, ethnicity and gender (Montacute and Cullinane, 2018, p. 16)



At the same time, qualitative research indicates that the subjective burden of choosing a school may not be proportionate to the amount of time and energy expended. People in disadvantaged circumstances may have less time and mental energy to spare, and so may find researching schools more onerous (Reay 1996). Reay (1996) also emphasises that many working-class parents spend a lot of time considering and evaluating their options long before they get as far as consulting formal sources or visiting schools, trying to determine whether certain schools are a realistic possibility. Moreover, people may vary in their ability to make sense of the information they are presented. Bowe et al (1994, 42) present this as a cognitively demanding task: “Parents may well face a potentially bemusing mass of information, frequently contradictory and confusing which requires fairly sophisticated information-handling strategies”.

#### 4.32 Children’s Engagement

There is less discussion in the literature about the demands of school choice upon children. However, there are indications that at least some children spend a lot of time considering and discussing schools. David et al (1994) report that 19% of children said they had talked with their parents a great deal about it, 46% quite a lot, 29% not very much and 2% not at all. One of Reay and Lucey's child participants describes evaluating schools methodically and systematically:

*"If you want to check to get into a perfect school you kind of make a check list. You've got to make sure the maths is good, you've got to make sure the history is good, you've got to make sure the science is good. All those subjects you've got to make sure of all of them. And then you've got to check with the teachers if they're good. And how the state of the building is. And then you know which school to go to."* (Reay and Lucey 2003, 136–37)

As with parents, children's level of engagement with school choice seems to vary substantially:

*"For some students, choosing the school meant deciding that they wanted to go to their local school, without experiencing any further kind of choice-making process, whilst for other students, school choice involved visiting a number of schools, assessing, comparing and discussing with family and friends and considering local opinion, and appealing if necessary"* (Heath 2009, 545)

#### 4.33 Scottish Families' Engagement

It seems likely that Scottish families expend less time and effort on choosing a secondary school than English ones. As discussed already, the vast majority of children attend their zoned school, and so do not make a formal choice. As in England (and indeed, we might expect more than England, given the limited institutional mechanisms for choice), families may exercise school choice by deciding where to live – but there is no previous evidence on how common this is. Even among those families that make placing requests, Adler et al (1989) suggest that most do not engage in an extensive search. 62% considered just one alternative to their catchment school, and only 11% of those making placing requests considered more than two.

#### 4.34 What Do We Know So Far?

It is clear from the literature that secondary school choice takes up at least some time and mental energy for most parents in England. At the same time, the objective burden for the less engaged half or so of parents seems to be modest: they visit at most one school and consult few formal

sources. On the other hand, there is a hard core of parents, perhaps 10-20%, for whom choosing a school seems to be a highly involved and time-consuming process.

We do not, though, know much about how this affects parents' subjective welfare – how burdensome they find it, whether they resent the time they spend on it, or the extent to which it crowds out other activities. Moreover, we have little sense of what the experience is like for children. Though we might presume Scottish families face less of a burden, there is little recent evidence on the matter.

## 4.4 Is School Choice Unpleasant (Affective Theories)?

### 4.4.1 General Negative Emotions

Chapter 3 reviewed a number of reasons why choosing a school might be psychologically unpleasant: it could involve making difficult trade-offs, it could create a sense of pressure and fear of making an error, or it could generate (the anticipation of) regret. In the sections that follow, I will take each of these in turn. Before discussing these specific mechanisms, it is worth observing that a number of studies in England comment more generally on negative affective responses to school choice (stress, anxiety, fear) without attributing them specifically to a particular cause.

David et al (1994) assessed the appearance of their interviewees, and judge 26% to be extremely anxious and 30% to be somewhat anxious, concluding that “the process of ‘choosing a secondary school’ is indeed seen as stressful by the majority of parents in this study”. This is an impression shared by many researchers:

*“previous qualitative studies reveal that many feel extremely anxious about the process”* (Coldron et al. 2008, 3)

*“schools have become the objects of intense anxiety”* (Byrne and De Tona 2012, 21)

*“most of the mothers interviewed in this study drew on a discourse of emotion as a strategy for coping with the anxiety, difficulty and strain opened up through choice”* (Wilkins 2011, 360–61)

*“Existing research that focuses on parental perspectives on choice rarely engages with the emotions generated by what is often an extremely stressful process”* (Reay and Lucey 2000, 88)

Ball and Vincent (1998, 386) comment that “For most...choice is often invested with stress and anxiety, which sometimes induces panic; although this may be a middle-class phenomenon”. Yet Reay’s (1996, 589–90) interviews suggest the phenomenon is more widespread: “Three mothers, two working-class and one middle-class, described the local secondary school market and the process of negotiating it as ‘a nightmare’”. One of them expanded “It’s on my mind all the time, something I’m constantly worrying about” (Reay 1996, 593). Byrne and De Tona (2012, 27) paint a similarly bleak picture of migrant parents who “seemed to have quickly internalised the anxieties of long-resident parents over the choice of schools”, “drawn into a frenzy of worrying”.

Researchers have found similar forms of distress among children choosing schools (Reay 2007; Reay and Lucey 2003; Warrington 2005):

*“I think she’s expressing it physically, she’s never had too many colds and whatnot as this year. I think she’s somatising actually”* – Parent (Lucey and Reay 2002b, 326)

*“the children’s voices reveal just how traumatising and demoralising the business of choosing a school can be for those who fail to be selected by their first choice school”* (Reay and Lucey 2000, 97)

*“for many students in East Town the transition was fraught with anxiety and uncertainty”* (Heath 2009, 554)

*“a difficult, sometimes agonising and traumatic process for parents and children”* (Woods, Bagley, and Glatter 1998, 172)

At the same time, Coldron et al (2008, 162) claim that their government-commissioned nationally representative survey “presents a picture of parents’ experiences of secondary school admissions that is broadly positive”. Similarly, Flatley et al’s (2001, 122) study – the predecessor to Coldron et al – reports that 85% of parents are satisfied with the process of choosing a school once it is completed. Yet such findings may just be a consequence of the narrowness of their questions. Both studies show that a clear majority of parents found information about schools to be accessible, adequate and useful and the application process to be straightforward. However, they did not probe parents’ emotional responses to choosing a school. As Stiell et al (2008, 59) suggest, there may be a significant difference between parents’ feelings towards the formal procedures of school choice and the wider process: most parents “found the application process (i.e. completing the actual form) relatively easy and straightforward, but many described the decision-making process as traumatic, highly stressful and daunting”.



#### 4.42 Does School Choice Involve Trade-offs Producing Mental Conflict?

There are at least two ways in which the difficulty of choosing a school might reduce subjective wellbeing. First, because the task of processing the various sources of information and accurately identifying the strengths and weaknesses of different schools may feel overwhelming. Second, the process of comparing different schools and trading off their strengths and weaknesses might be aversive. Some would suggest that such concerns are overblown. Recall that the majority of parents only consider one or two schools. Gorard (1999, 35) claims that “Many families probably make a default choice based on a very cursory examination of available information”. Thomas and Dennison’s (1991) survey of final year primary students shows that most found the decision easy, with only one-fifth finding it difficult.

Nevertheless, there does seem to be a significant minority that has to confront significant trade-offs. As noted above, David et al (1994) report that 23% of the parents in their study said that they had made compromises in their choice of school. For this group, weighing the alternatives can be tricky:

*“Choosing a school can be a complex and demanding process and tends to be a family affair. Parents and children in many ways exercise a sophisticated approach to this, weighing in the balance an array of factors”* (Woods, Bagley, and Glatter 1998, 214)

*“The inflation of choice and difference in schooling could have the outcome of producing a generalized cultural disorder and uncertainty in the process of educational consumption – parents who are unable to decide, who are confused and bamboozled by the signs and images”* (Bowe, Ball, and Gewirtz 1994, 42)

Gewirtz et al’s (1995) influential typology distinguishes three types of parent, each facing distinctive dilemmas and challenges. First, there are privileged/skilled choosers, who are overwhelmingly middle-class. This group has both a strong inclination and capacity to choose: school choice is a decision that matters to them, and they enjoy the economic, social and cultural capital to access and critically evaluate information. Nevertheless, choice can be confusing and complex because it involves weighing different aspirations, desires and sources of information. Many such parents engage in ‘child matching’ – seeking a school that suits the particularities of their child – and so have a fairly precise idea of what they are looking for. As Gewirtz et al (1995, 26–27) put it, “In some ways, the more skilled you are, the more difficult it is. The more you know about schools, the more apparent it is that no one school is perfect”. As a result, for many skilled/privileged choosers there is “a sense of frustration when no school is quite perfect

and compromises have to be made” (Gewirtz, Ball, and Bowe 1995, 31), although Gewirtz et al do point out that some parents find multiple options to be acceptable.

Second, there are semi-skilled choosers, who are a mix of middle and working-class. Parents in this group have a strong inclination but more limited ability to choose because they lack the experience and understanding of the system of privileged/skilled choosers. Semi-skilled choosers have a simpler perception of the education market: schools are reduced to good or bad. Their difficulty is in distinguishing the two. As a result, Gewirtz et al describe a different sort of frustration in that semi-skilled choosers have a clear sense of what they are supposed to do, but struggle to enact it.

Finally, there are disconnected choosers, generally working-class parents who are disengaged from school choice. It would not occur to most parents in this group to examine a wide range of schools, as they are generally seen as equivalent and interchangeable. As a result, disconnected choosers tend to consider only one or two schools, typically the nearest. For this group, choice is “often a process of confirmation rather than comparison” (Gewirtz, Ball, and Bowe 1995, 41). Consequently, school choice seems to be less unpleasant for disconnected choosers: “they are not inclined to spend time immersing themselves in consumerist activity and agonising over a range of possible options” (Gewirtz, Ball, and Bowe 1995, 183).

Byrne and De Tona (2012) report that choosing a school is particularly difficult for migrant parents because of a lack of trustworthy sources. As one parent complained, “if you are not from there, how can you get information? Because if you look at schools’ websites everything seems good” (Byrne and De Tona 2012, 28). The contradictory opinions they receive are described as “disorientating” (Byrne and De Tona 2012, 28).

Research in Scotland indicates that parents there are less likely to agonise than those in England. Adler et al (1989) argue that Scottish parents generally satisfice rather than maximise. They find that parents making placing requests are more likely to be motivated by ‘push’ factors (dissatisfaction with their zoned school) than ‘pull’ factors (attraction to their chosen school). Less than a third of parents making placing requests were confident that their choice was the best school on offer (which we might associate with maximising), while over two-thirds of them said that they did so in order to avoid their zoned school (satisficing). Willms (1997) summarises this evidence as showing “Most parents did not feel the need to examine all of the alternatives; rather they wanted to find the nearest school with a strong disciplinary climate and a positive social atmosphere”.

#### *4.43 Is School Choice Felt as Pressurised?*

Another reason why school choice may be stressful and anxiety provoking is because of the perceived high stakes of the decision, and fear of the potential consequences of getting it wrong. In their interviews with parents accessing choice advice services, Stiell et al (2008, 57) note that the most anxious were those who felt obligated to do everything in their power to reach the right conclusion. For example, one parent told them “we were trying to talk to as many people as we could before we made the final decision and so we felt we owed it to [our son] just to talk to everybody. We didn’t want to leave a stone unturned; we felt that we only had one shot to get this right” (Stiell et al. 2008, 60). One of the migrant mothers in Byrne and De Tona’s (2012, 32) study similarly portrays choice as a burden: “Secondary school [is] too much responsibility for the parents...all the responsibility goes to the mother in our culture”.

In Gewirtz et al’s framework we might expect pressure to be particularly an issue for semi-skilled choosers, as they struggle to reconcile their sense that secondary school choice is a very important decision with their limited ability to identify the ‘best’ school. Yet other studies have suggested that the expectation that responsible parents ought to behave as rational consumers is difficult for parents of all backgrounds to contend with (Hill and Lai 2016). For example, Wilkins (2011, 364) describes how the mothers he interviewed felt compelled to describe their choices in rationalist, calculating terms, speculating that this is because they want to emphasise that they are engaging appropriately with the process and avoid “being positioned as passive and undeserving subjects”. Warrington (2005, 805) describes a “hard-hitting” presentation to parents at a relatively deprived primary school, where the headteacher “stresses the importance of choice of secondary school on children’s eventual success as adults”.

We should not assume that apparently disengaged families do not feel pressure around school choice. Reay and Ball (1997, 89) argue that “working-class decision-making in education is infused by ambivalence, fear and a reluctance to invest too much in an area where failure is still a common working-class experience”. As a result, school choice may provoke strong emotional reactions even among those who do not appear to be active participants because they have already reconciled themselves to disappointment.

#### 4.44 Does School Choice Generate (the Anticipation of) Regret?

As outlined in chapter 3, a major mechanism through which choice may have disvalue is through regret. This might occur prior to the decision being made, with concern about closing off options, as parents told Stiell et al (2008, 59):

*“It’s probably one of the most stressful things I’ve ever done...I’d think to myself ‘well what about if this happens and what if I did that’”*

*“the process was awful, worrying about what to do for the best because it was such a big decision to make. Sometimes too much choice makes you question whether you’re doing the right thing”*

Alternatively, regret may appear (or persist) after the decision is made. As Ball and Vincent (1998, 387) put it, “The uncertainties of choice feed into a sense of continuing doubt for some parents – even once the choice is made questions still remain: is the chosen school the right one?” A number of parents, across several studies, expressed such doubts:

*“I’m still not certain, if I’ve made a right decision”* – Parent (Ball and Gewirtz 1997, 217)

*“I just thought, what am I doing sending my child to this school, I’m sure I’m going to regret this”*  
– Parent (Hill and Lai 2016, 1297)

*“Since I have been [to visit the school] I am not any happier about him going. I wanted to feel sure that we had made the right decision, but I do not”* – Parent (Hammond and Dennison 1995, 109)

#### 4.45 What Do We Know So Far?

The existing literature provides us with evidence that at least some parents in England find choosing a school unpleasant. It creates stress and anxiety for those struggling to identify reliable information, to weigh up the various trade-offs involved, that feel pressurised and fear making a mistake or regretting their decision. However, we only have snapshots of particular parents, and little sense of how widespread such experiences are. Moreover, the existing literature does not give us much indication of the intensity of these emotional reactions. While in some cases, parents’ responses are clearly severe, with researchers describing the process as ‘traumatic’, and parents claiming to be worrying ‘constantly’, it is unclear whether these are common experiences

or whether the psychological costs are relatively minor for others. There is little comparable evidence from Scotland, though there are some indications that school choice is less burdensome for Scottish parents because they are more likely to satisfice rather than maximise. The existing literature does not tell us much about children's experiences, though again, at least some find choice very difficult.

#### **4.5 Does Choice Unrealistically Raise Expectations or Improve Experiences of Outcomes (Affective Theories)?**

A concern around choice we encountered in chapter 3 is that it may raise expectations about how good schools will be, leading to disappointment when students finally start school. As noted above, the 'skilled choosers' in Gewirtz et al's (1995) English study seem to have a clear tendency towards perfectionism, whereas the satisficing approach of Adler et al's (1989) Scottish parents implies they will be content as long as they believe their school is adequate. Woods et al (1998, 84) describe how some English parents having chosen a school "became fully committed to it above all others". Warrington (2005, 812) portrays crushing disappointment in families where children, in the words of one mother, "get all hyped up, get their heart set on a school". This suggests a very strong positive, possibly over-optimistic, impression of their chosen school, which may be a prelude to ultimate dissatisfaction.

However, Coldron et al's parent survey suggests that school satisfaction more often increases once students started secondary school. Overall, 39% of parents said that they were more satisfied with the school than at the start of the school year, compared to 9% who said they were less satisfied. This fits with Reay's (2007) account, which describes children generally adapting to new surroundings even where they were reluctant to attend a particular school. That gives us little reason to think that initial expectations are unrealistically high.

## 4.6 Does School Choice Promote Freedom/Autonomy?

As we saw in chapter 3, different conceptions of freedom and autonomy give rise to different empirical questions. The existing literature provides minimal evidence on most of these questions, but I recount what little we have in the sections that follow.

### *4.61 Is School Choice Significant?*

On many accounts, the perceived significance of school choice crucially influences its value. Freedom judged by the agent and autonomy as narrative control depend on how much the choice matters to the chooser. Freedom judged by society depends on societal judgements of the significance of choice. The evidence of 3.1 provides some indication that choice is deemed significant both to the families that make the choice and to society in general, but gives us little idea of *how* significant it is.

### *4.62 How Far Do Choosers Vary in Terms of Which Schools They Prefer? (Freedom Judged by Society)*

Recall that according to the societal norms approach to freedom, the value of an option depends on the number of comparable people that would favour that option over the alternatives. This implies that school choice is valuable to the extent that people in practice have different preferences of school. Qualitative studies point in different directions on this question. Byrne (2006, 1008) describes “a total consensus among middle-class mothers as to which were the best schools (and nearly all the working-class women in the area who I interviewed agreed)”. On the other hand, David et al (1994, 134) report that “The secondary school preferred by the parents was in fact extremely variable, illustrating again that families differ in their preferences for education and schooling”.

Perhaps this is unsurprising – the level of divergence in preference is likely to vary significantly across different contexts. Using school application data that is available to researchers, it is possible in principle to construct ‘choice sets’ for families and calculate how frequently families

with schools in common between their choice sets rank them in a different order. I have not encountered such analysis in the literature, nor have I attempted to carry it out in this thesis.

#### *4.63 Does School Choice Promote Autonomy as Self-Government?*

Under the autonomy as self-government view, what is good about choice is that it avoids demeaning substitutions of judgement. As discussed in chapter 3, these substitutions of judgement are likely to be seen as more problematic if the judgements in question relate to ends rather than means, and if people believe that they have knowledge and expertise over the subject in question. Gorard (1998, 512) suggests that parents are likely to be confident in their judgements: “It is well known that just as everyone is supposedly an art critic, everyone is an ‘expert’ on education...After all, everyone has been to school, and that experience is likely to have helped them form opinions about educational issues”. Coldron et al (2008, 153) find that 94% of English parents were satisfied that they had adequate information to decide on a school, and only 3% were dissatisfied with the amount of information they had, which suggests that most parents feel sufficiently informed to make the choice. Reay and Ball (1998, 435) claim middle class parents have greater belief in their ability to evaluate schools because they are less likely to leave the decision to their children: “in positional middle-class families it is the parent (or parents) who is the expert”. However, it is unclear how far this is believed to be genuine expertise as opposed to greater competence relative to their children. Though these findings are suggestive, none of the studies I have reviewed addressed the question of parents’ confidence in their judgements directly. As we saw in 3.1, there is some existing evidence on why families want choice of schools, but this does not generally address whether they see themselves as choosing a means or an end.

#### *4.64 Does School Choice Help People Live Authentically?*

On the authenticity view, for school choice to have value, it has to relate to beliefs or characteristics that people strongly identify with, and help them to live in accordance with those beliefs and characteristics. Most of the common reasons for choosing a school – academic performance, proximity and convenience, security, environment and facilities (Coldron et al.

2008; Miriam David, West, and Ribbens 1994; Gorard 1999; Montacute and Cullinane 2018; Wespieser, Durbin, and Sims 2015) – do not relate to the fundamental questions of identity invoked by a concern for authenticity. That said, the single most popular reason for choosing a school in Wespieser et al's (2015) survey, rated among the top three factors by 48% of parents, is finding the school “that most suits my child/children”. While this is somewhat ambiguous, it is plausible that for some parents this fit may relate to questions of identity.

Authenticity is most obviously related to religious education. However, in Coldron et al's (2008, 130) survey, only 6% of parents said that they chose their school for religious reasons. That is far lower than the proportion of English secondary school students attending faith schools - 17% in 2010 (Department for Education 2010), 18% in 2019/20 (Department for Education 2020b). Indeed, qualitative research on school choice indicates that faith is often used as a proxy for a school's quality (Glatter, Woods, and Bagley 1996; Noden 2000). This attitude is exemplified by one parent's comment to Butler and Hamnett (2012, 1248): “I think people are gravitating towards faith schools because you haven't got much choice between the bad and the bad!”. At the same time, there are parents for whom the religious component of education is a clear priority. For example, one parent chose her Catholic school because their daughter “was christened at 10 years old, we are practising Catholics, and it was always in our mind” (Butler and Hamnett 2012).

The issue is particularly pertinent for ethnic and religious minorities. Weekes-Bernard reports strong demand for Christian schools among Black parents (Weekes-Bernard 2007, 36–38). Trevena et al (2016, 82) describe more ambivalence in the Polish community in England and Scotland:

*“Parents who chose to place their children in a Catholic school would do so because they were Catholics (even if not practising) and/or because they had heard that these schools fared better in academic terms. For some parents both of these reasons were equally important...Other Polish parents did not like the idea of their children attending a Catholic school, as they associated such schools with over-emphasis on religious instruction”*

However, the strongest demands for religious schooling on authenticity grounds in the literature come from Muslim parents. Weekes-Bernard uncovers high demand among parents for Islamic state schools:

*“If you look at Muslim parents, they have specific needs themselves, an understanding for their religious beliefs, an understanding for what we would like for our children. State schools can't at the moment achieve that” – Parent (Weekes-Bernard 2007, 31)*



*“My dream is – I have 6 children – [for] one of them to go to Islamic school. They’re very expensive so my dream is that at least one can go” – Parent (Weekes-Bernard 2007, 32)*

The arguments offered indicate that these demands are rooted in concern for identity and authenticity:

*“Children do well when they have confidence and their self-esteem is higher. So when they’re going to state school – and from every Muslim home the children do grow up with certain values, certain understanding of their religion – when they go into the school, those things are very dramatically cut. They’re told, it’s not going to happen here. Child loses his self-esteem, his confidence” – Parent (Weekes-Bernard 2007, 33)*

*“The day [is] spent in school then you’re in a different setting. Straight away 3.30, 4.00, it’s straight to the mosque. You have to behave differently – you can’t do this, you can’t do that. I think that’s more dangerous for the children – ‘at 3.30, at 4.00 I’m a different person’” – Student Teacher (Weekes-Bernard 2007, 32)*

This picture of alienation, of Muslim children required to be fundamentally different people at home and at school, is an explicit claim that more choice is needed in order for the children to live authentically.

For other parents, the desire for religious education is more complicated, driven neither by instrumentalism towards results nor religious observance, but rather by the view that religious education instils certain positive character traits, particularly discipline:

*“I just went down the faith route because of my own upbringing. They are renowned for giving a good education and good discipline, and that is paramount really, for any child” – Parent (Butler and Hamnett 2012, 1248)*

*“I think it’s to do with the fact that there is a certain discipline in those schools. There’s always a respect for teachers, priests, whatever, and also I think there’s certain morals that they work to that has worked for me, and I would want my children to have those morals as well” – Parent (Butler and Hamnett 2012, 1248)*

More generally, it has been suggested that some parents are attracted to ‘vicarious religion’: their children being socialised to a certain extent into religious practices, even if they are not expected to be observant themselves (Hemming and Roberts 2018).

Plausibly, school choice may have relevance for people’s ability to honour their social and political commitments as well. In the US, Cucchiara and Horvat (2014, 487–88) argue as much, claiming that for their participants school choice is “intertwined with identity construction”, an “articulation of who they were as parents and people”. Their study emphasises parents’ endorsement of urban public schools as an expression of political liberalism. In the England,

Crozier et al (2008) find parents making similar choices are less likely to be explicitly political, but are more likely to discuss their decision in moral terms, as a way to encourage an egalitarian and multicultural outlook (see also Byrne and De Tona (2014)). However, Reay et al (2007) suggests that these intrinsic values are often inextricable from an instrumental belief that comfort with people from different backgrounds is a useful disposition in a globalised world. Conversely, Weekes-Bernard (2007, 33) found some call among Black parents for predominantly Black schools, emphasising Black culture and history: “If you had a predominantly Black school, the children would have respect”.

Overall, discussions of school choice and authenticity have focused overwhelmingly on religion, to the exclusion of other identities. Moreover, it is unclear from the literature to what extent religious schools are felt to be necessary to expressions of faith, and to what extent preferences for faith schools are instrumental. The intrinsic desire for religious schools appears to be strongest among Muslim parents, some of whom express the view that secular schooling requires Muslim children to live a schizophrenic existence, acting very differently at home and school. In at least some cases, school choice may be used for parents to promote particular political or social outlooks, such as egalitarianism, multiculturalism or pride in a distinctive sub-culture.

#### *4.65 Questions Not Addressed in the Literature*

I have found little evidence in the literature to answer the following questions related to the value of school choice for freedom and autonomy: whether choosers feel they have an adequate range of options (freedom judged by agent), what the ‘narrative significance’ of school choice is (autonomy as narrative control), whether choice offers effective practice of choosing (autonomy as agential authority).

## **4.7 Conclusion**

In the previous chapter I developed a set of empirical questions that help us assess whether school choice has intrinsic (dis)value. In this chapter I have reviewed the existing literature on attitudes to and experiences of school choice in England and Scotland, seeking evidence to help

answer these questions. In general, there is far more evidence on parents in England, and relatively little on children and Scots. It is also worth emphasising that the bulk of the evidence comes from studies conducted in the 1990s and early 2000s, with relatively little from the last ten years – so much of it may be outdated. I have shown that the majority of parents want to choose their child's school, though it is unclear whether this desire is intrinsic or instrumental, and how strong it is. The literature suggests most English parents feel empowered by choice, but that a minority do not. Choice in England can involve significant time and effort, though it is unclear whether this is subjectively felt to be a major burden. Though choosing is unpleasant, stressful and anxious for some parents and children, it is unclear how widespread such experiences are. In general, there is far less evidence to help us determine whether school choice contributes to autonomy.

None of the questions that I laid out in chapter 3 can be satisfactorily answered from the existing evidence, and many cannot be addressed at all. The next chapter describes how I have collected and analysed new data in this thesis to try and fill the gap.

## 5. Methods

Ultimately, the purpose of this thesis is to help answer the policy question of what the optimal form and level of school choice is. More specifically, I wish to understand the extent to which secondary school choice produces intrinsic value or disvalue in England and Scotland. As we saw in chapter 3, this entails several sub-questions, including whether people want school choice (for intrinsic reasons), whether school choice increases or reduces subjective welfare, and whether school choice significantly enhances freedom or autonomy.

### 5.1 Research Questions and Comparative Approach

The way I have chosen to approach these questions is by comparing the experience of families in England (where increasing formal choice has been a government priority) with that of families in Scotland (where the government has tended to play down choice). Compared to the ultimate policy questions, my direct research questions are more modest in terms of causal inference:

*RQ1: In what ways does the process of secondary school choice produce intrinsic value or disvalue in England and Scotland?*

*RQ2: Is there a difference between England and Scotland in terms the types, extent or intensity of intrinsic value or disvalue experienced by families choosing a secondary school?*

Having identified in chapter 3 various ways in which people may be intrinsically better or worse off for having school choice, the next step is to determine which of these obtain and how they differ between the two countries. Note that RQ2 refers to both the ‘extent’ and ‘intensity’ of intrinsic value or disvalue. This reflects the fact that to evaluate a state of affairs it is not enough to say that it is good or bad in certain ways – we also care *how* good or bad it is. By ‘extent’, I mean how widespread are the different costs and benefits of choice - are they common or rare? By ‘intensity’, I mean how big are the costs or benefits for those that experience them - are they relatively trivial or substantial? These are difficult things to measure with precision. However, both qualitative and quantitative methods can help provide an indication of extent or intensity. How many survey respondents report something or how frequently it comes up in interviews tells us about its extent. Placement on a 11-point scale in a survey question, or strength and emphasis in interviews tells us about intensity.

These research questions call for comparison between the choice regimes in England and Scotland. As Sartori (1991, 244) observes “*comparing is controlling*. To be sure, one may engage in comparative work for any number of reasons; but *the* reason is control”. In other words, the fundamental objective of comparative studies is to approximate the process of controlling for confounding variables. That is, broadly, the strategy pursued in this project.

This thesis is based on a ‘most-similar systems’ approach – seeking cases that share as many characteristics in common as possible so as to identify salient differences (Della Porta 2008). England and Scotland are clearly not identical aside from school choice policy – as Slater and Ziblatt (2013, 13) recognise such “perfectly paired comparison” is a “chimerical goal”. However, with the “*intense theoretical engagement*” they call for (Slater and Ziblatt 2013, 13), I intend to use controlled comparison between the two countries to shed light on the costs and benefits of school choice.

England and Scotland are, fundamentally, very similar countries: they share a language, media, many political institutions and have substantial cultural overlap. They are part of a closely integrated economy. 460,000 people born in England live in Scotland - 9% of Scotland’s population (National Records of Scotland n.d.). 700,000 people have moved in the opposite direction, from Scotland to England (Stokes 2013). With the possible exception of Wales, there is no country on Earth that more closely resembles Scotland than England, and vice-versa. These basic similarities, alongside the contrasting approaches to school choice, mean it is at least *prima facie* plausible to attribute differences in the experiences of families choosing schools between the two countries to the divergence of policy.

Raffe et al (1999, 16) suggest that the devolved UK nations are well suited to such comparative studies, since “the education systems are (in some respects) different but their social relations and contexts are similar”. In particular, they argue that these conditions create opportunities for policy learning between England and Scotland, explicitly mentioning school choice as an appropriate area for comparison.

Of course, we cannot leap from observing differences in school choice policy and experience between England and Scotland to the conclusion that policy *caused* the differences in experience. There may be reverse causality: differences in policy may be caused by differences in experiences – for example, more formal choice where people find it more empowering, less where it has a more negative effect on subjective wellbeing. This is plausible: parents are citizens and can demand changes from democratically elected administrations. However, this possibility simply

raises the question of why Scottish and English families would have different experiences to begin with, independent of the choice regime.

In section 10.15, I consider a number of possible explanations: differences between England and Scotland in terms of the availability, accessibility and diversity of schools, underlying differences in political outlook and levels of social segregation. I take each of these in turn, and suggest that they are neither entirely independent of school choice policy, nor sufficient to fully explain the differences I find. In any case, in my interviews, I ask participants explicitly about the direct effect of different school choice policies and find that they believe policies have a causal impact on their experiences. Over the course of this thesis, I also shed light on some of the mechanisms by which the process of choosing schools creates intrinsic (dis)value, and in chapter 10 I argue that these mechanisms can be tied directly to government policy. Thus, while we should be cautious in our interpretation, a comparative study like this can provide at least suggestive evidence of the impact of different school choice policies in England and Scotland.

## **5.2 Mixed Methods Research Design**

To address my research questions, I decided to combine qualitative interviews in five case study locations across England and Scotland with an online quantitative survey in both countries. Both approaches have different advantages, and taken together they can help mitigate one another's weaknesses.

The way I am using qualitative methods in this thesis is unusual, though hardly unprecedented. From my theoretical analysis in chapter 3, I have a relatively clear idea of the phenomena I am seeking to understand. The framework I developed in that chapter lends itself to a primarily deductive approach, testing to see whether the phenomena predicted by different theories do in fact obtain (Bryman 2016, 21–24). That, in turn, entails a fairly fixed research design: my strategy for data collection and analysis was specified in advance, based on theoretical considerations, rather than emerging iteratively through the process (Robson and McCartan 2016). However, as is often the case, my study is not purely deductive, but contains an element of induction too (Bryman 2016, 21), admitting some flexibility into the research design. In conducting and analysing my qualitative interviews, I remained open to findings that were not anticipated in my theoretical framework (e.g. the significance of uncertainty - see section 6.7),

and I used the preliminary findings of my qualitative research to develop survey questions (see below).

Fixed research designs are typically purely quantitative, although there is nothing inherent to the approach that rules out qualitative methods, and indeed many successful fixed research designs have employed qualitative methods (Robson and McCartan 2016, 101). For my purposes, I believe qualitative methods bring a number of benefits.

As Bowe et al (1994) argue, the openness of interviews means that they can better capture the depth and nuance of participants' views and experiences, in contrast to the 'decontextualised' data generated by surveys. Interviews have less scope for conceptual ambiguity. First, ideas like 'adequate choice', 'basic right', even 'anxiety' and 'stress,' are liable to be interpreted differently by different respondents, who in turn may have different conceptions to the researcher (Gorard 1997a). The interactivity of interviews, with scope to probe responses in detail, reduces the likelihood of such misunderstanding (Robson and McCartan 2016, 286). Second, qualitative research encourages more reflective responses from participants, allowing the researcher to prompt and challenge with ideas that respondents may otherwise miss. This allows us to go deeper than immediate gut reactions (Byrne 2012). For example, responses to the notion of 'choice' may be instinctively favourable because of its positive connotations, but these may be weakened by further reflection (see section 5.1.3). Third, qualitative research is better placed to reconstruct the internal logic and structure of people's views (Rubin and Rubin 2005). For example, qualitative analysis should be more capable of teasing apart and exploring the inter-relationship of intrinsic and instrumental considerations, rather than running them together or creating excessively rigid dichotomies.

However, there would be two major limitations to relying solely on interview data to address my research questions. First, my interview participants are not fully representative – they are subject both to sampling bias (recruited through a small number of schools in a small number of cities) and non-response bias (less educated and affluent parents seem to have been less willing to participate). Second, sample size. RQ2 implies comparison at a national level. Yet making such claims from the interview data requires us to draw inferences from around 30 families in each of England and Scotland. This problem is exacerbated for any analysis of sub-groups – for example, families making placing requests - with fewer participants still.

To address these limitations, I have supplemented the interviews with a quantitative survey. While the survey does not provide a random sample of parents, it does at least provide a much larger and independent sample of data that is closer to representativeness. I have already

mentioned the disadvantages of surveys, in terms of producing less rich, less thought-through and contextualised responses from participants. It is worth emphasising how rapid-fire online surveys are: whereas interviews typically lasted 30-60 minutes, the median time taken to complete my survey was four minutes. However, combining broader, shallower survey responses with deeper interview data taken from a narrower slice of participants can help to compensate for the different limitations of the two methods.

In the course of this thesis, I combine quantitative and qualitative data, analysis and findings in a number of different ways, reflecting some of the different approaches that come under the broad heading of ‘mixed methods’. The relationship in the first instance is one of ‘development’ – using “the results from one method to help develop or inform the other method” (Greene, Caracelli, and Graham 1989, 259). I used findings from initial interviews to shape my survey questionnaire. For example, the response options to the question on why parents feel it is important to have a choice of schools drew on interview responses to that same question. I decided against asking explicitly about ‘empowerment’ in the survey, because it was a concept many interview respondents struggled to interpret on their own.

I also use qualitative and quantitative data in a ‘complementary’ fashion (Small 2011): increasing “the interpretability, meaningfulness, and validity of constructs and inquiry results by both capitalizing on inherent method strengths and counteracting inherent biases in methods” (Greene, Caracelli, and Graham 1989, 259). For example, in section 6.22 I use interview responses to explain why survey participants are more willing to describe school choice as ‘interesting’ than ‘enjoyable’. Another form of complementarity is using each method to address different aspects of the same overall research question. For example, the survey can tell us whether parents find choice stressful, whereas from the interviews we can get rich description of how this stress manifests itself.

There is also an element of what Small (2011) describes as ‘confirmation’: using the methods to verify findings from each other. As described already, a significant part of the rationale for the survey is to test whether findings from the interviews can be replicated in the larger independent survey sample.



### 5.3 Qualitative Research

#### 5.3.1 Case Selection

For my interviews, I decided to focus on five case study locations within my two country case studies. In my MSc project (Bhattacharya 2017), which was a pilot for this research, I spoke to parents in ‘Scotstown’, a city in Scotland whose local authority requested anonymity. In addition to using the data collected there, I recruited families from a further two Scottish cities and two English conurbations. Restricting the research to a handful of case study locations allows for contextualisation of the interview data, instead of making superficial comparisons against very different background conditions (Warrington 2005). It has also had practical benefits in terms of the logistics of recruitment and interviews.

As with the selection of country case studies, in selecting cities and towns I used a ‘most-similar systems design’ (Della Porta 2008), trying to identify matched pairs of English and Scottish locations. I started from the presumption that the key dimension of variation is density: the more densely populated a place is, the more schools are practically accessible. Consequently, we can expect large cities to have a high level of (certainly formal, and perhaps substantive) choice, smaller cities and larger towns to have a medium level of choice and small towns and rural locations to have a low level of choice.

*Figure 5.1: Case selection*

	<b>England</b>	<b>Scotland</b>
Large city (High choice)	London	Edinburgh
Small city/ Large town (Medium choice)	Ipswich	Dundee (+ Scotstown)
Small town/ rural (Low choice)		

While the operation of choice in small towns and rural areas is undoubtedly interesting, the inclusion of a further two case studies would mean fewer interviews in each location. Consequently, rural areas were excluded on the basis that choice there is likely to be less eventful and less different between England and Scotland. This means that the interview findings taken alone are likely to exaggerate the differences between England and Scotland, providing another reason to combine them with the survey, which does cover rural locations.

A number of criteria were used to select the specific case study locations. First, cities were shortlisted according to their accessibility. Second, they were compared in terms of the level of effective choice in each city: their population, number of schools, in England the proportion of first preferences granted and in Scotland the proportion of placing requests. The shortlisting process also identified atypical local features of the school system that mark the location out as very different to the rest of the country, such as a disproportionately high share of private, religious or grammar schools. Finally, the cities were compared on a number of demographic measures, such as education level and foreign-born population.

London is the obvious choice for the large English city case study. The vast array of options and mobility of students mean that it is the closest to the policymakers' ideal of widespread formal choice. Within London, I decided to focus on Camden Borough, mainly for logistical convenience. No Scottish city is as big as London, but Glasgow and Edinburgh are by some distance the two largest. There was little to choose between them - each have their idiosyncrasies. Edinburgh has an unusually large private sector, whereas Glasgow schools are quite divided along religious lines. Initially, I selected Glasgow, but was refused permission by its local authority to recruit through primary schools. As a result, I turned to Edinburgh as my high choice Scottish case study.

For my medium choice locations, I selected Dundee and Ipswich. Anticipating difficulties recruiting participants from less affluent backgrounds, the fact that both are below national average in terms of prosperity (Office for National Statistics 2017) counted in their favour, as this meant a larger pool of potential relatively disadvantaged participants. The two locations stood out as similar on a number of dimensions. They are close in terms of size: Dundee has 148,000 inhabitants; Ipswich 136,000 (Centre for Cities n.d.). Both have substantial foreign-born populations: 12% for Ipswich, 9% for Dundee (Centre for Cities n.d.). Both are coastal towns whose economies have suffered and recovered over recent decades. Both have a fairly typical range of schools.

It is worth describing the local educational 'markets' in each of these case study locations in more detail for background context. Camden Borough covers a densely populated stretch of London running from business districts in central London through to more suburban areas in the North, with 260,000 residents packed into 22km<sup>2</sup>. Over half of its adult residents are educated to degree level (the fifth highest for local authorities in England and Wales). At the same time, it features substantial deprivation: 29% of children live in low income families, compared to 17% for England and Wales as a whole. A third of Camden residents are ethnic

minorities, and a further fifth are White but not British (mostly from continental Europe) (London Borough of Camden 2020). Politically, the area leans strongly to the left, and a few of the parents I spoke to self-deprecatingly identified themselves with the stereotype of well-to-do ‘champagne socialists’ long associated with North London (Coates 2017).

There are 43 state primary schools in Camden, 13 of which are Church of England and six Roman Catholic. These feed into 10 state secondary schools,<sup>15</sup> two of which are Roman Catholic. Camden contains three single sex girls’ schools, but only one boys’ school, which has resulted in gender imbalances in some of the coeducational schools. Only one Camden secondary school is an Academy, and there has been strong political resistance to other schools following it out of local authority control (Camden New Journal 2016). All secondary schools in the borough are rated ‘good’ or ‘outstanding’ by Ofsted, and most are comfortably above national average in terms of exam performance (Gov.uk n.d.). By national standards, Camden schools are relatively well integrated: its index of dissimilarity (the proportion of students that would have to move schools in order to achieve an equal proportion of free school meals eligible students in each school) is 18%, compared to a national average 26%.<sup>16</sup> In the 2019/20 cohort, with whom I did most of my interviews, 64% of children in Camden received their first preference school and 88% received one of their top three preferences. Camden allows applicants to rank six schools, but 8% did not receive an offer from any of the schools to which they applied (Department for Education 2019a). While I focused my recruitment on parents with children in Camden primary schools, it is important to emphasise that local authority boundaries are highly porous in London: 28% of state-educated pupils living in Camden go to school in another local authority. Camden also has a sizeable private sector: 30% of school students educated in the borough are at an independent school (Department for Education 2019c), and an estimated 11% of children in Camden state primary schools go onto private secondaries (Facchetti, Neri, and Ovidi 2020).

The City of Edinburgh local authority area covers most of the extent of Scotland’s capital city, though not its outer suburbs. It contains 518,000 people and is relatively prosperous, with earnings comfortably above the UK average. It is highly educated: 58% of adult residents have a post-school qualification (Centre for Cities n.d.). 16% of Edinburgh’s population is foreign-born, most notably from Eastern Europe (Ferrier 2019). There are 88 state primary schools in Edinburgh, 15 of which are Roman Catholic, and 23 state secondaries, of which three are

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<sup>15</sup> Plus another two specifically for hospital inpatients.

<sup>16</sup> See chapter 10, footnote 26, for more detail on indices of dissimilarity.

Roman Catholic. Edinburgh schools are among the most segregated in the country. Its index of dissimilarity is 32%, compared to 19% for Scotland as a whole. There is also wide variation in exam performance: Edinburgh schools feature among the highest and lowest ranked in the country (Denholm 2019). In Edinburgh, each household is allocated both a catchment non-denominational school and a catchment Roman Catholic school, which they may choose between. If neither is satisfactory, they may also make a placing request to another school. Over the past five years the proportion of Edinburgh students entering secondary school that make placing requests has ranged from 19-24%, and these requests are successful between in 48% to 67% of cases (Burden 2020). Edinburgh also has an extremely prominent private sector: around a quarter of children educated in Edinburgh are at an independent school (Biggar Economics 2018), though many of these students will be resident outside Edinburgh.

Ipswich is a historic town in the county of Suffolk in the East of England. It is slightly poorer and less educated than the rest of the country: average weekly earnings are £470 (compared to national average £532) and 27% of the adult population has qualifications above school level (compared to national average 39%). There are around 25 primary schools in Ipswich itself, and 11 secondary schools in the Ipswich area. Almost all of the secondary schools are Academies, many of them in multi-academy chains. 90% of families in Suffolk receive their stated first choice of schools (Department for Education 2019a). There is one Catholic school, but the others are non-denominational. There are a few private schools in the area, and across the whole of Suffolk 7% of pupils attend independent schools (Department for Education 2019c). The performance of schools in Ipswich is fairly polarised. Overall, exam results are below average, and a couple of schools are rated by Ofsted as ‘requiring improvement’. However, most of the schools are ‘good’, according to Ofsted (Gov.uk n.d.). Suffolk is slightly above national average for socioeconomic segregation: its free school meals index of dissimilarity is 28%, compared to 26% for the whole of England.

Dundee, on the East coast of Scotland, is the poorest of Scotland’s cities – average weekly earnings are £479 a week, comparable to Ipswich, but well below Glasgow, Edinburgh and Aberdeen (Centre for Cities n.d.). After years of economic decline, following the closure of its shipyards and jute manufacturing, Dundee has made something of a resurgence in recent years, based around the technology sector – most notably, video game development. There are 34 primary schools in Dundee, ten of which are Roman Catholic, and eight secondary schools, of which two are Roman Catholic. Schools in Dundee tend to have lower attainment than national average: 25% of Dundee students achieve at least five Highers, compared to 36% across the whole of Scotland (Denholm 2019). Dundee is near the Scottish average for free school meal

segregation, with an index of dissimilarity of 18%. In 2018/19, 23% of students in Dundee made placing request, and 77% of these requests were granted (McKaig 2019).

Unfortunately, I am unable to provide further details on Scotstown, my fifth case study location, without compromising its anonymity.

### *5.32 Recruitment*

The population of interest is parents and children going through the process of moving from primary to secondary school. An immediate question is which stage of the process to focus on. It is entirely possible that emotions and attitudes may be quite different before seriously considering alternatives, while exploring and weighing up options, once a school is allocated and after the student starts school. A further complication is that recollections of the process may be shaped by the outcome – Coldron et al (2008) find that parents who got their children into a preferred school were more positive about the choice process. Yet such ‘remembered’ (dis)utility may have (dis)value in itself: an otherwise pleasant experience might be undesirable if it leaves a ‘nasty taste in the mouth’ (Kahneman, Wakker, and Sarin 1997).

In this research, I have focused on the immediate experience of choosing. To capture families’ impressions when school choice is most salient and vivid to them, I sought to interview them in the month or two before and after school applications are submitted but before the outcome is known. In practice, I also ended up learning a bit about the longer-term impact of school choice as well. Many of the parents I spoke to had older children that had already moved up to secondary school, and so inevitably they drew on those past experiences in answering my questions.

Though most previous studies of school choice have focused on parents, this is regarded as a weakness in the literature (Gorard 1997a). As we have seen, children are often heavily involved in choosing a school. Moreover, as we saw in chapter 3, arguments about the intrinsic value or disvalue of school choice often apply just as strongly to children as their parents. I therefore sought to include children as well as parents in the research.

Technically, my interview participants represent a convenience sample – although that is something of a misnomer, given the difficulties of recruiting them. Consequently, the objective has not been strict representativeness, but rather to canvass a range of perspectives. In

particular, I took pains to try to reach families that are less heavily engaged with choice (for example, Scottish parents that do not make a placing request). Moreover, in light of the evidence that responses to choice are strongly shaped by social class, my case selection and recruitment approach were informed by a desire to get a sizeable number of participants from less advantaged backgrounds.

My main source of recruitment was through primary schools. Initially, I intended to approach schools selectively, based on their location and social mix. However, I had such little success getting schools even to acknowledge requests, let alone agree to participate, that ultimately I had to be more pragmatic and less discriminating in my approaches. All told, six primary schools across Ipswich, Edinburgh, Dundee and Scotstown were involved. In my earlier fieldwork in Scotstown, I asked schools to distribute invitation letters to parents of final year students, but this approach yielded relatively few participants. By contrast, face-to-face recruitment at parent information evenings was far more successful. In Camden, I recruited parents not through schools, but by approaching them at an open evening organised by the local authority and at 'Meet the Parents' events. Meet the Parents is a voluntary organisation that encourages families to choose Camden state secondaries (Facchetti, Neri, and Ovidi 2019). It holds events in most primary schools in the borough where prospective applicants can hear about the experiences of children already attending local secondary schools and their parents. As a result, participants in Camden were drawn from a wider range of primary schools (around 10 in total) and residential locations within the borough.

In addition to the 45 parents recruited through schools and events, I also recruited a further six through requests on social media (Facebook and Twitter) and six through snowball sampling (asking participants to recommend friends or acquaintances). Where there seemed to be major imbalances in the sample, I took active steps to address these. For example, in the first phase of data collection in Camden, there were very few interviews with parents without a university degree. In response, I went back to parents that had registered interest but not agreed to be interviewed, explicitly seeking participants without a university degree, as well as asking those that had already been interviewed to recommend potential non-graduates to participate.

Figures 5.2 and 5.3 provide information on the 57 families I interviewed for this project (with more extensive detail in appendix B). There were a comparable number (8-11) of participants in each of the case study locations, except for Camden, where initial recruitment was more successful and was topped up with additional non-university educated participants. Since there

was an extra Scottish location, participants were split fairly evenly between England and Scotland.

I had no preference in recruitment between speaking to mothers or fathers (or indeed, non-biological parents and guardians). However, three-quarters of the participants were mothers. This is unsurprising, since among my participants, as in previous studies (Gorard 1999), women are more likely to take the lead in choosing a school – although in many families men are heavily involved.

Because of the potential ethical issues around recruiting children directly, and particularly the necessity of getting parental approval, I decided to recruit child participants through their parents. Once a parent had agreed to participate, I then asked them if it would be possible to speak to their child as well. In total, I interviewed 24 children. In all but three cases, the children were interviewed alongside their parent(s), rather than on their own. For some interviews, this worked well. It could be informative to see families interacting and thinking through my questions together. I suspect it was also reassuring for some of the children to have their parents with them. However, this approach had drawbacks. It meant that children did not get as much time to speak as they might have done, and in some interviews the children mostly deferred to their parents. In those cases where I could speak to different family members separately, it was useful to compare different accounts. Though it was not ideal, I believe interviewing families together was necessary to maximise participation.

Interview participants were demographically mixed, including a substantial number of foreign-born and ethnic minority parents. However, a major issue, as already alluded to, was the over-representation of university-educated parents. More generally, a concern is that these recruitment methods are likely to have produced a sample of more ‘engaged’ parents that are more participative in their school community. This is a common issue with studies of this sort, and is not easy to mitigate (Byrne and De Tona 2012; Miriam David, West, and Ribbens 1994; Shuls 2018; Tooley 1997). After all, parents reluctant to engage with their children’s school are unlikely to be enthusiastic about engaging with researchers.

Figure 5.2: Background of interview participants

	England	Scotland	Total
<b>Families interviewed</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>57</b>
Mother interviewed	23	25	48
Father interviewed	8	10	18
Child interviewed	15	9	24
At least one foreign parent	11	3	14
At least one non-white parent	9	2	11
University educated father	19	18	37
University educated mother	19	18	37
Boy	10	17	27
Girl	17	13	30
Only child	6	4	10
Oldest child	13	16	29
Middle child	1	3	4
Youngest child	7	7	14
Made placing request	n/a	6	6

Figure 5.3: Background of interview participants by case study location

	Ipswich	Camden	Edinburgh	Dundee	Scotstown
<b>Families interviewed</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>11</b>
Mother interviewed	8	15	6	8	11
Father interviewed	2	6	4	3	3
Child interviewed	6	9	6	3	0
At least one foreign parent	2	9	1	0	2
At least one non-white parent	1	8	0	0	2
University educated father	4	15	7	5	6
University educated mother	4	15	8	4	6
Boy	5	5	5	5	7
Girl	3	14	4	5	4
Only child	1	5	2	0	2
Oldest child	3	10	5	5	6
Middle child	1	0	0	2	1
Youngest child	3	4	2	3	2
Made placing request	n/a	n/a	2	1	3

The Scotstown interviews took place in June and July 2017. Most of the Camden and Ipswich interviews took place in October and November 2018, with four top-up interviews in October-December 2019. The Edinburgh and Dundee interviews took place in February and March



2019. The intention was to speak to families as they were in the process of finalising their choices, or soon after, but before they knew whether their applications had been successful. The timing of the interviews was particularly significant in England because it allowed me to speak to parents either side of the October 31<sup>st</sup> deadline for school applications. In Scotland, things are trickier because the deadline for placing requests is not centrally set – Edinburgh’s deadline is the end of December, Dundee aims to allocate places by March but does not have a set deadline. In any case, the fact that most parents do not make placing requests meant that the timing was less significant in Scotland. The timing of the Scotstown interviews, after decisions had been made, was not ideal, but was driven by the requirements of the MSc project.

In my information sheet, I explicitly stated that I was seeking to interview families of final year primary school students – year 6 in England, primary 7 in Scotland. However, I interviewed two participants in England who had misunderstood this – Franco’s son was in year 5, Jane’s in year 7. I also relaxed this requirement for Heather, Marion, Kelly and Khalida<sup>17</sup>, who were recruited to top up the non-university contingent in Camden, and whose children had all started year 7 by the time I interviewed them.

Families that were only considering private schools were ineligible for the project, but families that had chosen or were likely to choose a private school were included if they had at least considered state schools.

### *5.33 Data Collection*

Interviews typically lasted 30-60 minutes and took place in a location convenient for the participant: usually their home or a café, in some cases their primary school or their place of work. The interviews were semi-structured, based on the relatively tightly focused topic guides reproduced in appendix C. While there were distinct topic guides for adults and children to reflect different levels of vocabulary and understanding, as well as a mixed one for families interviewed together, the questions were fundamentally the same, wording aside.

A less structured approach would have been inefficient, given the fairly well specified research questions already set out (Miles and Huberman, 1994, p. 6). Standardising the interview guides also made it easier to compare across interviews and countries. At the same time, the topic guide

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<sup>17</sup> All names used in this thesis are pseudonyms.

was used as a guide rather than script, and I altered the order or depth in which I explored different issues. This flexibility gave participants more control over the interviews, allowing them ample opportunity to express ideas not anticipated in advance.

Given how contested the notion of ‘validity’ is in qualitative research (Kvale 1996, 229–53), the design of data collection instruments can be tricky. A good starting point is to clarify the ontological and epistemological presumptions and objectives of the research: the nature of the data and the underlying reality that the interviews intend to capture.

The primary objects of interest are mental phenomena. Insofar as we are looking to understand events or behaviour, it is so that we can infer their psychological consequences. For example, learning that a parent has attended 15 school open days may reflect a tiresome or inconvenient experience, or a highly engaging one. We are interested in the number of open days only insofar as it gives us insight into that inconvenience or engagement.

In fact, there are two quite different types of mental phenomenon that we are seeking to understand. On the one hand, there are *mental states* such as anxiety, boredom, enjoyment or excitement. We want to know how often and how intensely these states arise in the course of choosing a school (RQ2), and what specifically about choosing causes them to occur (RQ1). On the other hand, there are more *evaluative* phenomena – such as a person’s self-perceived autonomy. These are more like thoughts than feelings, and involve judgement rather than sensation: they do not occur moment to moment, but strike us on reflection as we consider our lives. To illustrate the difference, consider these two common measures of subjective well-being (Dolan and Metcalfe 2012):

1. *Overall, how anxious did you feel yesterday?*
2. *Overall, how satisfied are you with your life nowadays?*

The first asks the respondent to try and remember their mental state; the second requires them to reflect on and evaluate their life.

These two types of phenomena are ontologically different and imply different epistemological orientations in research which seeks to understand them. There are clear matters of fact around mental states – people are either excited, bored or frustrated or they are not. However, these mental states are fundamentally inaccessible to anybody but the subject experiencing them, including researchers. Consequently, the appropriate approach for understanding mental states is ‘naturalistic’, seeing interviews as a way to elicit authentic accounts of subjective experience

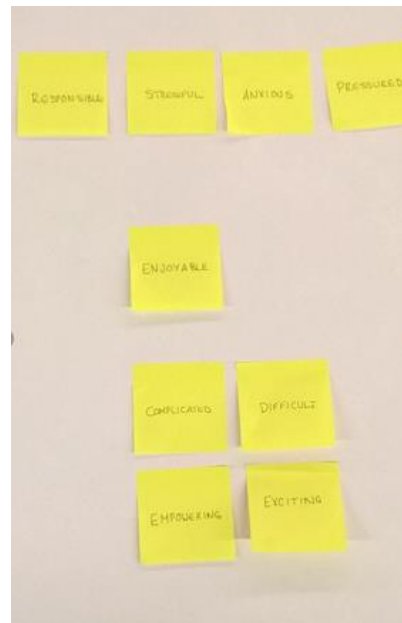
(Silverman 2014). This approach presumes that there is an objective reality to the phenomena under investigation, and that interviews can uncover this reality.

By contrast, evaluative phenomena lend themselves to a more ‘constructionist’ outlook: instead of seeking the truth about whether people feel free, we need to recognise that their ideas of freedom are developed, revised and worked out in the course of the interview. It is important therefore to contextualise these evaluations and get a sense of their relevance to participants’ lives outside of the interview. For example, how strongly do they feel about the constraints on their autonomy? Are these salient issues day-to-day, or are they prompted only in the artificial setting of the interview?

There is an important balance to be struck between allowing participants to report the thoughts and experiences that are at the top of their minds (and which therefore are likely to be more salient to them) and prompting them to consider aspects of their experience that they may otherwise forget to report (Gorard 1997a). Salience is more important for constructed evaluations, accurate recall for mental states. The interviews began with an open-ended question asking the participant to describe the process of transition to secondary school, encouraging participants to put their feelings and experiences in their own words. They were then asked more explicitly about how and why they chose certain schools and their satisfaction with the level of choice that they had.

To prompt participants to reflect on their mental states while choosing schools, they were engaged in a ‘card sort’ task (Arthur and Nazroo 2003, 130). This involved presenting them with a set of sticky notes with the following words written on them (intended to reflect different hypothesised experiences of school choice from the literature), and asking them to arrange the cards according to the extent to which the words reflect their own experience: ‘Anxious’, ‘Boring’, ‘Difficult’, ‘Pressurised’, ‘Stressful’, ‘Time Consuming’, ‘Empowering’, ‘Enjoyable’, ‘Exciting’. This method allows several hypotheses to be tested simultaneously while engaging the participant and giving them a more active role in the interview.

Figure 5.4: Example card sort



To get at their reflective evaluations of choice, participants were asked to consider the benefits and disadvantages of the system in their country compared to other systems with different levels of formal choice. At the end of the interview, they were given a fuller explanation of the aims of the study and asked for their thoughts.

The topic guides were initially developed, tested and refined over the course of my MSc research and tested again prior to my PhD fieldwork on families outwith the case study locations. These tests followed cognitive interviewing techniques, with participants encouraged to ‘think aloud’, so as to provide an indication of how they understood the questions (Willis 1999). This helped me adjust wording to ensure topic guides were as user friendly as possible.

It is worth reflecting explicitly about my position, and how this may have affected participants’ responses (Pillow 2003). In general, I feel I was able to establish reasonable rapport with most of the parents I spoke to. My success with the children was more mixed – interviews with the more mature and articulate children tended to go well, but I think I lacked the skill and experience to draw out shier and warier participants. As a man in my twenties with no children, I felt very much an ‘outsider’.<sup>18</sup> While this may have weakened my connection with participants, it also carried benefits, allowing me to ask more ‘basic’ questions that highlight implicit or unquestioned assumptions (Corbin Dwyer and Buckle 2009). I am Scottish, and went through

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<sup>18</sup> Contrast with Roda and Wells (2013) who both had children attending schools in the school district they were researching.

the Scottish school system myself, which perhaps put Scottish participants at ease and made them less defensive than they might have been about their education system. At the same time, it may have made English participants more reluctant to compare their system favourably to the one in Scotland.

### *5.34 Ethics*

My interview programme has been approved by the LSE Research Ethics Committee. My submission to the committee is reproduced in appendix D. Given the sensitivity around interviewing children, I applied for and received clearance from the government Disclosure and Barring Service. Written consent was taken from all participants, who were (orally and in writing) informed of the purposes of the project, its requirements and risks, that their responses would be anonymised, data stored securely and that their participation was voluntary. Interview questions were designed to be as unobtrusive as possible, but participants were encouraged not to answer any questions they deemed too sensitive or personal. When interviewing children, both the participants and their parents were required to give consent, as recommended by the Economic and Social Research Council (2015).

In line with a data management plan agreed with the LSE, all recordings and transcripts were saved under anonymous codes, temporarily stored on a password protected USB device, transferred to my personal password protected folder on the university's hard drive, before being deleted from the USB.

These formal requirements do not exhaust the ethical considerations around this project. For example, I was conscious of the risk that participants would mistakenly believe that I had influence over their school allocation. Consequently, I emphasised my independence, the fact that I had no power to affect their application and that refusing to participate would not prejudice their chances of success.

### *5.35 Data Analysis*

Given my interest in mental states and evaluations, the level of analysis is relatively explicit. We are seeking to understand conscious phenomena, not hidden sub-conscious drives. The qualitative data analysis approach that best suits this interest is thematic analysis, methodically working through interview responses to identify recurring ‘themes’ and relating these back to the research questions. The ‘level’ of analysis is primarily semantic, focusing on manifest rather than latent meaning, certainly for descriptions of mental states (Braun and Clarke 2006). However, analysing constructed evaluations involves deeper interpretation and excavation, relating verbal responses more closely to one another and to underlying attitudes and beliefs to build a fuller picture of the views in question.

Thematic analysis starts with ‘codes’: basic ideas to organise the data around. I developed an initial set of codes, based on the theoretical framework from chapter 3. These were iterated through the process of coding (aligning passages of interview transcripts to codes), for which I used the programme NVivo, adding and consolidating codes to best represent the meaning in the data (Attride-Stirling 2001). To aid the comparison and contrast between England and Scotland, I coded interviews from the two countries separately, using different coding frames which are reproduced in appendix E.

From these coded segments of text, extracted from the full transcripts, common ‘basic themes’ were identified. Attride-Stirling (2001) describes these as analogous to ‘warrants’: principles and premises capable of forming the building blocks of higher-level arguments. These ‘basic themes’ were then linked back to the overarching research questions.

Instead of seeking objectivity, which is a problematic and unrealistic ambition in qualitative research, it has been suggested that researchers should aim to produce “defensible knowledge claims”, robust to attempts to falsify them (Kvale 1996, 240). This necessitates sceptical and reflexive interrogation of preliminary conclusions, continually seeking ways that the data and its interpretation could have been influenced by researcher effects. I used Miles and Huberman’s (1994: 262-77) checklist of common biases in qualitative research and tactics to guard against them to guide the analysis. This involves paying close attention to outliers and extreme cases, putting particular effort into explaining and revising theories in light of surprising results, and deliberately seeking out disconfirmatory findings.

## 5.4 Quantitative Research

### *5.4.1 Recruitment and Sample*

The interviews generated a lot of rich, deep data. However, the practical constraints on the places I could recruit from and the number and type of people I could speak to limits the generalisability of my interview findings. I therefore decided to supplement the interviews with an online survey, canvassing the views of many more families, with a more demographically representative sample, covering the whole of both countries.

The survey was distributed through Panelbase, a commercial survey company which maintains a large panel of people that have signed up to participate in online research. Recruitment to the panel is designed to ensure that it is broadly nationally representative. For example, if a particular age or social group is underrepresented in the panel, Panelbase proactively recruit new members from those groups.

Nonprobability online panel surveys of this sort have long been used to successfully predict election outcomes and TV popularity contests, and are increasingly common in academic research (Sturgis 2015). However, they are particularly prone to certain forms of sampling bias (Baker et al. 2010). Unlike face-to-face surveys, they exclude people without internet connections. Compared to surveys that employ random probability recruitment (which are less common online and relatively expensive (Sturgis 2015)), there may be greater differences between the online panel and the general population even after adjusting for observed demographic variables. Consequently, inferences from the survey to the general population should be made cautiously, recognising that survey estimates may be subject to bias.

Because of the very specific population of interest – and in particular, the need to recruit a reasonable number of participants from Scotland – I had to be somewhat pragmatic in setting eligibility criteria. Though some research companies maintain panels of children, the cost of surveying students as well as – or even instead of – parents was unaffordable. Focusing only on parents with final year primary school children would have limited the sample too much, so I opened the survey to families with children in the first three years of secondary school, in the expectation that this group should still have relative clear memories of choosing a school. I instructed Panelbase to invite parents on their panel recorded as having children aged between 10 and 13 years old to complete the survey.

Even with these relaxed criteria, Panelbase anticipated that it would be challenging to recruit the 200 eligible parents I targeted in Scotland. As a result, it was deemed infeasible to impose demographic quotas on the survey sample (beyond oversampling Scotland). The survey respondents in England and Scotland therefore represent a ‘natural fallout’ sample. In other words, respondents are drawn from a sampling frame designed to be broadly reflective of the UK population, but the representativeness of the ultimate sample depends on the propensity of different groups to complete the survey. The invitation did not specify the topic of the survey, so panel members should not have been driven to the survey by a particular interest or experience that they wanted to share. 31 people started the survey without completing it (3% of all those who started the survey), suggesting little loss of parents less motivated to discuss school choice. Participants were incentivised with a 35p payment for completing the survey (Panelbase’s standard rate for a five-minute survey).

Ultimately, there were 987 valid survey responses – 801 from England and 186 from Scotland. That represents a participation rate of 22% among invited panel members, in line with Panelbase’s average rate of 24%. Far fewer of the survey respondents were university educated compared to the interview sample – around a third in total (figure 5.5). 48% of survey respondents had a post-school qualification: broadly similar to the 44% registered among 25-50 year olds in the Annual Population Survey (Office for National Statistics n.d.). This illustrates the survey’s ability to partially compensate for the limitations of the interview sample. Moreover, this variable is particularly significant, given the existing evidence that parents’ approach to and experience of school choice is affected by their own educational experience (Gorard 1997b).

*Figure 5.5: Survey respondents by education level*

	<b>England</b>	<b>Scotland</b>	<b>Total</b>
University degree or equivalent	34%	40%	35%
Higher educational qualification below degree level	12%	15%	12%
A-Levels / Highers or equivalent	21%	22%	21%
ONC / National Level BTEC or equivalent	8%	4%	7%
O Level / GCSE / Standard Grade or equivalent	24%	19%	23%

Ethnic minorities are under-represented in the survey, though it is unclear why this might be. Figure 6 shows that whereas 27% of English secondary school students are ethnic minorities,



only 8% of parents responding to the survey were minorities. Similarly, 10% of Scottish school students are ethnic minorities, compared to 4% of parents responding to the survey.

*Figure 5.6: Ethnicity of parents responding to survey compared to school students*

	<b>English Survey Respondents</b>	<b>English secondary school students</b> (Department for Education 2019c)	<b>Scottish Survey Respondents</b>	<b>Scottish school students</b> (Anthony 2019)
White	90%	73%	95%	90%
Black	1%	6%	0%	1%
Asian	6%	11%	3%	4%
Chinese	1%	0%	1%	1%
Mixed	1%	6%	2%	1%
Other	0%	4%	0%	3%
I'd rather not say	1%		0%	

Respondents in England were split fairly evenly between different regions: as figure 5.7 shows, the North West and East Midlands were somewhat over-represented relative to their share of secondary school applications. By contrast, London was under-represented: 12% of survey respondents were from the capital, compared to 16% of applications.

*Figure 5.7: Regional breakdown of English survey respondents*

<b>Region</b>	<b>Share of survey respondents</b>	<b>Share of October 2018 school applications (Department for Education 2019a)</b>
North East	6%	4%
North West	17%	14%
Yorkshire & Humberside	11%	10%
West Midlands	11%	11%
East Midlands	12%	9%
East England	10%	11%
London	11%	16%
South East	15%	16%
South West	8%	9%

Based on their postcodes, survey respondents were classified by the rurality of their neighbourhoods. As figures 5.8 and 5.9 show, the survey sample is slightly more urban than the student population, although it is better matched to the population in Scotland than England.

Figure 5.8: *Rurality of survey respondents compared to 0-14 year old population, England*

	<b>English respondents</b>	<b>survey</b>	<b>0-14 year olds (DEFRA 2020; DEFRA rural statistics 2017)</b>
Urban major conurbation	35%		38%
Urban minor conurbation	4%		4%
Urban city and town	52%		43%
Urban city and town in a sparse setting	0%		0%
Rural town and fringe	4%		8%
Rural town and fringe in a sparse setting	0%		0%
Rural village	3%		6%
Rural village in a sparse setting	0%		0%

Figure 5.9: *Rurality of survey respondents compared to 10-13 year old population, Scotland*

	<b>Scottish Survey Respondents</b>	<b>10-13 year olds (National Records of Scotland 2019)</b>
Large Urban Area	34%	31%
Other Urban Area	37%	38%
Accessible Small Town	9%	9%
Remote Small Town	4%	2%
Very Remote Small Town	1%	1%
Accessible Rural	9%	12%
Remote Rural	3%	3%
Very Remote Rural	2%	3%

Around a quarter of survey participants were in the process of choosing a school for a child that would start secondary school the following autumn (2020). The rest were split fairly evenly between those that had chosen one, two and three years prior to completing the survey.

Figure 5.10: *Survey respondents by child's secondary school start date*

	<b>England</b>	<b>Scotland</b>	<b>Total</b>
Autumn 2017	20%	17%	19%
Autumn 2018	23%	22%	23%
Autumn 2019	29%	34%	30%
Autumn 2020	26%	25%	26%
Other	2%	3%	2%

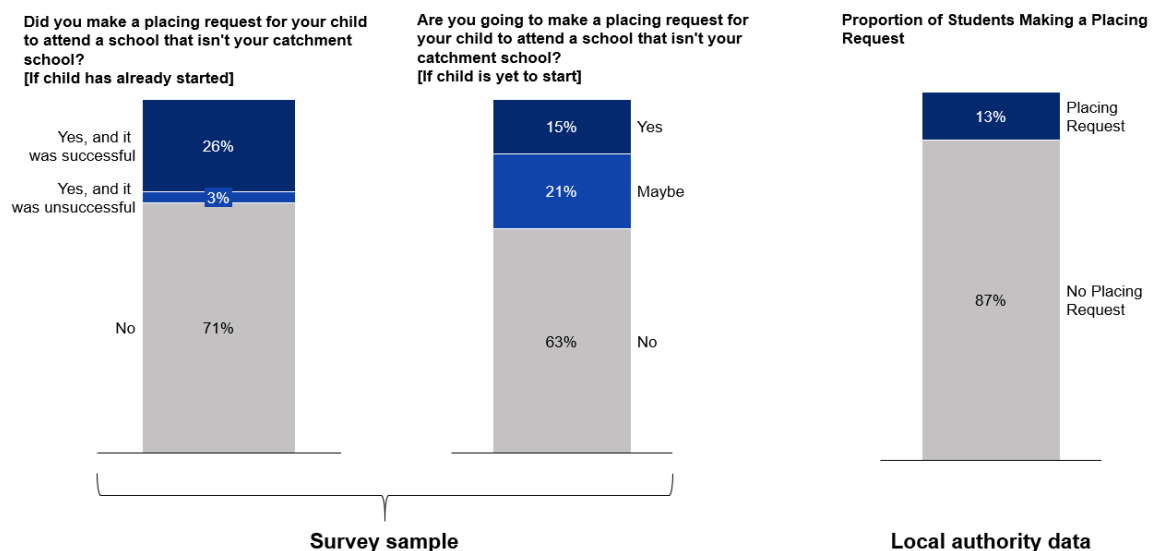
Compared to interview participants, who were disproportionately likely to be discussing older children, survey respondents were split more equally by child order. Scottish survey responses were, however, more likely to relate to older children.

Figure 5.11: Survey respondents by child order

	England	Scotland	Total
Only child	17%	15%	17%
Oldest child	33%	44%	35%
Middle child	15%	12%	15%
Youngest child	34%	29%	33%

Survey respondents in Scotland were considerably more likely to have made a placing request than the general population. Whereas data from local authorities shows that 13% of all students entering secondary school in Scotland make a placing request,<sup>19</sup> over twice as many parents said they had made or were considering one in the survey (figure 5.12). This discrepancy is something of a puzzle. Given the lack of research into placing requests in the past 30 years, we do not know much about those who make them. We do know that they are more likely to live in urban areas, but as we have seen survey participants are only slightly more likely to live in towns and cities than the parent population. I have found little evidence of self-selection into the survey, but it is possible that panel participants may share some unobserved traits that predispose them to make placing requests. Alternatively, the over-representation of parents making placing requests could just be random variation. Importantly, if the survey sample does overrepresent parents with unobserved traits relative to their prevalence in the general population, there is no reason to expect the discrepancy to be any greater in Scotland relative to England, or vice-versa.

Figure 5.12: Prevalence of placing requests in survey sample vs local authority data



<sup>19</sup> This figure comes from freedom of information requests – see note 3 above.

#### *5.42 Data Collection*

I coded the survey using Qualtrics software. The full questionnaire is reproduced in appendix F. Because the survey was hosted externally to Panelbase's platform, it was not possible to link responses to the demographic information held by the company. As a result, I had to ask for demographic information explicitly. I asked parents which region they live in, which was necessary to distinguish English from Scottish respondents. I also asked respondents to provide the first part of their postcode (the 'outward code'), which is general enough to avoid compromising anonymity, but can be linked to more specific information about the area they live in. As well as ethnicity and education level, I asked parents where they went to school. This can be used as a proxy for parents being foreign-born, but it also reflects a finding from the interviews that parents educated abroad often brought the values and expectations of their education system to their decisions for their child. I asked parents when their child started secondary school, to identify whether they were in the process of choosing or had chosen in previous years. Scottish parents were asked whether they had made a placing request or were intending to. Respondents that only considered private schools were ineligible, but those that at least considered state schools, even if they ultimately chose private schools, were included. Ideally, I would have liked to have captured more detail on respondents' backgrounds. In particular, their gender, age, income and special educational needs could have been useful. However, adding more questions would have increased the length of the questionnaire and so the cost of the survey.

Separate sections of the questionnaire probed parents' desire for and attitudes to choice, their approach to choice and their experiences of choice. Many of these questions were taken directly from the interview topic guide, while others were shaped by interview findings. The question on which different sources of information parents' used to research schools used the same wording and response options as previous Sutton Trust surveys (Francis and Hutchings 2013; Montacute and Cullinane 2018).

In the place of the card sort task, I asked parents to rate the applicability to their experience of a selection of the most used words - 'Stressful', 'Anxious', 'Time Consuming/Inconvenient', 'Enjoyable' and 'Interesting' - on a 0-10 scale. While I generally tried to limit the number of response options in order to make the survey questions as easy to interpret as possible, for these critical questions, I believe that the extra granularity of the 11-point scale was necessary to capture potentially small differences in experience (Dawes 2002). I also reasoned that 0-10 scales

would be fairly familiar and intuitive to respondents. In the survey, I decided not to include ‘Empowering’, because interviewed parents often found the concept unclear or confusing. Instead, I tried to capture the idea of empowerment by asking parents how much choice they felt they had and how satisfied they were with their perceived level of choice.

In the final substantive question, I asked parents to signal their level of agreement with a number of statements. These allowed me to test some emerging theories from the interviews: that parents in Scotland are more satisfied with their catchment schools and tend to think the stakes of choice are lower, leading to less stressful experiences. This section also allowed me to examine a phenomenon I discovered in my interviews, of parents struggling to reconcile conflicting sources. Finally, I used this section to test a major theory from the literature: that ‘maximising’ parents seeking the best possible school would find choice more stressful than ‘satisficing’ ones.

The questionnaire was tested by several respondents, including some of my interview participants. These tests uncovered some issues with question wording or where response options were too restrictive, as well as some technical issues with the readability of the survey on mobile devices. Reassuringly, respondents to the final survey described it as “quite clear”, “interesting” and “enjoyable” to complete when asked for comments at the end of the survey. Once these issues were addressed, invitations were issued and the survey was in the field from the 21<sup>st</sup> to the 23<sup>rd</sup> October 2019, timed to capture parents’ responses in the week before applications were due to be submitted in England.

#### *5.43 Ethics*

The online survey raised fewer ethical issues than the interview programme, and consequently my supervisor deemed it appropriate to self-certify rather than seeking approval from the Research Ethics Committee. My research ethics review is reproduced in appendix D.

#### *5.44 Data Analysis*

The survey was analysed using Stata and Microsoft Excel. Respondents were excluded from the analysis if they did not complete the survey (31 respondents), if they reported that their children

had or would start secondary school in any year other than 2017-21 (27), if they considered only private schools (38) or if they completed the survey in less than 90 seconds (20).

In light of some of the apparent discrepancies between the survey sample and the national populations I am seeking to generalise to, I considered weighting the survey by a range of respondent characteristics: region, rurality, parental education, ethnicity, child order. To examine whether weighting would make a material difference to the results, I tested the impact of reweighting to plausible alternative frequencies of these variables (for example, upweighting the proportion of university-educated parents in England to match the proportion in Scotland) on a few of the questions. Two variables did noticeably change the results (in magnitude but not direction): the proportion of parents making a placing request and the share of ethnic minorities in the survey.

Weighting survey results by the proportion of parents making a placing request is straightforward enough, since we know that 13% of families make a placing request. For parents who had not yet chosen but were considering a placing request, I applied a weight midway between placing request and non-placing request parents. This would imply half of these parents end up making a placing request, resulting in a similar proportion of placing requests to survey respondents that had already chosen. Throughout the rest of the thesis, the numbers I refer to are weighted by placing request (intention) unless otherwise stated, and unweighted numbers are provided in the appendices.

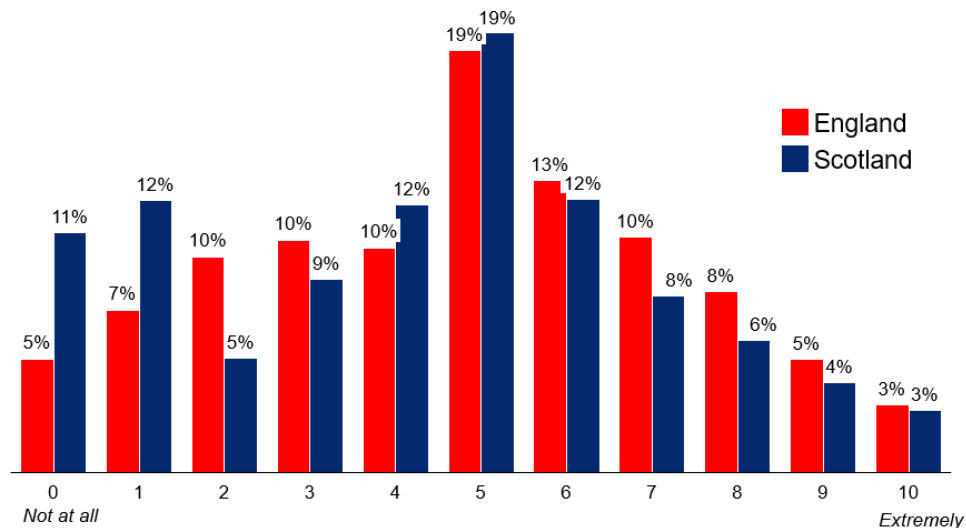
I decided not to weight by ethnicity for two reasons. First, because we do not have accurate data on the ethnicity of the very specific population in interest, parents of 10-13 year olds (as other researchers conducting school choice surveys have found (Glazerman et al. 2020)). Even so, we can use the ethnicity of students as a proxy, as in most cases children will have the same ethnicity as their parents. However, this approach draws out the second issue: that ethnic minority participants would have to be extremely heavily upweighted (counting for 2.6 responses each) because they comprise a relatively small proportion of respondents. As a result, the underweighting of ethnic minority families is acknowledged as a limitation of the survey, which I have tried to mitigate with analysis of interviews with ethnic minority families.

Much of the survey analysis in chapters 6 and 7 involves simple cross-tabulation: for example, the proportion of parents in Scotland or England to say it is important to have a choice of schools or that they had enough choice. In these cases, I have presented only the point estimates in the main body of the text, but also provided standard errors in the appendix. Unless otherwise

stated, I have only presented results that are statistically significant at the 5% level using a chi-square test.

11-point scales of the sort I used in the survey raise certain methodological and interpretive issues (Diener, Inglehart, and Tay 2013). First, there is the question of whether such scales should be treated as cardinal (equal-interval): for example, is the one-point difference between 3 and 4 on the scale the same as the one-point difference between 8 and 9? Second, there is the possibility that different people may interpret the same point on the scale differently: a more exuberant or optimistic person's 8 could be a more sober person's 5. Third, some respondents may use 'simple responding', rather than making full use of the scale. For example, if they have a positive experience, they might describe this as 10 out of 10, without considering whether 8 or 9 might fit better. If their experience is adequate or acceptable, they might gravitate towards 5 out of 10. Indeed, I do find some evidence of clustering in the middle of the scale in my survey. Figure 5.13 shows that by far the most common response to the question of how enjoyable parents found school choice is 5 out of 10 – although this pattern is not so clear for other questions.

Figure 5.13: "To what extent did you find the process of choosing a secondary school enjoyable?" (Rating out of 10)

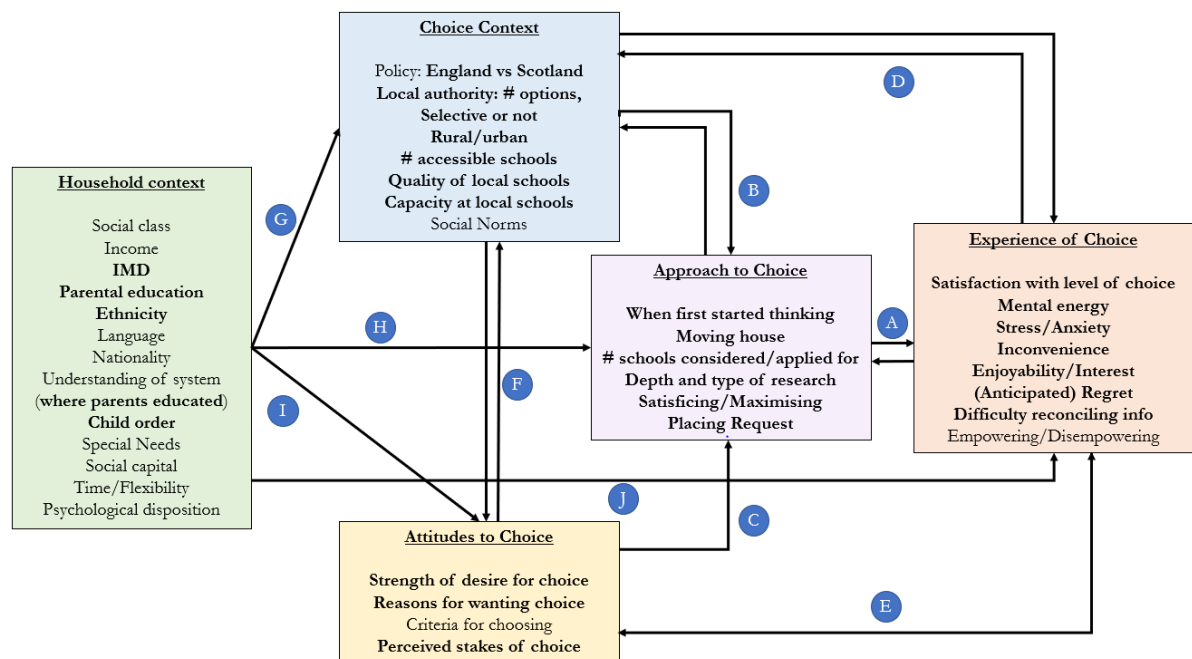


In most of my analyses, I have assumed that the 0-10 scales are cardinal, interpersonally comparable and granular, and that it is therefore valid to average responses across respondents or to analyse them using linear regression functions. Previous research has shown that such assumptions do not fundamentally alter the validity of analysis of happiness scales (Ferrer-i-Carbonell and Frijters 2004). While these considerations may alter the interpretation of the *absolute* ratings, for example pulling averages towards the middle of the scale, there is little reason

to think they invalidate *relative* comparisons. On average, between different groups (e.g. England vs Scotland), we would expect any biases in responses to cancel each other out. In any case, alongside average ratings, for a number of questions I have also divided respondents into ‘High’ (8-10), ‘Low’ (0-2) and ‘Medium’ (3-7) categories, which is a common response to concerns about ‘simple responding’ (Diener, Inglehart, and Tay 2013). The thresholds for these categories are admittedly arbitrary.

In chapter 8, I use the survey to explore in more depth how experiences of school choice vary between different types of families *within* England and Scotland. Partly, this is because such differences are intrinsically interesting: concerns about inequality drive us to ask how the costs and benefits of school choice vary between socially advantaged and disadvantaged families. It is also to shed light on some of the ‘enabling’ or ‘risk factors’ which affect experiences of school choice, and which might help explain the mechanisms through which school choice affects families. Moreover, examining such differences can help put the impact of policy into perspective, relative to other structural differences between families.

Figure 5.14: *Why experiences of choice might vary between families*



Note: Arrows reflect direction of causation, bolded factors are captured in survey

Figure 5.14 maps out my conceptual framework for this analysis: a non-exhaustive list of the different types of factors that can help explain why different families have different experiences of school choice, in terms of how stressful, anxiety-provoking, inconvenient, burdensome,



enjoyable or empowering it is. In the first instance (A in the chart), experiences will be shaped by differences in approaches to choice - the form and depth of engagement with the decision: whether choice is through moving house or formal application, when parents start thinking about it, how many schools they consider and how they research them. However, causality may run the other way: approaches to choice may be shaped by experiences: for example, if choice is stressful that might discourage deeper engagement. Approaches to choice are likely to be shaped both by parental attitudes to choice and by the choice context (B and C). In terms of attitudes, parents with a stronger desire for choice, or greater belief in its importance, may be expected to approach choice with greater purpose. In terms of choice context, it is likely that the number type, quality and accessibility of schools will affect how families go about choosing a school (and indeed, families may alter their choice context as a result of their approach to choice, by moving house). Attitudes to choice and choice context may also have a direct effect on the experience of choice, independent of their influence on the approach to choice (D and E). For example, families that think choice matters more may find it more stressful, as might families whose choices are more limited by their context. Equally, experiences may shape attitudes – having a negative experience could sour people on the value of choice, or make them want it more – and, possibly, shape their choice context (if parents decide to move as a result of experiences with older children). Moreover, choice context and attitudes to choice can influence one another (F). Those in areas where they have more reason to be satisfied with their schools and their system may have less strong desire for choice, whereas those with a strong preference for choice may move to places where that can be exercised.

Finally, background household context is likely to affect experiences of choice, both directly and by shaping the family's choice context, attitudes to choice and its approach. The family's social background, affluence, experience and understanding of the education system, number of children, social capital, available time and mental resources and psychological dispositions might all plausibly have an impact. The household's socioeconomic background will condition where they live, which largely determines their choice context (G). Their educational background, confidence and familiarity with the system and social capital is likely to influence how they go about choosing (H), as well as their desire and motivation for choice (I). Household background may also affect families' experience of choice directly (J). Other pressures on their time could reduce the mental energy they have available and increase the stress and anxiety associated with choice. Feeling less welcome in schools and competent at research may reduce the enjoyment and interest they take in the process

In chapter 8, I attempt to explore these relationships. I do so by focusing my attention on three outcomes: how stressful parents found choosing, how interesting they found it, and whether they felt they had enough choice. I choose these as ‘archetypes’ of different types of outcomes. For example, instead of laboriously analysing and reporting a range of different negative outcomes – stress, anxiety, inconvenience, mental burden and regret – which I show are closely correlated in any case, I take stress to be representative of all these outcomes together. I considered combining the various measures into an index, however, I felt that this ‘archetype’ approach would ensure that the outcomes in question are more tangible and easy to comprehend.

For each of the three outcomes, I ran several bivariable linear and logistic regressions to explore how they are related to different approaches and attitudes to choice, as well as household and choice context. This is a rather unusual approach to analysis: multivariable regression is more common. However, in chapter 8, I am interested in bivariable associations, rather than wanting to control for factors. For example, I want to know how a) living in a poorer area, b) living near more schools or c) doing more research are each associated with how stressful parents find school choice, not their association with stress taken together. I could have presented this as a series of correlations (for continuous variables) or comparisons of means (for categorical variables). However, regression coefficients summarise the same relationships more succinctly with a more straightforward interpretation. The ultimate purpose is to achieve a rich description of the characteristics that are associated with having a more positive or negative experience of school choice.

## **5.5 Conclusion**

In chapter 3, I developed a theoretical framework that set out the empirical questions we need to answer in order to understand the intrinsic value or disvalue associated with school choice. In chapter 4, I showed that the existing literature fails to answer these questions satisfactorily. In this chapter, I have explained how I have gone about addressing them in this thesis.

I have chosen to compare people’s desire for school choice, its effect on their subjective welfare and its contribution to their freedom and autonomy between England and Scotland, exploiting the fact that the two nations are socially and culturally similar, but have taken divergent

approaches to school choice policy. That means that differences in experience between them can plausibly be attributed to policy.

I have made these comparisons through mixed methods, combining qualitative interviews with 57 families across five locations and an online survey of 987 parents. The qualitative and quantitative data each have strengths and weaknesses. The interviews generate rich, contextualised data from a smaller and less representative sample, whereas the survey generates shallower data from a larger and more representative sample.

Over the next four chapters, I describe the findings of this empirical research in an integrated way, drawing on both quantitative and qualitative data in chapters 6 and 7, before focusing on the survey in chapter 8 and the interviews in chapter 9. I begin in chapter 6 with evidence on the putative intrinsic benefits of school choice – that it fulfils people’s preferences, that it is enjoyable and empowering, and that it enhances freedom and autonomy. I then turn in chapter 7 to the potential intrinsic costs, in terms of the burden, stress, anxiety, pressure and regret. In chapter 8, I consider how these experiences vary between different types of families. Then in chapter 9, I describe a few of my interviewees in greater depth, in order to develop a clearer, more contextualised picture of the process of school choice and how it differs between England and Scotland.

## 6. Are People Better Off for Having School Choice?

In this chapter, I begin to describe my empirical findings, combining thematic analysis of the qualitative interviews with results from the quantitative survey. Back in chapter 3, I set out a number of empirical questions that require answering in order to determine the intrinsic value or disvalue of school choice. Over this chapter and the next, I take each of these questions in turn and try to answer them as best I can in light of the evidence I have gathered. In this chapter, I start by evaluating the positive claims made in favour of choice: that people want it, that they enjoy it, that it empowers them and supports their freedom and autonomy. In the following chapter, I will turn to the potential negative aspects of choice.

In each section of this chapter, I start with a postulated benefit of choice (e.g. ‘choice is (intrinsically) desired’, ‘choice is enjoyable’, ‘choice is empowering’). I then to do three things:

- a) examine whether this benefit obtains for secondary school choice (e.g. Do people want choice? Is it enjoyable/empowering?), and whether this differs between England and Scotland;
- b) further expand on and explain where the benefit comes from, what it looks like in practice (e.g. Why do people want choice? What is enjoyable/empowering about choosing a school?), and whether this differs between England and Scotland;
- c) consider how large/substantial this benefit is for school choice (e.g. How strong is the desire? How enjoyable is choosing?), and whether this differs between England and Scotland;

Where possible, I try to separate these three tasks and address them sequentially. However, the distinction between them is rather artificial and in some cases they cannot be isolated from one another. Clearly, in response to a) the benefit must obtain for there to be anything to explicate in b) or measure in c). Moreover, in explaining what is enjoyable or empowering about choosing, I am also to some degree explaining how significant choice is as a source of enjoyment or empowerment.

With each question, I start with interview evidence first, and then supplement it with survey data where appropriate. This is because the interview responses are often helpful to understand the concepts or phenomena explored in the survey, and indeed were used to design some of the survey questions. In this chapter, wherever I explicitly draw attention to a difference between England and Scotland, or between parents that did or did not make a placing request, it is

statistically significant unless stated. Full weighted and unweighted results with standard errors are reported in appendix G.

## 6.1 The Desire for Choice (Desire Theories)

### 6.11 Do People Want Choice?

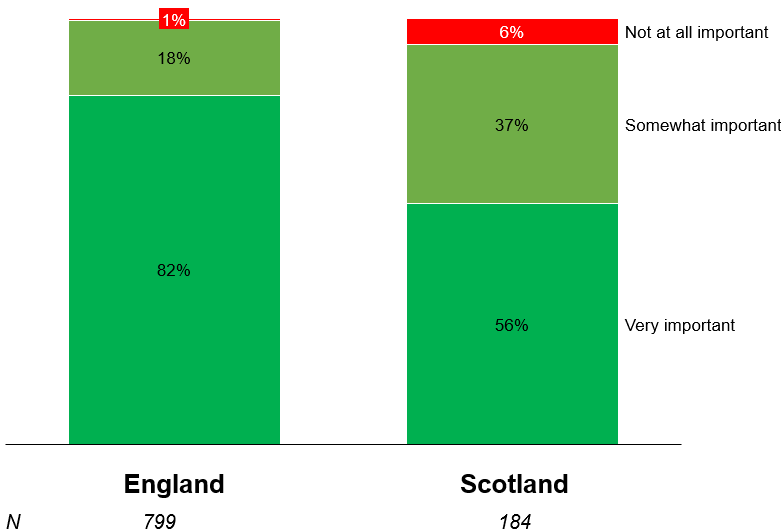
In line with previous research, attitudes to choice in both England and Scotland were overwhelmingly positive, at least at first blush. When asked how important it is to have a choice of schools, parents and children on each side of the border described it as “essential”, “really really important” or “hugely important”. Those happy with the level of choice they had expressed gratitude at their good fortune:

*“we were quite lucky to be in a position where we've got really two good options”* (Anil, father, Camden)

*“I feel like we are so lucky that we've had that choice. But I do feel a wee bit guilty that not everybody feels that they have that choice”* (Lisa, mother, Edinburgh)

The survey confirms that the desire for school choice is almost universal. 99% of English parents, and 94% of Scottish parents said that it is at least somewhat important to have a choice of secondary schools, as figure 6.1 illustrates.

Figure 6.1: “How important is it to you to have a choice over which secondary school your child attends?”



At the same time, the desire for choice does appear to be stronger in England than in Scotland: 82% of English parents said that school choice was ‘very important’ to them, compared to 56% of Scottish parents. This is consistent with previous survey evidence that Scottish people tend to favour school choice, but less enthusiastically than the rest of the UK (Exley 2012).

#### *6.12 Do People Want Choice for Intrinsic Reasons?*

Is this desire for choice intrinsic? That is not a straightforward question to answer, not least because intrinsic and instrumental reasons for wanting choice were often not sharply distinguished in parents’ minds. In some cases, certainly, interview participants (more typically parents than children) used language that suggested choice had intrinsic value, emphasising their need for agency and influence over the process:

Jane (mother, Ipswich): *I think it’s really important to feel like you’ve got a choice.*

Me: *And why is that, do you think?*

Jane: *Because otherwise you feel completely disempowered and you feel really hopeless.*

*“There is a part of me that wants to control as much as I can.”* (Marie, mother, Ipswich)

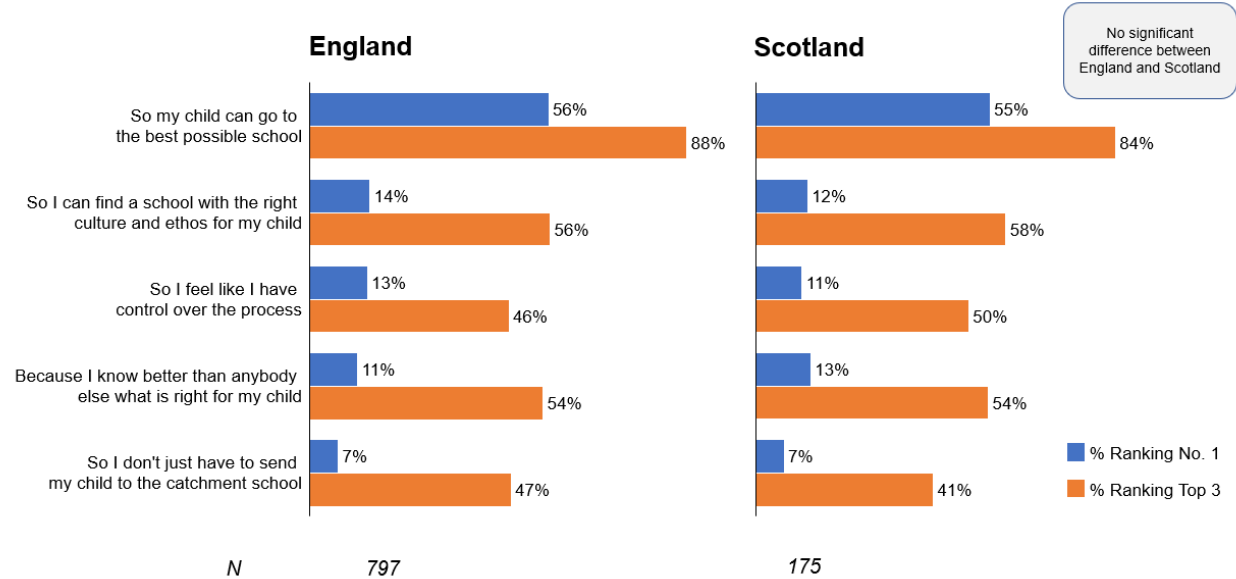
*“I want to choose what school I go to myself because it’s what’s happening to you and not other people.”* (Melissa, student, Camden)

Yet we need to be a little careful in interpreting these responses. It is clear from them that without any perceived choice, the parents and children would feel frustrated. The most natural reading is that this frustration is the *direct* consequence of not having choice (i.e. because they value choice intrinsically). However, the frustration might also result from the belief that having less substantive choice leads to worse outcomes (i.e. choice is valued instrumentally). Those quoted above may see a lack of choice as frustrating because they believe nobody else is sufficiently motivated or capable to secure a good enough school, and so they need to choose in order to ensure an acceptable outcome. Indeed, when pressed to explain why having a choice is so important to her, Marie said “because they’re our children...I still think that I know my boy better than other people, some aspects of my boy better than other people. That’s why”.

My interpretation is that the desire for school choice is *primarily* instrumental, but that school choice also has at least some intrinsic value for a sizeable minority. In the survey, I asked parents

who said they think choice is important to rank five different reasons for wanting choice. The clear dominant reason was to ensure their child could go to the best possible school (an instrumental reason) – a finding consistent with the interview results. As figure 6.2 shows, a majority of parents in both England and Scotland ranked that as the number one reason for wanting choice.

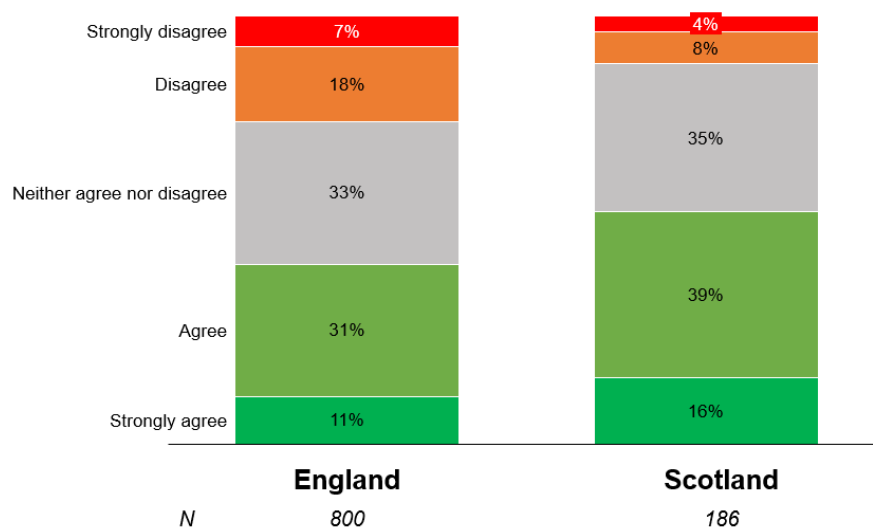
Figure 6.2: “Why do you feel it is important to have a choice of secondary schools?”



At the same time, 13% of parents in the survey said that having control over the process is their main reason for wanting school choice, more important than the consequences in terms of the school it allows them to choose. Thus, for a small minority, the desire for school choice appears to be primarily motivated by intrinsic reasons. Moreover, just under half of parents in both countries put the desire for control in their top three reasons. 95% ranked it in their top five, though the survey instructions explicitly stated that parents should not “rank answers that do not apply”. Even allowing for the possibility that some respondents may not have paid attention to these instructions, these results suggest a desire for control over the process is part of many parents’ reasons for wanting choice, even if it is not as prominent a consideration as getting into a better school.

Another relevant survey question here is one that asked whether parents would still care about having choice even if they were guaranteed to get into a “reasonably good school” (note: not necessarily the *best* possible school). Under such circumstances, 25% of English parents and 12% of Scottish parents insisted that they still would want to choose, though around a third of respondents did not have a view (figure 6.3).

Figure 6.3: “If I knew my child would get into a reasonably good school anyway, I wouldn't care about having a choice”



There is reason to think that at least some of these parents are motivated by intrinsic reasons. In interviews, parents discussed the value of formal choice as an opportunity to ‘rubber stamp’ their allocated school – to feel like they have some influence or responsibility, even if they do not alter the final outcome:

*“I think it's quite important to have the last say even if what you were allocated was reasonable and would be acceptable. It's nice to be able to say yes to that rather than just be told.”* (Angela, mother, Camden)

*“I think if you're forced into a decision, regardless if that's the decision you would have made, when the choice is taken away from you you're a lot more negative about it.”* (Shona, mother, Scotstown)

However, other parents would still want substantive choice for instrumental reasons even if confident of having a place at a ‘reasonably good’ school. Presumably some would still want to try and choose the ‘best’ possible school. Others told me they would value the ability to choose between schools on the basis of attributes other than academic performance:

*“if the schools had pretty much a similar standard and all of that and your choice was around other things to do with education then, yeah, that sounds great. You could choose what suits your kids.”* (Yvonne, mother, Camden)

Note that such ‘child matching’ still implies finding a school that has better (not necessarily academic) outcomes for one’s child.



The most common response in my interviews, as in the survey, was that a secure place at a reasonably good school would render choice redundant. Amy from Ipswich claimed that “if I was happy for [daughter] to go to my catchment school I wouldn't really care if I had a choice or not”. Michael, a father from Camden, said that “if you could take out the issue of some schools being better than others then I don't think it's important”. Considering whether he would want to choose on the basis of other school features, such as ethos or culture, he said he would only do so if he had strong objections to the way a school was run, and thus “you'd have to create quite an unlikely scenario for me to want to think the choice is really important”.

In the interviews, it was notable that many parents (particularly in England) tended to see choice as a chore: a necessary evil in order to protect their child's interests: “It is what it is, has to be done. You can't ignore it, because if you ignore it then you will just get what you're given” (Sandra, mother, Ipswich). Jill in Ipswich said she wanted choice because “I don't want to be told that my child only gets to go to the rubbish school”.

The reality of having to choose was counterposed by some parents in England against the apparently utopian vision of a society where choice was unnecessary. It is clear from such statements that some parents feel they need to choose primarily because other parents around them are making choices, creating a sort of ‘treadmill effect’, where people must engage with choice merely to avoid losing ground:

*“I do always I wish I could go to the local school. Well I could, easily. Oh, but - not that local school! But part of the reason why it's not that local school is because everyone else around is taking all these choices”* (Ruth, mother, Camden)

For some of the parents in England, the question was not purely hypothetical. Brigitte, originally from France, and Aaliyah, originally from Singapore, both contrasted the English system unfavourably with the school systems they had grown up with. In both cases, they believed that other countries better guaranteed school quality without necessitating choice:

*Brigitte: in France people don't worry because there is a national curriculum and whatever school their kids go to, they will have French, English, Maths, Science, Biology and Geography. All the schools teach the same things at the same level...if the education was the same in all the schools and all the schools had a good reputation and the ones that didn't have a good reputation, you knew the issues were addressed, and, I don't know, the size of the schools was limited and more schools are open*

*Me: Then you wouldn't be so unhappy about...*

*Brigitte: Yes, and the teachers were all motivated, I wouldn't even check the league tables.*

*“Singapore, the education system there is really good I don't think parents are any less engaged about the school. I just think the government makes it so every school is a good school.”* (Aaliyah, mother, London)

Of course, many Scottish families were in exactly the situation that English participants tended regard as an idealistic thought experiment: guaranteed a place at a satisfactory school without having to engage in choice, they saw it as an irrelevance. Many had never really considered secondary school as a matter of choice - it was not something that they needed to think about, and so they generally did not. Insofar as choice matters, it is for other parents:

*“we're fortunate in where we live in that the catchment schools are all good, you know, so it didn't really feel like a big issue. We were quite happy for them to go to the local school.”* (Andrea, mother, Edinburgh)

*“I think for other people in different situations, if they want to put their child to a different school. I was quite happy with them going to [catchment school]”* (Adele, mother, Dundee)

Recall that previous studies have suggested that choice is desired mainly as a ‘right to escape’ undesirable schools (Exley 2014), and that this motive is particularly strong in Scotland (Adler, Petch, and Tweedie 1989). Such claims were broadly consistent with my interview evidence, but less so with the survey responses. A number of parents I interviewed in both England and Scotland did indeed present choice more as a defensive tool to avoid one’s fears more than realise one’s hopes:

*“If I wasn't happy with [catchment school] it would be good to have the freedom to look elsewhere.”* (Wendy, mother, Dundee)

*“I do strongly believe that there should be a choice, particularly, as I say, when you've got a school on your doorstep that's really underperforming”* (Tracy, mother, Scotstown)

*“You don't want to be just forced into your catchment school. Then you got no way, you've got no alternative, if your catchment school is a school you don't want your child to go to. So I think, yeah, the idea of choice is good.”* (Amy, mother, Ipswich)

*“Choice is really important. I'd be really furious if we had to just go to the local school”* (Jill, mother, Ipswich)

At the same time, as figure 6.2 shows, only 7% of parents said that their main reason for wanting choice was to avoid having to send their children to the catchment school – the least popular of any of the options. Combined with the fact that the positive desire to secure a place at the best possible school was the dominant response to that question, it indicates that the wish

merely to escape unwanted schools is not in most cases the primary motivation for school choice. Moreover, the survey shows no difference between English and Scottish parents in the extent to which the desire for a ‘right to escape’ lies behind their desire for school choice.

Overall, these results produce a picture that suggests a minority (perhaps between a fifth and a third in England, and somewhat lower in Scotland) of parents care strongly about the intrinsic value of school choice. For the rest, their desire for choice is mostly instrumental, though they may see some small intrinsic value in choosing a school. As we have seen, it is difficult to disentangle intrinsic from instrumental motivations for choice among parents. With children, their preferences were generally not sufficiently developed and articulated to make such a distinction.

### *6.13 How Strong is the Desire for Choice, and Does it Conflict With Other Desires?*

While it is undeniable that most people want school choice, and that many of them want it for intrinsic reasons, we have not yet considered how enthusiastic this desire is. Recall that previous surveys have found school choice to be a relatively low priority policy objective among parents and the general public (Curtice and Heath 2009; Exley 2012). Desire theories imply not only that school choice is valuable if people want it, but also that this value is greater the stronger this desire is, and the less it conflicts with other desires.

It was notable in the interviews that children were often rather lukewarm in their enthusiasm for choice, playing down its value and significance even when they said they favoured it<sup>20</sup>:

*“it’s an important decision but some people make a really big deal out of it.”* (Scarlett, student, Camden)

*“it might be a little bit - not that important, but for me I wouldn’t mind a lot to go to a school that I don’t really want to go.”* (Tedros, student, Camden)

At the same time, I found little evidence of latent frustration or desire for greater involvement among children (particularly in Scotland) that did not have much of a say over which secondary school they were going to. As Lauren in Edinburgh put it, “I don’t think I really would have

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<sup>20</sup> See also Chiara and Scarlett’s comments on page 135 below.

mindful because, I've not seen the other schools. So I wouldn't really know what I was missing out on”.

Over the course of the interviews, some families that had initially expressed enthusiasm for choice acknowledged that it came with substantial potential costs, and were more ambivalent on reflection. In particular, there was a belief among several parents that choice was related to inequality and segregation between schools. The precise nature of this relationship was spelled out in different ways by different people. Some believe that choice is only necessary because of underlying societal inequality, which results in some schools being ‘better’ than others (implying that choice is instrumentally necessary to avoid lower performing schools). Others believe that choice exacerbates inequality by allowing and encouraging more advantaged families to self-segregate. A third view is that focusing on choice is a mis-prioritisation that distracts policymakers from the more important task of reducing inequalities. In all three cases, the unequal system of choice is contrasted with a more egalitarian alternative:

*“As a parent, I'm happy that I can choose. If I was on the other side, I would be trying to create a system where every school is very good.”* (Franco, father, Camden)

*“I do firmly believe that if everybody had no choice and had to send their child to the local comprehensive, then standards would be better. That's what should happen.”* (Yvonne, mother, Camden)

*“They should all be of an equal standard so that choice is irrelevant.”* (Nathan, father, Dundee)

*“Generally I think the council should actually make sure that all schools are achieving so there's not actually better schools or schools that are less achieving. If that's the case, then no I don't think you should. I think you should be, if that's your catchment, you go to that catchment. But I think if there's such a difference in schools, then yes I think you should be able to have a say in where your child goes to make sure they've got the education.”* (Abbie, mother, Scotstown)

*“I think, overall, all schools should be of the same standard instead of people clamouring to get into the so-called good schools. Should be bringing up poorer performing schools to match the good schools. And then people wouldn't be so concerned about trying to get the child to a specific school.”* (Claire, mother, Dundee)

Another perceived drawback of school choice is its tendency to weaken the connection between children and their local neighbourhood. A number of parents expressed the view that in a perfect world, most children would attend their nearest school. For some English parents, this was expressed as a romantic ideal:

*“I would like to imagine - this may well be a fantasy - but if you knew and everybody knew from when their child was born, basically, this is the school you are going to go to, you would cultivate*

*local relationships quite differently, you would invest emotionally in that school” (Ruth, mother, Camden)*

By contrast, for Scottish parents (and those English parents who opted for a nearby school) this was a reality – local comprehensive schools are valued and desirable because they are embedded in their communities:

*“I also like the fact that when I walk around here, everybody that I see are parents from our school and I think it helps extend the community of the school because we all live in the same areas... And so I think it's quite nice to have a school as a central point within our community.” (Lisa, mother, Edinburgh)*

Me: *And why is that so important to you to for them to go to the catchment school?*

Victoria (mother, Dundee): *For me, it's always my belief that a child should go to their catchment school because they live in that area, so they're meeting people that live in the area that they want to go and socialise with.*

*“rather than ‘your kid goes into school from 9 to 3 and then they come out and do some homework’, now they’re actually getting them out and about, they’re getting them more aware of their community, and to hopefully have a bit more involvement as they get older as well, to take a bit more pride.” (Shona, mother, Scotstown)*

*“it’s really good you go to your local school, it’s your local community, you’re valuing that local community, you’re less likely to drop litter when you know that your mum’s next door neighbour’s cousin’s going to say ‘mmm, I saw’.” (Iona, mother, Scotstown)*

*“I just wanted to go to a school in the community where she's home in 15 minutes and any time she's walking down the street there might be somebody she knows.” (Aaliyah, mother, Camden)*

Most interviewees did not initially register the tension between a system in which most or all children attend their nearest school, and one providing a diversity of options. I tried to press them on this, pointing out that neighbourhood schools would likely have to be more generalist and try to provide a ‘one-size-fits-all’ education for the full range of children in the area, whereas schools that were not bound by catchment areas could afford to be more specialised and offer a wider range of educational approaches. Some parents favoured such diversity:

*“Those things where you're expected to go to your local school which is doing the same things as everybody else, it's great if you fit into that system and I know people who've been through that system and it was great. I know people who haven't fitted in that system and it's been terrible because there isn't an alternative.” (Dimitrios, father, Camden)*

*“The more diversity, the more options that are available, the more chance that you have of each individual child hitting on something that’s really going to work for them.” (Harry, father, Ipswich)*

*"I think it is quite naive because you're put into catchment zones and it caters for, you have a lump of children, 30, 40 kids in one class. It can cater for the majority and not the minority."* (Lizzie, mother, Edinburgh)

More typically, parents were resistant to specialisation. Some worried that it would encourage inequality, with certain specialisations seen as more prestigious than others:

*"my worry is always you end up a two-tiered system...when you talk about variety, doesn't necessarily mean that they're good things, you also have bad variety, you know, you'll also have some things that make the school a lot worse. And I'd actually rather have everybody having the same standard and the same experience as much as they can than some people getting widely different"* (Lisa, mother, Edinburgh)

Another fear around specialisation is that it would give too much influence to parents, who might have different ambitions to their children. Other participants pointed out that children's tastes and goals often change substantially over their teenage years, so specialisation could create greater scope for even well-intentioned parents to choose the wrong school:

*"I don't think specialisation's a good way to go. Purely because when they're 12 years old, you're going to pick a school that's got a great music department but the rest of it's kind of okey-dokey because they're really into playing their instrument at 12. I liked doing a lot of things at 12, but when I got to 16 I thought 'I don't want to do that any more'. So there's a possibility of picking a school because your child likes doing something or is really good at maths and picking a school on that basis and then two years later, that's not the route they want to go down."* (Sarah, mother, Dundee)

*"You don't want to pigeonhole them in first year."* (Jackie, mother, Dundee)

*"When people put their kids into a more specialised thing or whatever that's always about the parents, it's never really about the kids."* (Tracy, Scotstown)

*"The only reason to have a choice beyond standards, which is a different conversation, I think is some sort of matching and I think that sort of matching is largely fake."* (Michael, father, Camden)

This ideal vision that many (though by no means all) parents had of neighbourhood schools offering a broadly homogeneous educational experience offers further evidence that choice is largely sought for instrumental reasons as a response to inequality in the system. Because parents view some schools as better than others, they see choice as necessary to prevent their children being defaulted into lower performing schools. It also indicates that choice is not necessarily a high policy priority: these parents generally would prefer the government to focus on reducing these inequalities than expanding formal or substantive choice.

There is another group of parents that expressed misgivings about choice, despite many simultaneously insisting that they wanted and valued it. This group, as I will go on to discuss, had such a tortuous experience of choosing that they began to wonder whether they might have been better off had the decision been taken out of their hands:

*“We are really lucky where we live in that we have so much choice and I think that has made it more difficult to narrow everything down because there is so much choice. If we just had a school that we had to go to life would be so much easier.”* (Angela, mother, Camden)

*“For me, it’s all a bit strange because I went to a village where you went from primary school to high school, no choice. Everybody went to the same thing. So the choice of schools I’ve really struggled with.”* (Beverley, mother, Edinburgh)

#### 6.14 Conclusion

Though parents are near unanimous in their strong instinctive support for school choice, in the majority of cases choice is desired for instrumental rather than intrinsic reasons. Furthermore, upon discussion and reflection, many parents see choice in conflict with other things they value: reducing inequality, maintaining a link between local schools and the surrounding neighbourhood and retaining a generalist, broad-based education for students of all backgrounds. Such views are not universal, but they are widespread enough to mean that we should be careful not to overestimate how enthusiastic parents are about choosing. Children tend to feel favourable towards school choice too, but typically in a more inchoate way.

## 6.2 The Enjoyability of Choice (Affective Theories)

#### 6.21 Interview Findings

The idea that public service choice can be enjoyable has tended to be met with scepticism in the literature (Barnes and Prior 1995). Yet many of my participants found elements of the school choice process fun and interesting, particularly school visits (though as we shall see in chapter 7 some found scheduling these visits rather inconvenient). This was independent of how they felt about the wider process of research and deliberation. As Ruth in Camden put it, “I quite enjoy the process of visiting schools, but I don’t enjoy the process of choosing”. Several

interviewees described a sense of spectacle around open days, portraying them as vibrant and exciting:

*“Every school in Camden has a good building and nice facilities and the schools feel lively and there's lots of fire going on in the labs, so that's very entertaining.”* (Ruth, mother, Camden)

*“It was quite nice though going to the open evenings, actually. Seeing them in the science lab and stuff where they get the chemicals out so they can impress all the kids - ‘whoa’ - go up to high school and be really enjoyed that.”* (Jane, mother, Ipswich)

*“You go and visit a school and ‘Oh, I could really see him here. Wow, that's an amazing playing field, look what they...’. One school had a laser printer!”* (Samantha, mother, Camden)

School visits were the part of the choice process where the children were most involved, and many of them were left similarly enthused:

*“I liked seeing what the schools had to offer and I liked seeing all of the different facilities and how happy the students were and how the head teacher was like.”* (Rhannon, student, Ipswich)

*“it seems like an interesting experience. Number one, just to see some of the people you know around the area in class, and sometimes there is some entertainment there, like sometimes the choir sings, sometimes they let you try some kind of equipment like the electronic piano.”* (Tedros, student, Camden)

For some, part of pleasure of the visits was as a kind of bonding activity between parents and children. As Zofia from Ipswich put it, “When we do something interesting in schools because they open some classroom, show some technology or design or some cooking, that was something nice that we can do together”.

The other aspect of choosing a school that people liked was learning more about the education system and the schools in their area. For Samantha, who has a social science PhD, comparing schools is “vaguely enjoyable – you know it’s a piece of research really”. Parents from outside the UK seemed to take particular pleasure in increasing their understanding:

Me: *What have you found enjoyable about it?*

Haile (father, Camden): *Even how the whole thing works, you know I never experienced this.*

*“Some of the schools I know because I've lived in this area for a long time, I know them from outside and even seen them from behind, but this was a good opportunity for me to see how they're like from the inside”* (Haile, father, Camden)

*“For me it was enjoyable because I got to see so many different kinds of school and understand better the whole education system in the UK”* (Aaliyah, mother, Camden)



*“It’s a little bit enjoyable, yes, because it’s new to me. I like doing new things”* (Marie, mother, Ipswich)

As we shall see in the next chapter, school choice in Scotland generally involves far less research and fewer school visits. Moreover, Scottish school open days tend to be more functional – in the less competitive Scottish environment, schools have less need to ‘sell themselves’. Consequently, Scottish interviewees were much less likely to describe school choice as enjoyable. However, there were exceptions. Lizzie, who made a placing request for her son, said “it is enjoyable seeing what is available in that respect, each school and the differences, trying to find the right fit and seeing whether that is an option”. Even some of those that opted for their zoned school still had visits or ‘transition days’ which they found pleasant:

*“It was an enjoyable evening. The teachers that were there were really nice...I think I could feel excitement. You could feel it coming from the kids who are about to go up. As the night went on, they were getting more and more excited about ‘look at all the different things that are on the wall!’, you could feel it come off of them.”* (Sarah, mother, Dundee)

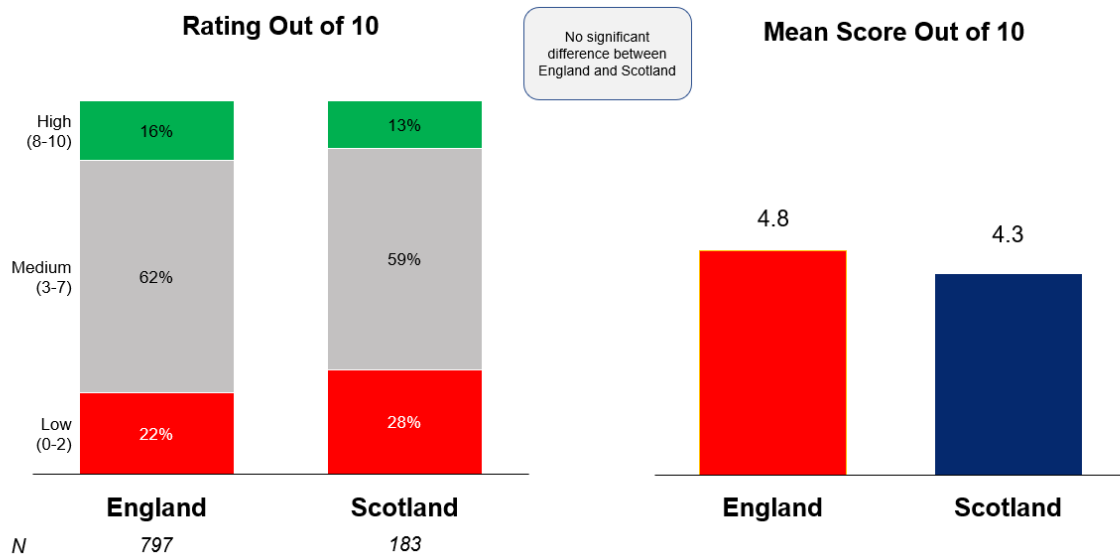
*“Hearing the experiences of these kids, who gave the stories of their time, and then looking around the building, and, you know, reminiscing about your own...woodwork department or whatever, you know?”* (Fred, father, Scotstown)

As in England, some Scottish parents appreciated learning about their local area: “It was interesting in that you got to know your community a bit more” (Stephanie, mother, Scotstown)

## 6.22 Survey Findings

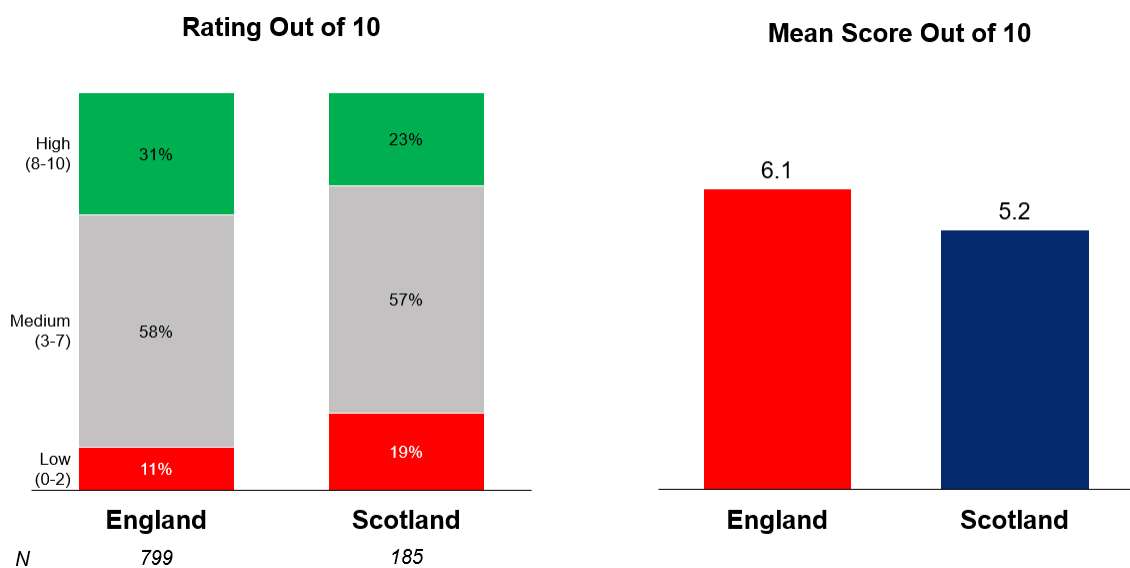
The survey confirms that at least some parents found school choice to be interesting and enjoyable, and also indicates (though failing to demonstrate conclusively) that such experiences were more common in England than in Scotland. Figure 6.4 shows that across both countries a small but non-negligible minority - around 15% of parents - found choosing to be highly enjoyable (8+ out of 10, where 10 represents ‘extremely’ enjoyable). Both the average enjoyment score (4.8 vs 4.3) and the proportion of parents finding choice highly enjoyable (16% vs 13%) were higher for English parents in the survey, but in neither case was the difference statistically significant.

Figure 6.4: “To what extent did you find the process of choosing a school enjoyable?”



Parents were more comfortable saying that school choice is ‘interesting’ than enjoyable. As figure 6.5 shows, 31% of English parents and 23% of Scottish parents found school choice to be highly interesting. This time, the difference between England and Scotland is statistically significant<sup>21</sup>, and does suggest the process of choosing a school is more interesting for parents in England. On average, English parents choosing a school rate it as 6.1 out of 10 in terms of how interesting it is, compared to 5.2 in Scotland.

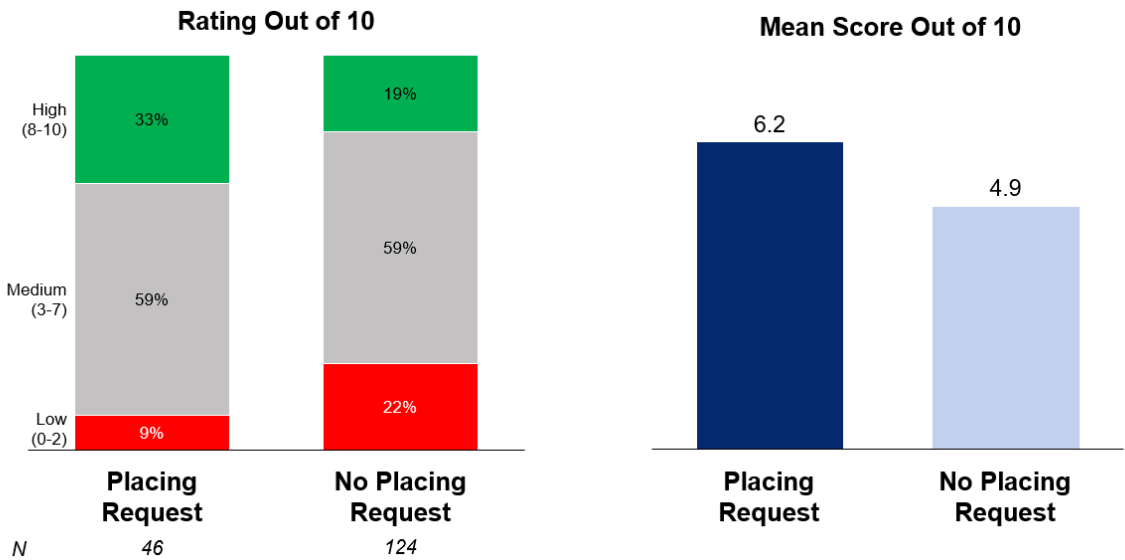
Figure 6.5: “To what extent did you find the process of choosing a school interesting?”



<sup>21</sup> Using the weighted, but not the unweighted, data.

The gap between England and Scotland is driven entirely by parents that did not make placing requests. Figure 6.6 shows that Scottish parents that made placing requests matched English parents in terms of how interesting they found school choice – 33% rated it highly interesting with an average score of 6.2 out of 10. By contrast, only 19% of Scottish parents that accepted their zoned school said they found school choice highly interesting, with an average score of 4.9. This fits with the interviews and makes intuitive sense – unless they make a placing request, Scottish parents have less reason to learn about schools and the system, and as a result have less opportunity to satisfy their curiosity.

Figure 6.6: “To what extent did you find the process of choosing a school interesting?” – Scotland only (unweighted)



The tendency to find school choice ‘interesting’ but not ‘enjoyable’ fits with some of the interviews, where participants seemed to find the word ‘enjoyable’ excessive:

*“‘Enjoyable’ I would put...it’s for want of a better word educational or informative. It’s that.”*  
(Dimitrios, father, Camden)

*“‘Exciting’s too strong, ‘exciting’ or ‘enjoyable’ are quite extreme”* (Alistair, father, Edinburgh)

*“We enjoyed – you know, the process we didn’t not enjoy. It was just such a process and it all went very smoothly”* (Andrea, mother, Edinburgh)

This reluctance to get verbally carried away indicates that while choosing can be enjoyable, the amount of pleasurable people get from it is limited. This is reflected too in the tendency of interview participants to qualify how enjoyable the activity is:

*"It's a little bit enjoyable"* (Marie, mother, Ipswich)

*"vaguely enjoyable"* (Samantha, mother, Camden)

*"I suppose it has been quite enjoyable"* (Nathan, father, Dundee)

*"I think it's been reasonably enjoyable"* (Frank, father, Edinburgh)

As we shall see in the following chapter, this presents a stark contrast to the more dramatic and emphatic language used by parents who found choosing stressful and anxiety-provoking.

### 6.23 Conclusion

Overall, these results show that the process of choosing a school – particularly visits and open days - can be somewhat enjoyable, though only a small minority of parents (around 15%) claim to find it highly enjoyable. Parents and children enjoy the spectacle and experience of school visits, as well as learning about particular schools and the system. There is some reason to think that school choice is more enjoyable for families in England, not least because English parents report finding the process more interesting, certainly compared to Scottish parents that do not make a placing request. However, the difference between English and Scottish parents in terms of how enjoyable they rate choosing schools is not statistically significant, which suggests it must be modest at best.

## 6.3 Choice and Empowerment (Affective Theories)

We saw in chapters 2 and 3 that a major motivation behind school choice policies is to give families a greater sense of control over their own lives. In this section, I examine to what extent that has been achieved. For this section, I reverse the normal order and present survey results first before interview findings. In this case, I believe the interview responses help us understand and interpret the survey findings. The survey paints a fairly positive picture, telling us that most parents are satisfied with the level of perceived choice that they have. However, the interviews suggest that satisfaction tends to be experienced merely as the absence of frustration, rather than as an active sense of empowerment. Moreover, for those families dissatisfied with their level of perceived choice, the process is experienced as deeply *disempowering*. In sum, choice is only felt to be moderately good for those that are satisfied with the status quo, and extremely

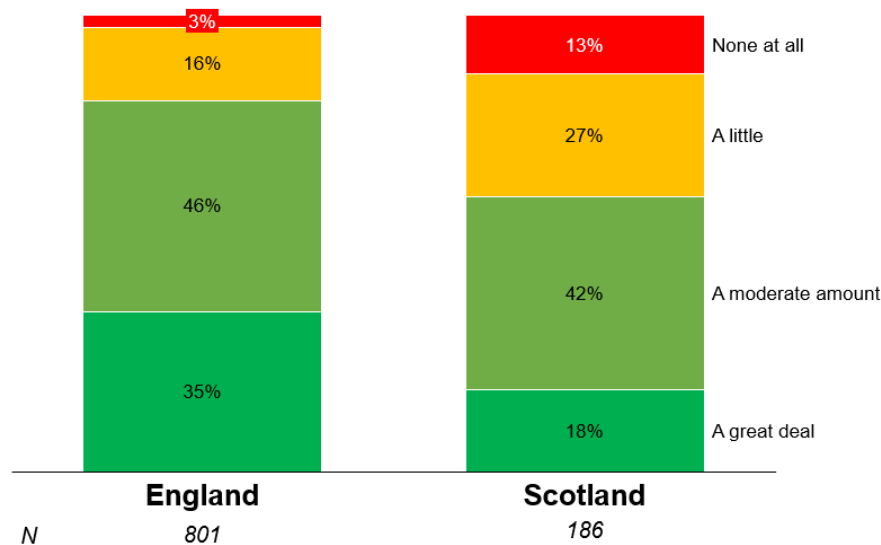
bad for those who are not.

The survey also indicates that while English parents feel they have more choice, Scottish parents are no less satisfied with the level of choice that they have. The interview findings go further and indicate a deeper level of frustration and disempowerment in England than Scotland. I therefore close this section by considering some of the reasons why Scottish families seem to be feel less (and possibly even more) empowered than those in England, so as to help us understand precisely what is empowering about school choice.

### 6.31 Survey Findings

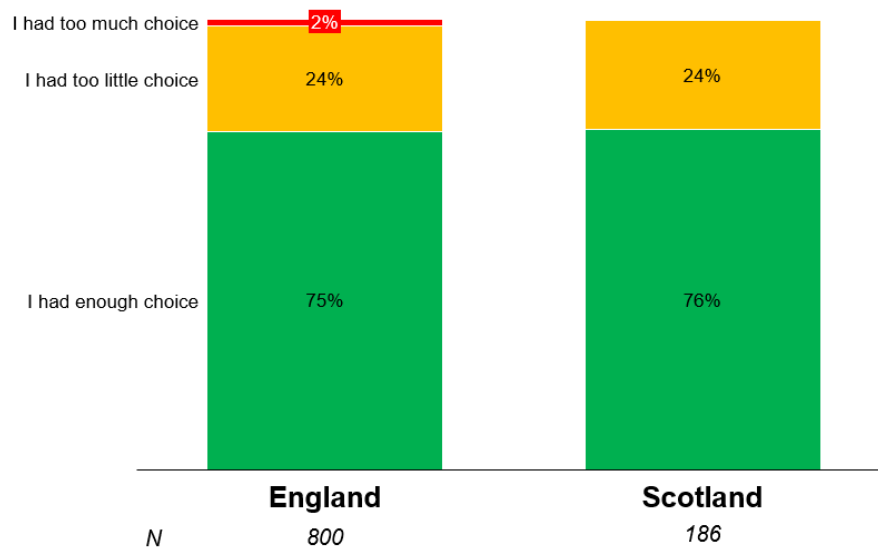
In the survey, it is striking that the vast majority of parents – 97% in England and 88% in Scotland - said that they had at least some choice of secondary schools. However, English parents said they had more choice. As figure 6.7 shows, 35% of parents in England said they had a great deal of choice, and 81% said they had at least a moderate amount. By comparison, 18% of parents in Scotland said they had a great deal of choice, and 60% said they had at least a moderate amount.

Figure 6.7: “How much choice do you think you had over your child's secondary school?”



Yet even though English parents tend to have higher perceived choice than their Scottish counterparts, parents in both countries are equally satisfied with the level of choice that they have. The proportion of parents that believe they have enough choice of schools is near identical: 75% in England and 76% in Scotland, as figure 6.8 illustrates.

Figure 6.8: “How satisfied are you with the amount of choice you had?”



The same pattern occurs within Scotland. Parents in the survey that made a placing request believe they had more choice than those that did not (figure 6.9), but there is no significant difference in how satisfied they are with their level of perceived choice (figure 6.10).

Figure 6.9: “How much choice do you think you had over your child's secondary school?” – Scotland only (unweighted)

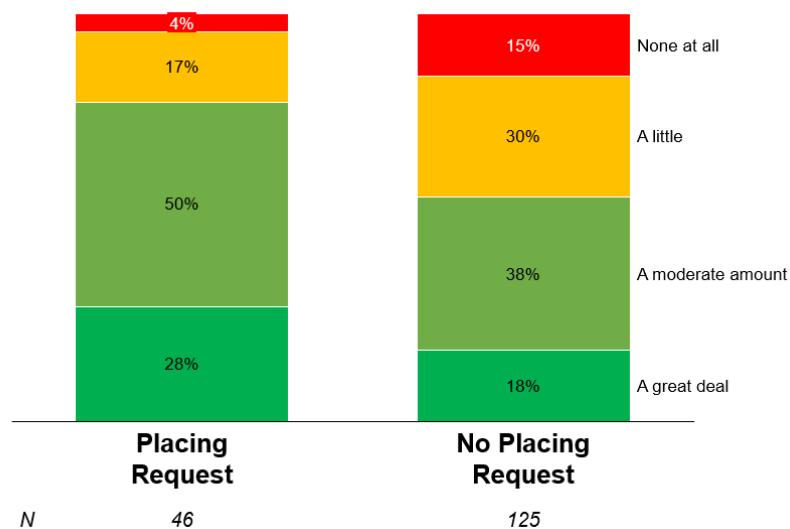
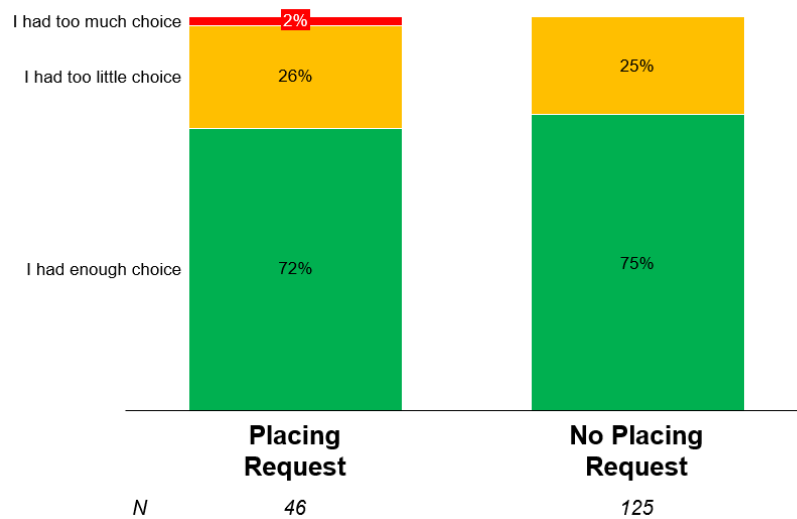


Figure 6.10: “How satisfied are you with the amount of choice you had?” – Scotland only (unweighted)



### 6.32 Interview Findings

As in the survey, a majority of interview participants expressed positive views about their perceived level of choice. Yet the interview format allowed participants to develop and explore their attitudes to choice in greater detail and depth than the closed, multiple choice survey question. Given this space, English families that claimed to be satisfied with their level of choice expressed greater ambivalence and uncertainty, and those English parents that were explicitly dissatisfied showed greater frustration.

While most parents I interviewed – on both sides of the border – felt they had been given *some* choice over their children’s schooling, they were hardly effusive about the sense of empowerment or control this brought. Only a third of parents in both England and Scotland selected the ‘Empowering’ card in the card sort task. As with ‘enjoyable’, for many parents the term ‘empowering’ seemed to be excessive, too strong. It was not an idea that participants tended to bring up spontaneously, but rather one they had to be prompted to consider:

*“Empowering? I suppose it is a bit.”* (Ingrid, mother, Scotstown)

*“I guess I hadn’t really thought about it being empowering, because it hadn’t entered my thinking that I was so lucky to be able to go ‘yep, you can go there.’”* (Jenny, mother, Scotstown)

*“There was something empowering about it I suppose. I suppose when you’re making the decision you’re empowered with that decision.”* (Charlotte, mother, Camden)

*“We are empowered, aren’t we, if we’re making a choice?”* (Angela, mother, Camden)

*"Empowering? Only in that you get to know a situation and how something is, which is always a useful thing. Maybe you can say, but I don't like the word. I find it doesn't say anything."*  
(Dimitrios, father, Camden)

A few of the children I spoke to were more effusive about the sense of empowerment they got from school choice:

*"You feel like you can have independence choosing."* (Melissa, student, Camden)

*"I had, like, a say in everything, if I wanted to go to that school or not."* (Rhiannon, student, Ipswich)

However, this was usually somewhat tempered by the understanding that responsibility for school choice was at least shared with parents:

*"I do feel quite in charge. I don't feel like I got all the control but I feel like if I really don't want to go somewhere then I won't and that is a nice feeling, that is kind of reassuring."* (Eli, student, Camden)

Many of the children were content to leave the ultimate decision to their parents:

*"I don't mind I didn't get a lot of say over stuff."* (Chiara, student, Camden)

*"because it wasn't really my decision, I didn't really have to worry about it."* (Scarlett, student, Camden)

However, those with different preferences to their parents sometimes found themselves embroiled in out-and-out conflict, which merely demonstrated their powerlessness. For example, Tracy in Scotstown, who overruled her son's desire to go to a particular school, told me that it had caused "arguing, crying, all sorts, brings it up every day...There has been full scale meltdowns".

While interview participants were lukewarm in describing empowerment through school choice, those that found it disempowering – overwhelmingly in England – laid out their frustration in the strongest terms. Contrary to the best hopes of policymakers seeking to empower parents, their remarks reflected fatalism and despondency:

*"it doesn't feel like choice, I don't feel like we got a choice, we'll get what we're given however much we want something else."* (Ruth, mother, Camden)

*"I don't really feel you're in control of much at all."* (Graeme, father, Camden)

*"I think anyway it's not your decision in a way when it comes to it. It's out of my hands in a way."* (Jill, mother, Ipswich)

*"Empowering? No, no, because I feel like I don't have as much power as I want to have."*  
(Amy, mother, Ipswich)



*“it’s stressful because of the limited choice because someone else decided for me.”* (Brigitte, mother, Camden)

*“Not empowering at all. In fact, I remember saying at one point that up until now I feel everything that we’ve done as parents we’ve done the absolute best, I’m pretty confident that is the absolute best, and this is the one thing where I think I don’t know whether I’ve done my best and I don’t know whether she’s getting the best. So actually, really not empowering at all.”* (Yvonne, mother, Camden)

Among English families, there was a widespread sense that choice is not meaningful or genuine because students may not get a place at the school they select (a notion expressed in several previous studies – see section 4.22). A common trope in England is that the school choice process is fundamentally about impression management, formal but not substantive, an attempt by the authorities to ‘trick’ people into believing that they have a say. Jane, in Ipswich, believes that “Ostensibly you have a choice, but really when you weigh everything up you don’t”. Multiple participants described choice as an “illusion”. For example, according to Marie from Ipswich:

*“I’m aware that it’s not a dictatorship, but is it a real choice or is it to give you the impression that you have a say? Like anything else which is going on here in this country presently, it’s the illusion of you being important enough to have a say in your own life or that of your children.”* (Marie, mother, Ipswich)

This cynicism fed through to some of the children I spoke to as well, who saw their ability to choose a school as highly limited:

*“You know how there are the lights that go green and when you press the button, it doesn’t actually do anything it’s just to make you feel like you’re in control...Maybe it’s kind of like that because when you put stuff down, does it really matter? Because I feel like whatever happens I’m going to get the same schools.”* (Eli, student, Camden)

*“I don’t feel very in charge of it. I feel like there are a few things I can choose from, but not too many.”* (William, student, Camden)

*“When we first started this, I thought it was going to be such an exciting experience. Schools that you choose to go to, and you go there for definite. Then I started to realise the problems there are with all these systems”* (Tedros, student, Camden)

Some Scottish families expressed a similar sense of disempowerment – but such sentiment was almost entirely limited to those that made placing requests. Lizzie, still waiting on the outcome of her application to an out-of-catchment school, said that “It doesn’t feel like a proper choice. It feels like throwing a bunch of Skittles in the air and hope you get the one you like”. Daphne

in Scotstown described herself as “helpless, basically”. Abbie in Scotstown told me that “You have the choice, you’re allowed to apply for any school you want to, so yes, you have plenty of choice, but getting your choice is quite difficult I would say”. Just as in England, a few parents expressed the view that ultimately local authorities are in charge:

*“it’s completely out of our hands. We are powerless to those decisions, powerless to that person sitting behind the desk going ‘OK’” (Lizzie, mother, Edinburgh)*

*“You live in this area, this is your choice of secondary school, and that is pretty much where your child’s going. It’s not much of a choice, is it?” (Flora, mother, Scotstown)*

The responses of those Scottish parents that did not make a placing request and said they had too little choice were quite different. To them, the issue did not seem especially salient. Dissatisfaction was often expressed rather indifferently, in distant and hypothetical terms. For example, Andy’s discussion of low perceived choice in Dundee was based on second-hand accounts of other families’ experiences of making placing requests:

*“Nah, you don’t get one, do you? You don’t get a choice unless you go and seek it. And even then I’ve heard through other people that asking for a position at another school that’s not in your catchment area, you’re no’ guaranteed that position. So as far as choice goes, you don’t have one here”*

Yet when I asked him whether he was satisfied with the amount of choice he personally had, it was something he needed to think about and reason through, before deciding that in fact he was content with his zoned school:

*Me: And you think that’s bad? Do you think it - is that something would you have wanted, more choice? Is it something that’s important to you?*

*Andy: It would possibly - no myself because I’m quite - where we are, you walk to the end of the road and you’re at [school A]. So I mean, that’s going to be handy for him. As he gets older he can get himself to school, it’s in walking distance and stuff. So no, I’m it’s not really something that - but I guess some parents it maybe is.*

Similarly, Frank in Edinburgh claimed initially not to have had any choice, but then went on to list a number of schools that may have been open to him, before concluding that he *had* made a choice in moving to his current residential area:

*Me: To what extent, I guess taking everything in the round, do you feel like you’ve had a meaningful choice of secondary schools?*

*Frank (father, Edinburgh): We probably haven’t to be honest with you. That’s maybe a bit unfair. We probably made the choice based on the fact that we had the opportunity to move and that was one of the key considerations in terms of which area we were going to. I suppose if you look at the options we have, we’ve got [School A] or [School B] from a catchment perspective and*

*we didn't have much choice. We could have gone for [School C] or [School D], but that's an out-of-catchment placement you know, and to be honest with you we're pretty comfortable in terms of [school B] so it wasn't really a discussion.*

Two things to notice here. First, in contrast to the parents in England, Andy and Frank did not have clear pre-existing views. Rather, the question seemed to prompt them to consider how much choice they had, perhaps for the first time. Second, and relatedly, even when they consider whether they would perhaps have liked more choice, the question is academic to them, since they are satisfied with their catchment schools. The upshot of all of this is that contrary to the hopes and expectations of policymakers, the English families I spoke to were more likely to feel *disempowered* by the process of choosing a school than those in Scotland.

How can we reconcile the depth of disempowerment in the interviews, and the fact that it was far worse in England than in Scotland, with the survey results? Parents' satisfaction with their perceived level of choice that they have may depend on two separate factors: i) the range of options available to them (the formal level of choice), and ii) what we might call the 'efficacy' of their choice: the actual likelihood of their getting the option they choose (substantive). It is impossible to know for sure how the survey respondents interpreted the question "How satisfied are you with the amount of choice you had?", but I suspect at least some interpreted it primarily or solely in formal rather than substantive terms. This may mean the survey results flatter the English system, because in my interviews English participants tended to be more sceptical about the level of substantive choice they had.

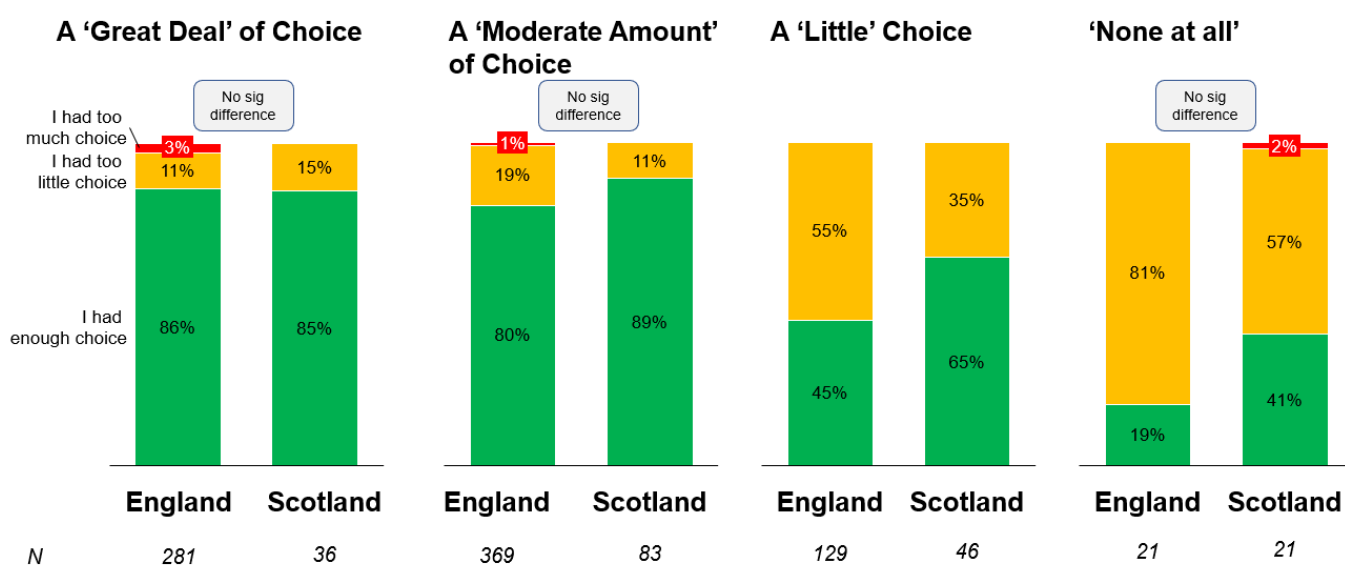
Several English parents who said they were satisfied with their options expressed doubt about the efficacy of their formal choice. For example, Harry in Ipswich claimed that "there's quite a lot to choose from but ultimately the choice won't be with the parents, it's the authorities that pick". Angela in Camden told me "we are really lucky where we live in that we have so much choice", but later in the interview said "we are given a choice, we are allowed to present a preference. Whether we are actually given that choice is another matter entirely".

### *6.33 Why are Scottish families equally satisfied with less perceived choice?*

All this raises something of a puzzle. English families are explicitly asked to choose, appear to have more options and tend to be more engaged in choosing. Why then do they appear to be less satisfied with apparently more choice?

Figure 6.11 shows that in general, as we would expect, the more choice parents say they have, the likelier they are to believe they have enough choice. However, at almost every level of perceived choice, Scottish parents are more likely to be satisfied than English parents. The difference is only statistically significant for parents that say they only have ‘a little’ choice, though this may be due to a lack of statistical power in the sub-samples.

Figure 6.11: “How satisfied are you with the amount of choice you had?” by perceived level of choice



It is possible that this is partly an artefact of the way survey questions are formulated. There were four response options in the question on how much choice parents felt they had (A 'great deal', a 'moderate amount', a 'little' or 'none at all'), but only three response options in the question on satisfaction with choice ('enough', 'too much' or 'too little' choice). Perhaps if the question on choice satisfaction allowed for more granular responses it would pick up differences in the degree of satisfaction with choice between England and Scotland. Perhaps those who say they have enough choice in Scotland are more likely to be barely satisfied and those who say they have enough choice in England are more comfortably satisfied.

However, this interpretation is at odds with the interview evidence, which did not find English parents to be substantially more satisfied with their perceived level of choice than Scottish parents, and if anything found the reverse. Rather, the interviews were consistent with the picture figure 6.11 portrays, with Scottish participants content with a relatively modest level of perceived choice. In many cases, acceptance of the catchment option was framed as an active and satisfactory choice. For example, Jackie in Dundee insisted “I did have a choice...The choice that was there was willingly taken”. This applies even to those zoned for less highly rated schools. Stephanie, who opted to send her daughter to her Scotstown catchment school, even

though it is one of the lowest attaining in the city, insisted that “There was certainly choice...I don’t think we felt ‘oh this is it, we’re stuck’”.

For others, the mere option of making a placing request, even if it was never seriously considered, presented enough formal choice:

*“I never really paid much attention to it because I was always quite confident that I knew where they were going to go. But there were letters from school that said ‘this is the catchment that you’re in, but if you want to apply somewhere different’, told you the process that you went through, so the information was there if I wanted it. I don’t feel that it was like ‘this is your option, and that’s it.’*  
(Shona, mother, Scotstown)

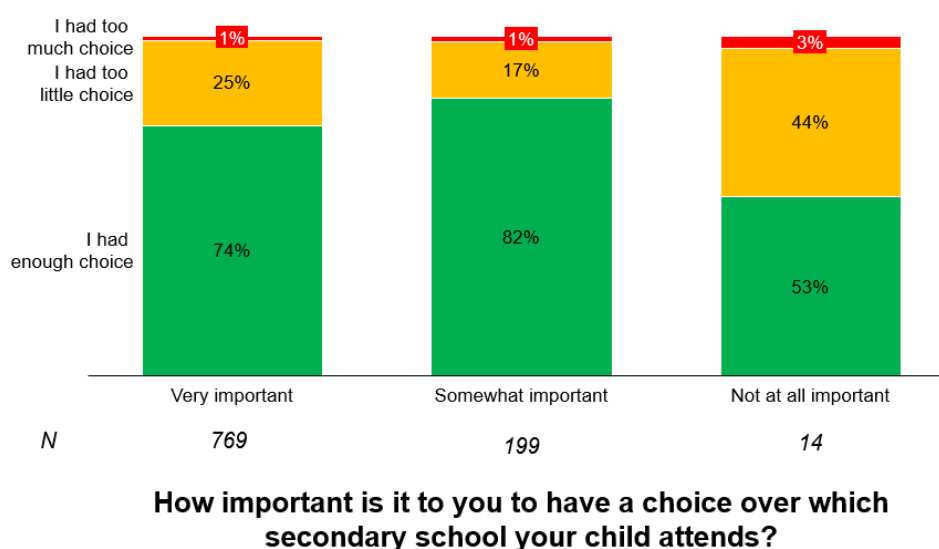
*“you did feel from the council that they gave you the option to change it if you needed to.”* (Sarah, mother, Dundee)

*“we were sent a letter through the door, confirming that would be allocated [School A] unless I wanted to apply to another high school and they gave the different categories, obviously told me it was within my right to do that...I’ve got a choice to send my child wherever I want to go.”*  
(Victoria, mother, Dundee)

Alistair and Lisa, both parents in Edinburgh who faced a choice between two catchment schools - one non-denominational, one Catholic – agreed that this was sufficient. Alistair only seriously considered the non-denominational school, but for him “there was enough choice. That might sound rather odd because it’s only a choice between probably two, but the reality is through where we live it was simple”. Lisa, who was less decided between the two, described herself as “spoiled for choice”.

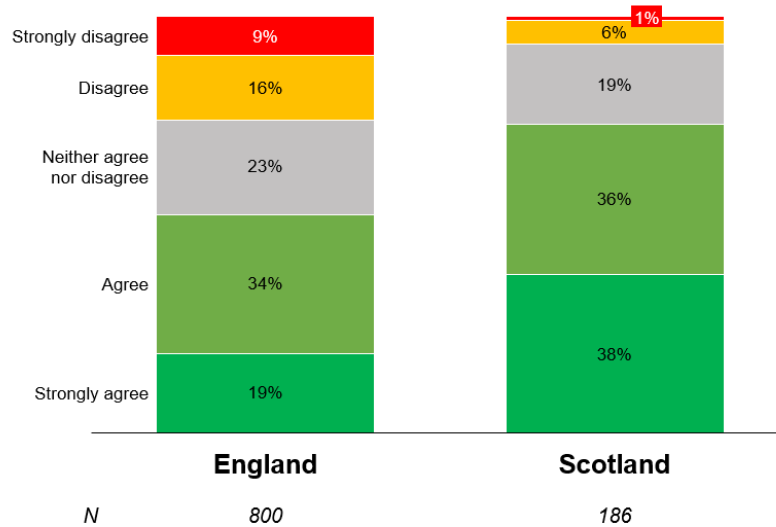
Why, then, might Scottish parents be satisfied with less formal choice? One possibility is that Scottish families value choice less than English families. As we saw in figure 6.1, English parents are more likely to say that having a choice of school is ‘very’ important to them. Moreover, as I have just described above, in the interviews, choice appears to be less salient as an issue to parents in Scotland. Figure 6.12 offers some support for that account, showing that those who say that school choice is only ‘somewhat important’ (of whom there are more in Scotland) are slightly more likely to say they are satisfied with the level of choice that they have than those who say it is ‘very important’. Puzzlingly, those who said it is not at all important to have choice (again, disproportionately Scottish parents) were least satisfied with the level of choice they had – although only 14 respondents are in that category, so this finding may be spurious.

Figure 6.12: “How satisfied are you with the amount of choice you had?” by strength of desire for choice



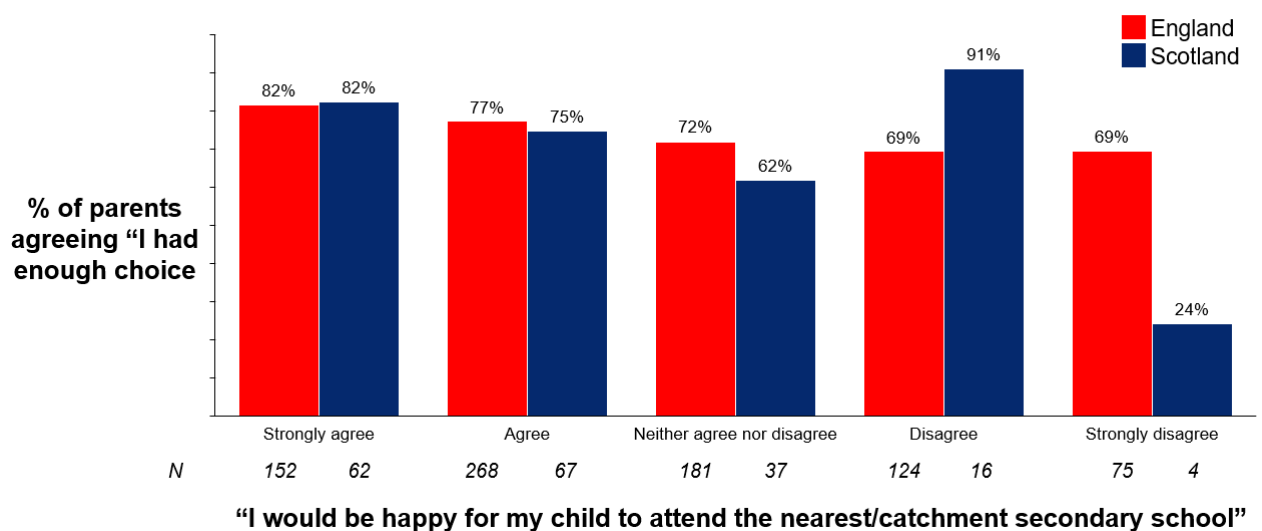
A second, related, explanation (this may be one of the reasons Scottish parents care less about choice), is that Scottish parents may be satisfied with less formal choice because they are more content with their catchment schools. As Alistair in Edinburgh put it, explaining why he felt empowered despite only seriously considering his nearest school: “if this was the only coffee shop in the area, and you came to this coffee shop, you'd be empowered to come to this coffee shop. The reality is there isn't a huge choice, but if you like Starbucks, what's the problem?”. Alistair was not alone: most of the Scottish families I spoke to, across a range of different areas, liked their catchment schools. The survey confirms this impression: figure 6.13 shows that 73% of Scottish parents say they are happy for their child to attend their catchment school, and only 8% say they are not. By contrast, though a majority of English parents say they are happy for their child to attend their ‘nearest/catchment’ school (I left it to parents to interpret for themselves what this means since English children are not officially zoned for a particular school), this endorsement was less full throated than in Scotland (19% vs 33% strongly agree). Moreover, a quarter of English parents would not want their child to attend their nearest or catchment school.

Figure 6.13: “I would be happy for my child to attend the nearest/catchment secondary school”



However, the survey does not overall support the claim that parents more satisfied with their catchment school are more satisfied with the amount of choice that they have. Figure 6.14 plots the two against one another, and while there does appear to be a positive relationship, it falls well short of statistical significance.

Figure 6.14: Proportion of parents that say they had enough choice by agreement with the statement “I would be happy for my child to attend the nearest/catchment secondary school”



A third possible explanation for why parents in Scotland are no less satisfied with less choice could be that the level of formal choice in Scotland reaches an adequate threshold that is high enough for most families. Conversely, this would imply that the level of formal choice in

England goes above and beyond what families want. Indeed, many of my Scottish participants made just such an argument – that the balance in Scotland is just right, with most students expected to attend their catchment school, but with the option to make a more active choice available for those who want it:

*“A local school as a default position, I think, you should be offered a local space, and then be able to apply out of zone – that’s basically what Scotland does, I think that’s a pretty good system.”*  
(Stephanie, mother, Scotstown)

*“I think that the choice is really important, and also I think that the level of choice here is right.”*  
(Tracy, mother, Scotstown)

*“I think actually this amount of choice was fine.”* (Angus, student, Edinburgh)

*“I think it’s good that we get a school. You know that the option’s always there, if for some reason you really didn’t want your child to go to that school, you could put in a request for them to go elsewhere.”* (Sarah, mother, Dundee)

*“Personally, I think Scotland’s got it right in that they allocate you to a high school near your address and then you have the opportunity to then put in a placing request if that’s not where your child wants to go.”* (Victoria, mother, Dundee)

It was notable that several Scottish parents, even those that felt disappointed and disenchanted by their own experiences, seemed to accept the Scottish system as basically reasonable:

*“I understand that they’ve got zoned areas and have you got siblings and all that sort of thing but I then kind of felt a bit let down.”* (Flora, mother, Scotstown)

*“It’s quite fair because there are four priorities [categories for placing requests]...I can understand that, people who work there, they’ve got to come first.”* (Abbie, Scotstown)

By contrast, Fred in Scotstown, reflecting on the English system, said “That’s almost, in my mind, going too far, you know, I think you should need a, you should have an option of two or three [schools]”.

As we have seen, there were parents in England, too, that expressed doubt over whether so much choice is necessary. Aaliyah and Brigitte compared the English system unfavourably with their native Singapore and France. Franco, an Italian from Camden, claimed that his home country offers adequate choice:

*“In Italy for example, for the primary school, you don’t really have a choice. Because the choice is the distance. And nobody’s complaining. If you have a special reason you ask ‘because my work is there’ or any reasons that is comprehensible but not ‘I don’t want’, you need to give a clear reason.”*



Along similar lines, James in Camden described the English system as “bonkers”: “we're quite lucky really because we've got all these options but it just seems that most people most places in the world you don't have to worry about which system you're going to go into you just go to your local school”. When I described the Scottish system to them, a number of parents in England preferred it. For example, James saw the Scottish approach as more rational: “There is a default assumption that you go to your local school? That makes so much more sense, right?” Similarly, Linda in Ipswich liked the fact that the Scottish system allows some choice, without requiring all to choose: “I suppose in a way that's quite a good idea really because then if you didn't want that I suppose that takes a lot of pressure off you”.

A fourth explanation for why satisfaction is not higher in England, as we have seen, is the lack of efficacy of choice: choice is formal but not substantive. Simply put, English families are more likely to have an unsuccessful school application. Recall that in Scotland, 13% of families make a placing request each year and that around 80% of these placing requests are granted. That implies that nationally only 3% of Scottish families apply for a school place and do not receive it. By contrast, in the whole of England, 17% of students fail to get a place at their first choice secondary, implying six times as many families endure an unsuccessful application as in Scotland (Department for Education 2018).

Understandably, the less likely families are to get into the school of their preference, the less meaningful they feel their choice is. Being asked to make a choice and then receiving something altogether different is a recipe for frustration and disempowerment. As Michael puts it, “in times of stress I was really annoyed by how as soon as you were presented by a choice you might not get into I really suddenly started to care”. As we shall see in chapter 8, parents choosing for middle or youngest children are more likely to be satisfied with their level of choice. This may well be because their choice is believed to be more efficacious. Children with an older sibling at a school are typically given priority for admission, so provided the parents wanted to send their children to attend the same school, their applications for their younger children were very likely to be successful.

Yet success rates alone do not tell the full story. A fifth potentially significant difference between England and Scotland is that the English system involves greater uncertainty. The majority of families in Scotland do not make an application and so know exactly which school they are attending. By contrast, since every family in England has to make an application, every family *potentially* faces rejection. Moreover, since the English system involves applications to multiple schools, there are many more potential possible outcomes.

This uncertainty contributes to a lack of perceived control. A number of interview participants compared school choice to a ‘gamble’ or ‘lottery’, characterising it as a matter of chance rather than something they are in charge of:

*“It really feels like luck and that's what so horrible.”* (Eli, student, Camden)

*“the lottery part of it is that you put your choices down and then the authorities would choose according to their criteria.”* (Harry, father, Ipswich)

*“the big lottery that is the attribution of a place.”* (Marie, mother, Ipswich)

*“I wouldn't say we're spoilt for choice because it is a bit of a lottery.”* (Francesca, mother, Camden)

As might be expected, the only families in Scotland to portray school choice in this way were those making a placing request. I have already quoted Lizzie's image of the process as “throwing a bunch of Skittles in the air and hope you get the one you like” – like a roll of a die or toss of a coin.

A sixth reason why English families are no more satisfied despite having more formal choice could be the greater gap between the rhetoric and reality of school choice. In England, choice is valorised and encouraged by the central government, local authorities and schools, whereas Scottish institutions tend to play it down. As previous studies have suggested (4.22), that may heighten frustrations when families feel they cannot get a place at the school they want. Yvonne in Camden makes exactly such a claim, signalling her irritation at the apparent false promises:

*“I find it really annoying when schools and government talk about choice because one thing I've learnt from this is that there is virtually no choice at all, you've got no choice...I've spoken to a lot of parents who've said it's a joke, the choice thing.”*

Similarly, Jack in Ipswich makes a point of stressing how far his experiences are from the “freedom of choice” he is meant to be entitled to:

*“you're supposed to be getting this freedom of choice, but have we really? And that's the tricky thing about it really is like you can choose one of these three. ‘OK, I want that one’. ‘You can't have that one’.”*

Samantha in Camden uses a colourful image to draw the same contrast between the potential promise of school choice from the constrained reality:

*“it felt like you went into an amazing gelateria and people said you can have any ice cream you want as long as it's these three flavours. It's a bit like that. Any flavour you want as long as it's chocolate, vanilla, strawberry.”*

### *6.34 Conclusion*

While families in England recognise they have more formal choice than their counterparts in Scotland, this does not appear to translate into a greater sense of empowerment or control. I have outlined a few possible reasons why. It may be due to differences in social attitudes between England and Scotland, in terms of the value they put on choice or their satisfaction with catchment schools, although it is worth emphasising that these attitudes may to some extent be a consequence of the policy differences between the two countries. The Scottish system may offer an adequate amount of formal choice, while the English system offers more than is necessary. The Scottish system may offer families a greater sense of efficacy in their choice as they are less likely to fear an unsuccessful application. Moreover, it involves less uncertainty, with most Scottish families secure in the knowledge of which school they will end up with. The gap between the rhetoric of choice in England and the reality English families face may set them up for greater disappointment. Likely it is a combination of all these factors. Whatever the reasons, the Scottish system seems to translate less choice into greater perceived empowerment.

## **6.4 Choice and Freedom**

In chapter 3, we saw that the value of a choice, in terms of its contribution to freedom, is often held to be a function of: i) the significance of the choice; and ii) the adequacy of the range of options available. On some theories, these are to be judged by society or by reference to objective values. My empirical findings cannot speak to those theories. However, other theories posit that significance and adequacy depend on the agent's values and perceptions. That implies that the value of school choice depends on: i) whether families choosing schools see it as significant; and ii) their satisfaction with their options. In this section, I look at each of these in turn.

#### 6.41 Is school choice significant to choosers?

How much does school choice matter to people? Does it contribute meaningfully to their “plan of life”, as Berlin (2002) puts it? As we saw in section 6.1, most parents see school choice as a hugely important decision. However, the evidence in section 6.1 also suggests that the importance is mostly instrumental – it is not choosing a school per se that matters, but the consequences for the child’s future development and success. In such cases, school choice may be significant to parents because it contributes to their life goal of being an effective parent. For example, Brigitte couches its value in terms of allowing her to discharge her responsibilities:

Me: *So how important is it to you as a parent to be able to choose which school your children goes to?*

Brigitte (mother, Camden): *It's really important. 10 out of 10.*

Me: *And why do you think it's so important?*

Brigitte: *Because it's my child, I'm the parent. I've got the parental responsibility.*

Kelly in Camden sees it in similar terms, as a way of securing greater success for her daughter than she can hope to achieve: “It's really important because I want her to do much better than me and my husband have done. I want her to go to university”.

Of course, such perceptions of the requirements of effective parenting are socially contingent. The notion that carefully choosing a school is an important component of being a good parent depends on the belief that which school they attend matters a lot to a child’s outcomes and that it is the parent’s responsibility to find the right school for their child. As Brigitte herself notes, those beliefs are not universal – she contrasts the expectations she faces with her siblings in France who do not feel the need to choose a school.

The motivation for school choice that perhaps best fits the idea of contributing to a plan of life is a preference for religious instruction. As figure 6.2 showed, 14% of parents say finding a school “with the right culture and ethos” (which presumably includes religion) is their main reason for wanting to choose a school. Religious observance is certainly the sort of fundamental project that valuable choice is intended to protect. Indeed, some interview participants did say that a religious school is preferable because it supports and sustain the child’s faith:

Me: *Are you religious, would you say?*

Angus (student, Edinburgh): *Yeab, definitely.*

Me: *OK, so is that one of the things you were thinking about?*

Angus: *Yeab, I wanted to keep on building up my religion.*

*"I think I made a good choice because there is still that base of that's what we do at home pray every morning and that sort of thing and I wanted the same sort of level from home to school."* (Linda, mother, Ipswich)

*"we are Catholic and when we chose [School A] it was because we wanted to give our children Catholic education."* (Daniela, mother, Edinburgh)

As in the previous research discussed in section 4.64, however, most families that opted for faith schools did not do so for strong religious reasons. In some cases, their comments suggested only a weak preference for religious schooling, as opposed to a fundamental belief in its importance to observance. For example, Linda, who chose a religious school so her children could pray each day, also admitted "we're not Catholics but it's on the same sort of line". Zofia in Ipswich said she was leaning towards a particular school "because it's just a Catholic school and we are Catholics and it's an important part of our lives", but was only considering putting it as her second choice, behind a non-denominational school. For Frank in Edinburgh, "it would be a 'nice to have'. It wouldn't be a case of they must go to a Catholic school because they are Catholics".

Parents that opted for a faith schools talked as often in general terms about the culture of the school as about specific religious values they wanted to inculcate:

*"I wouldn't say we're religious, but I kind of I like the ethos and how it teaches them to care for others."* (Andrea, mother, Edinburgh)

*"I mean that's [religious school] purely something that was available when we moved to the area, but I think there is a general ethos that is useful. And it doesn't particularly matter what the faith is."* (Harry, father, Ipswich)

In 4.64, we saw that previous research has linked school choice to political identities. Politics did come up occasionally in my interviews, but generally parents felt ideologically committed only to choosing state schools over the private sector, rather than favouring particular schools within the state sector (with the exception in some cases of resisting selective schools). Even then, parents often admitted their willingness to compromise these values if they deemed it necessary to protect their children's future.

*"there's a whole political nuance of what it means to send your child to private school and my husband's quite a Socialist."* (Aaliyah, mother, Camden)

*"ideologically I don't want my children to go to a private school but if all the state schools around the area were not good I would consider it."* (Ioanna, mother, Camden)

*"we're both committed to the state school system, so ideologically, that's what I would choose by default...if I felt that I was disadvantaging them for some sort of political principle then I would abandon that political principle."* (Stephanie, mother, Scotstown)

Another potential source of significance for school choice is the ability to choose between single-sex and mixed schooling. Only a couple of parents I spoke to deliberately sought out girls' schools, however, and they did so on instrumental grounds, suggesting that they provide a more academically supportive environment:

*"I don't think it's necessarily best for boys, but girls I do think it's possibly the best. Not all girls, again, but probably for her."* (Charlotte, mother, Camden)

*"I think a mixed school might have been disruptive. That's not definite, but that's my impression."* (Kelly, mother, Camden)

Given the preponderance of single-sex schools in Camden, several interviewees there did apply to them, but this was typically regardless to or in spite of their single-sex status:

*"for me it's a big compromise that she would go to a single-sex."* (Angela, mother, Camden)

*"I can just about accept a girls' school"* (Ruth, mother, Camden)

In general, families felt more favourably towards girls' schools than boys' schools (as Charlotte's comment above indicates). However, in Camden the fact that girls' schools outnumber boys' schools had resulted some nominally co-educational schools becoming perceived as de facto boys' schools, a cause of some consternation and resentment. As Michael put it, "it's a strange choice: lots of people generally say 'I don't want all girls but I'm not sure about 70% boys, that seems quite a lot'". None of the other case study locations offered single-sex state schools, and I found little appetite or desire for them among the families I interviewed.

School choice does seem to play an important role in the life plans of some parents and children, most commonly by allowing them to access religious education. However, most families that send their children to religious schools do not seem to be trying to inculcate very specific values. School choice also may have some significance as a means to discharging the perceived duties of responsible parenthood. I found little evidence that people want to use school choice to express their political beliefs, nor to ensure their children attend single-sex schools.

#### 6.42 Do choosers have an adequate range of option?

As we saw in chapter 3, Sen (1991) argues that the value of a choice to freedom depends on how many good options the chooser has. The findings described in sections 6.31 and 6.32 indicate that for the most part parents are satisfied with the choice that they have, although a substantial minority, particularly in England, expressed cynicism about the number of options are ‘really’ open to them.

In terms of the quality and range of options available, interview participants were generally content. Some were impressed by the diversity of the schools they could choose from:

*“They seem to be actually quite different... You can see that there seems to be a different ethos in some of them”* (Dimitrios, father, Camden)

*“I think they are focused on different things”* (Zofia, mother, Ipswich)

*“we are happy with the options we have”* (Daniela, mother, Edinburgh)

Others saw the schools as broadly similar in terms of the type of education they provided, but nevertheless different enough to provide meaningful choice:

*“I think there's quite a lot to choose.”* (Harry, father, Ipswich)

*“How different are they? Mid-range, as it were. Much of a muchness, all very similar, all very good from my perspective anyway.”* (Harry, father, Ipswich)

*“I think fundamentally a state school in North London is going to be pretty similar... I think when you scratch the surface there isn't a huge huge difference.”* (Angela, mother, Camden)

For a minority, though, particularly in Ipswich, there was a desire for greater diversity:

*“it's difficult, they're all much the same.”* (Sandra, mother, Ipswich)

*“we couldn't afford private schools. We wouldn't get into a grammar school. I feel that's really unfair. And so then what you're left with is all very samey. And you are just going on location and another thing that was important to us was to try and choose one that was a bit smaller and that's all really the difference. There's nothing, they are just bog-standard comprehensive schools.”* (Jill, mother, Ipswich)

#### 6.43 Conclusion

I believe the evidence I have presented here offers little support for the claim that school choice makes a significant contribution to choosers' freedom by their own lights. Though for the most

part the options are seen as adequate, for the majority of families the interest at stake is not sufficiently significant. The major exception seems to be highly religious families seeking faith education, but these appear to be a relatively small minority.

## 6.5 Choice and Autonomy

In this section, I run through each of the ‘connotations’ of autonomy sketched out in chapter 3, and examine whether my empirical findings suggest school choice contributes to autonomy.

### 6.5.1 *Autonomy as Self-Government*

Self-government views of autonomy suggest that we are more likely to see choice is necessary to avoid a demeaning or disrespectful ‘substitution of judgement’ if i) the choice relates to fundamental ends, rather than means; and ii) potential choosers recognise themselves as lacking expertise. In sections 6.1 and 6.41, we have seen that school choice touches on fundamental ends only for a minority of families, but that for most it is seen as a means to a better standard of education.

However, my interviews indicate that most parents do not see school choice as a matter of technical expertise, but rather have a great deal of confidence in their own ability to judge schools for themselves. For some, this is based on their particular skills and experience:

*“it wasn't difficult, but then again as I said I look at information sources as part of my day job.”* (Katy, mother Camden)

*“in terms of being equipped to, I've been through the system to various degrees so I get that.”* (Harry, father, Ipswich)

For others, their confidence was grounded in faith in themselves or their specific knowledge about their child:

*“I'm just a parent, I have to do that. And I think that I just need to trust myself.”* (Zofia, mother, Ipswich)

*“ultimately you know your child best.”* (Aaliyah, mother, Camden)

*“I may not have come to the right conclusion but I feel like I was able to identify the best school that would have been, I do think that.”* (Yvonne, mother, Camden)



*"I'm not necessarily confident about that because it's a subjective decision to make. I feel that I'm able to make a decision based on what I think is OK. It might not be the right one, but it's OK for us if you know what I mean."* (Angela, mother, Camden)

Given this widespread self-confidence, it does seem plausible that denying parents school choice could be seen as a disrespectful verdict on their judgement, and so in at least one sense a restriction of their autonomy.

#### *6.52 Autonomy as Narrative Significance*

Narrative control theories imply that choice has value: i) when it enhances people's perceived control over their lives and ii) when the choice has 'narrative significance'. We have already addressed both of these in relation to school choice. In section 6.3 we saw that the majority of parents are satisfied with the level of perceived choice that they have. However, we also saw that a significant minority - particularly in England - are deeply cynical about whether their choice is effective and as a result seem perversely disempowered by school choice. In section 6.41, we saw that school choice rarely pertains to significant interests, and certainly few, if any, of the people I spoke to suggested it would have such prominence in their life story as to have 'narrative significance'.

Only a couple of families had such close connections with particular institutions and social groups linked to schools that they might meet this standard. Beverley and Nicky both told me that Nicky's father was keen for her to attend the (private) secondary school that he attended as a child. The school seemed to be an important part of his life story - a formative part of his development, and still the basis for his social circle, and so it is plausible that ensuring his daughter to follow in his footsteps had narrative significance to him. Tracy described how her decision not to continue her son's Gaelic education had "been a really big thing because we've been so involved with the little community in the school, because it really is a proper community, and we're so closely linked...I really feel like a traitor". For the vast majority of families, however, the idea of choice having this sort of narrative significance is a bit of stretch.

The notion of autonomy as authenticity implies that choice has value insofar as it helps people to live according to beliefs or characteristics that they strongly identify with. The evidence of section 6.41 suggests that this does not seem to obtain for most school choosers, with devoutly religious families the only major exception.

## 6.6 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have used both survey and interview evidence to examine four arguments in favour of school choice: that people want it, that they enjoy it, that they feel empowered by it and that it enhances their freedom/autonomy.

In terms of fulfilling desires, I have shown that an overwhelming majority of families in both Scotland and England want to choose their schools. In most cases, this is because they believe choice will enable them to get a place at a better school. However, a non-negligible minority (perhaps between a fifth and a third in England, and somewhat lower in Scotland) care strongly about choice for intrinsic reasons, because they value having control over the process, and many others place some weak intrinsic value on choice. At the same time, people's strong instinctive support for school choice in theory must be placed in the context of their more considered views. On reflection, support for school choice cools somewhat when people consider trade-offs with other things they value, such as reducing inequality and segregation, retaining a link between neighbourhood schools and the local community and ensuring all students get a broad-based generalist education.

I have shown that elements of choosing a school can be enjoyable for many families, and that in general school choice is more enjoyable in England than in Scotland. School visits can be fun for parents and children alike, and people seem to like learning about schools and the education system. However, it is important not to overstate how enjoyable school choice is. Only around 15% of parents rate it as highly enjoyable, and in interviews enthusiasm is rather qualified: choice is only "quite", "vaguely" or "a little bit" enjoyable.

While a clear majority of parents in both England and Scotland believe they have adequate choice over secondary schools, it is not clear that choice reforms have succeeded in empowering

families. In my interviews, English families were more cynical, fatalistic and disempowered than their Scottish counterparts. I have suggested six possible reasons why greater formal choice in England has not led to higher satisfaction. Two of these relate to differences in attitude: Scottish families place less value on choice and are more likely to be contented with their local catchment school. It should be noted, however, that such attitudes may be shaped or influenced by policy, responding to signals from government about how families ought to behave in the educational market. The other four explanations relate directly to policy: the level of choice offered in England goes ‘above and beyond’ what many families want or expect, whereas Scottish system offers just enough choice for most; the ‘efficacy’ of choice (the expected success of applications) is lower in England; choice carries greater uncertainty for English families; and the rhetoric in England seems to raise expectations above what is delivered.

I have suggested that in the vast majority of cases, the interest at stake is not significant enough for school choice to make a substantial contribution to freedom or autonomy – it does not have sufficient “narrative significance” or matter enough to people’s “plan of life”. The most notable exception is families with strong religious commitments that they believe can only be met through faith schooling – although it should be noted that such families appear to represent a minority of those opting for faith schools. However, insofar as autonomy is associated with the anti-paternalistic idea of self-government, preventing parents from exercising school choice may be seen as demeaning or disrespectful because parents express a great deal of self-confidence in their judgements on the issue.

## 7. Are People Worse Off for Having School Choice?

The previous chapter considered potential intrinsic benefits of secondary school choice in England and Scotland. In this chapter, I turn to the potential intrinsic costs. The basic format of the chapter is the same. In each section, I take a possible disadvantage of choice: opportunity costs, mental conflict, pressure, regret and unrealistic expectations. Drawing on the survey and interviews, I consider the evidence as to whether these costs obtain, further explicate where they come from and what they look like in practice, and try to provide a sense of their magnitude. In each case, I also compare and contrast experiences in England and in Scotland. In each section, I begin with the interview evidence and supplement it with survey data. Wherever I draw attention to a difference in the survey between two groups of parents, it is statistically significant at the 5% level unless stated, and full weighted and unweighted results with standard errors are reported in appendix H.

For the most part, I follow the framework set out in chapter 3. However, I go beyond it in the first and last sections of the chapter. In 7.1, I consider general negative emotions, particularly stress and anxiety, that were not linked to a proximate cause. The rest of the chapter tries to explain the reasons for such negative feelings. In 7.7, I consider a drawback of choice that we did not encounter in chapter 3, but which emerged as extremely significant in the course of my interviews: the uncertainty involved with school choice.

### 7.1 General Negative Emotions – Stress and Anxiety (Affective Theories)

#### *7.1.1 Interview Findings*

One of the most striking features of the interviews was how frequently and spontaneously English families would express negative sentiments. I typically started the interview with a general question about how they had found the process of choosing a school. Several parents – in some cases before I could even get the question out, would launch into descriptions of how stressful and anxiety-provoking it all was:

Me: *So you're choosing a school now, presumably putting in the application form -*  
Zofia (mother, Ipswich): *It's really stressful to be honest. Choosing the right school, it's horrible to be honest.*

Me: *The application deadline is October 31<sup>st</sup>. So cast your mind back about 12 months -*

Khalida (mother, Camden): *It was a nightmare.*

Me: *Oh yeah? Why do you say it was a nightmare?*

Khalida (mother, Camden): *Well, when it comes to picking a school, it's a huge decision to take.*

Me: *We're about a month on now, I guess, from when the application forms went in. How did you both find the process?*

Katy (mother, Camden): *Stressful. It's quite frantic*

*"I found the whole process quite stressful and it's still stressful"* (Samantha, mother, Camden)

Me: *How have you found the process so far?*

Graeme (father, Camden): *A bit – it's a bit annoying that there has to be a process. It's quite – I would have difficulty explaining it to someone else.*

Such views were expressed regularly over the course of my interviews with English families:

*"I am quite anxious. I'm trying not to think about it"* (Marie, mother, Ipswich)

*"Worry is probably...I'm not sure, I'm probably beyond worry. I think I've gone through all the worries."* (Harry, father, Ipswich)

*"it was quite stressful actually, at times. Yeah, yeah, I would say. For a week or so it was actually quite stressful"* (Jane, mother, Ipswich)

The apparent strain of choosing for English parents was reflected in the relief expressed by those interviewed after the application had been submitted:

*"Once the decision was made, for me anyway, I was quite relieved I have to say...I am glad it's over just because it was stressful and it's done now."* (Charlotte, mother, Camden)

*"Once that form went in it was a relief because I thought 'it's done now, the decision's made'."* (Jill, mother, Ipswich)

*"I'm feeling a little bit better now because I've got a few weeks of thinking it's done."* (Yvonne, mother, Camden)

*"I definitely was happy when it was all over."* (Ioanna, mother, Camden)

In general, Scottish parents I spoke to were more relaxed about school choice. Whereas 50% (14/28) of English parents picked the 'Stressful' card in the card sort task, only 20% (6/30)

Scottish parents did.<sup>22</sup> The tallies were closer for the ‘Anxious’ card, selected by 39% (11/28) English parents and 33% (10/30) Scottish parents. However, these anxieties were typically more related to general worries about the transition to secondary school, rather than the school choice process per se. The main exception was parents making placing requests or actively choosing between two catchment schools, some of whom described the process in similar terms to their English counterparts:

*“it was quite stressful that, because it was, again, so much going on. And anxious, because I think you're just really anxious about making the right choice”* (Lisa, mother, Edinburgh)

*“I just found it all very frustrating and stressful”* (Flora, mother, Scotstown)

Most parents made concerted efforts to protect their children from the negative aspects of choice. In the card sort task, 57% (4/7) of students in Scotland chose ‘Anxious’ compared to 45% (5/11) of students in England, but again this anxiety was typically more about the transition to secondary school more generally than specifically choosing a school. However English students were more likely to say the ‘Stressed’ card applied to them: five of the eleven (45%) English interviewees did so, compared to just one (14%) in Scotland:

*“I try not to think about it because it often gets me a bit worried... and then I feel a bit anxious because I'm wondering about which school I'm going to be going to.”* (William, student, Camden)

*“I was a bit anxious about it.”* (Melissa, student, Camden)

Me: *And how do you think [son] has found it, in terms of all of these things?*

Marie (mother, Ipswich): *I think it's increased his anxiety levels.*

*“it was quite stressful and when it ended I felt really relieved.”* (Donny, student, Ipswich)

## 7.12 Survey Findings

The survey confirms that secondary school choice is more stressful and anxiety-provoking for parents in England than in Scotland. Figures 7.1 and 7.2 show that around a quarter of parents in England were highly stressed and anxious (8+ out of 10), compared to around one in seven (12-15%) in Scotland. By contrast, over a third of Scottish parents reported low stress and anxiety (0-2 out of 10) from school choice, compared to just over a fifth in England. On average,

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<sup>22</sup> Though I interviewed parents from 27 English families, Jill and Harry in Ipswich were interviewed separately, and so there were 28 card sort tasks.

English parents rated the stressfulness of school choice as 5.2 out of 10 and their anxiousness as 5.3. Parents in Scotland were over a full point lower on the scale on average, at 4.0 for both. Though we should be careful in making inferences assuming the cardinality of these scales, these findings imply Scottish parents are around a third less stressed or anxious on average.

Figure 7.1: “To what extent did you find the process of choosing a school stressful?”

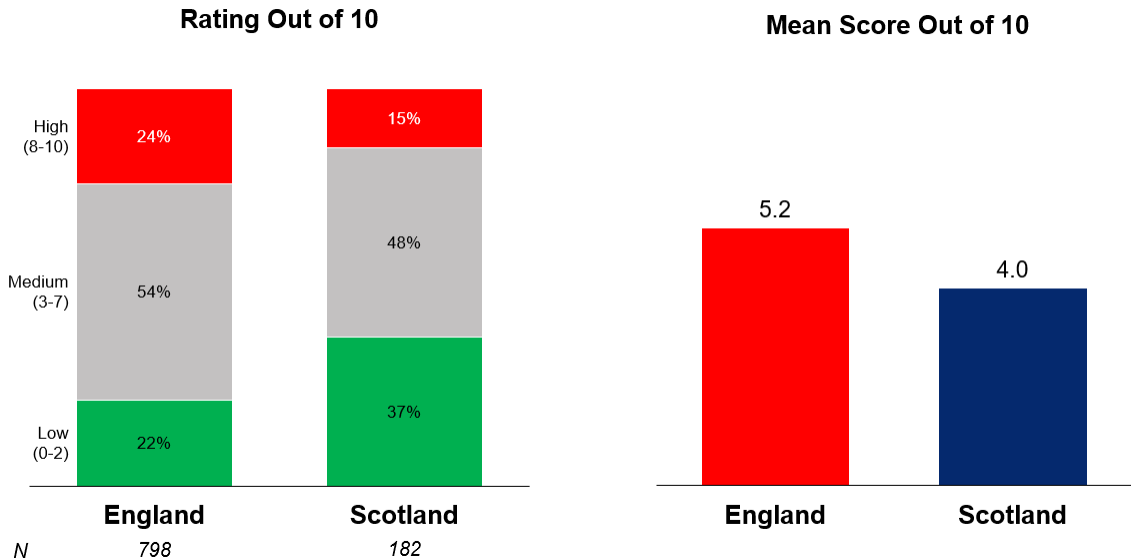
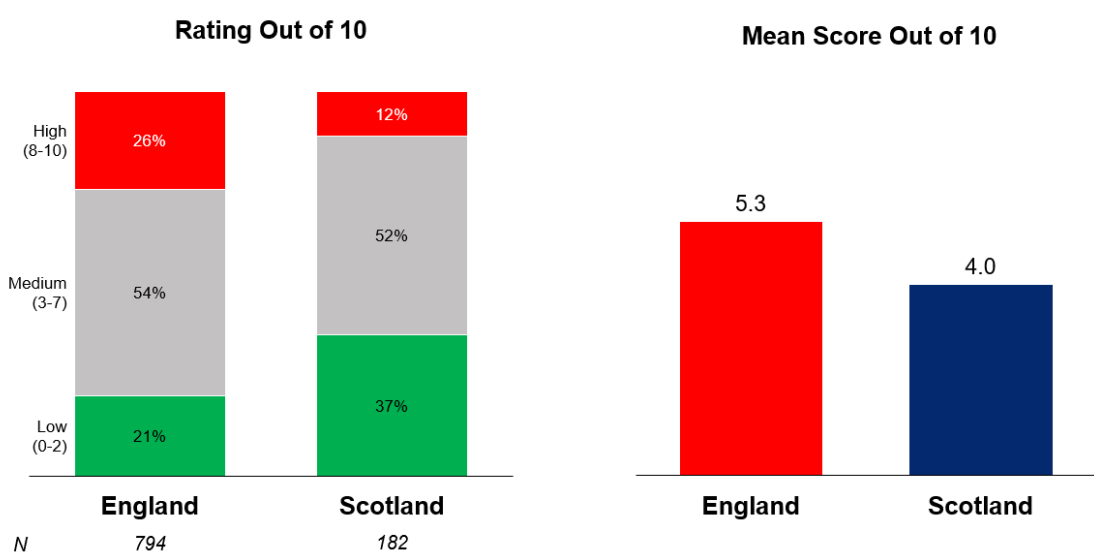


Figure 7.2: “To what extent did you find the process of choosing a school anxious?”



The survey also confirms stark differences in the experiences of Scottish parents, depending on whether they made a placing request or not. Figures 7.3 and 7.4 suggest that parents in Scotland who make a placing request experience a comparable level of stress and anxiety to their English counterparts, with between a fifth and a quarter reporting high stress and anxiety. By contrast,

only one in ten Scottish parents that did not make a placing request gave high stress and anxiety scores, and over 40% gave low scores. As a result, average stress and anxiety scores were much lower for parents that accepted their catchment school – 3.6 out of 10, compared to 5.3 (stress) and 5.7 (anxiety) for parents that did make a placing request.

Figure 7.3: “To what extent did you find the process of choosing a school stressful?” – Scotland only (unweighted)

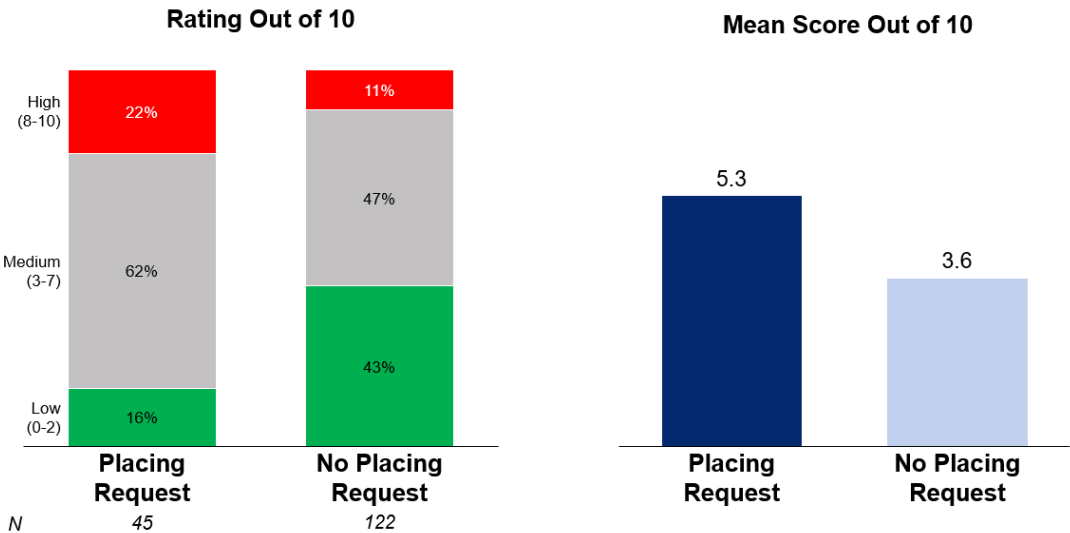
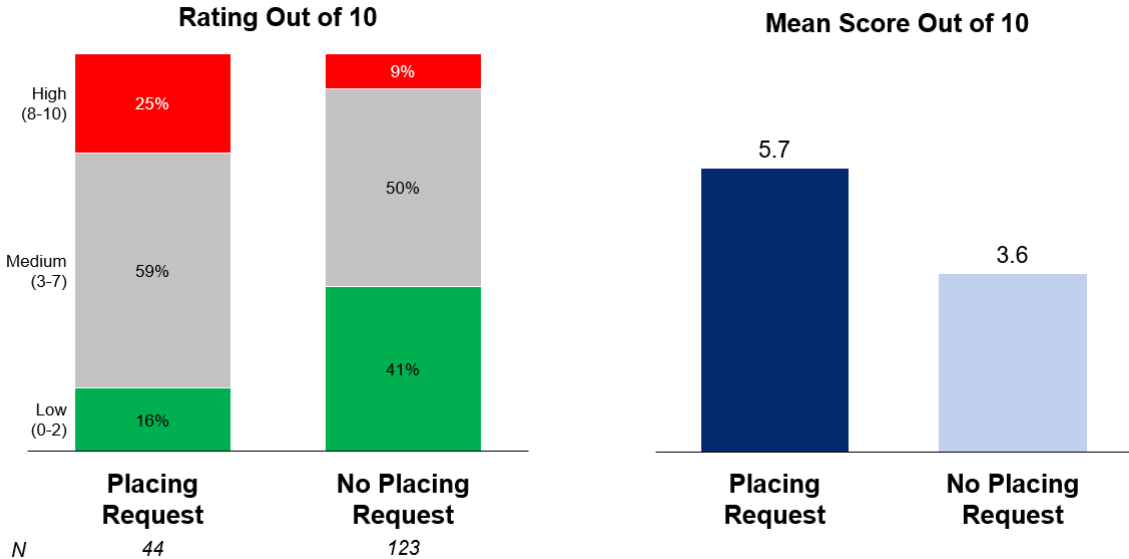


Figure 7.4: “To what extent did you find the process of choosing a school anxious?” – Scotland only (unweighted)





### 7.13 Conclusion

A substantial minority of parents experience negative emotions while choosing a secondary school. This minority is perhaps twice as large proportionately in England than in Scotland: around a quarter of English parents find school choice highly stressful and anxiety-provoking, compared to around one in seven Scots. Within Scotland, parents that make a placing request have a more stressful and anxious time of it than those that do not. For the most part, children are protected from such worries, but English children appear to suffer more than their Scottish counterparts. The following sections seek to explain what it is about school choice that is so stressful and anxiety-provoking, and how choice undermines subjective welfare more broadly.

## 7.2 Does Choosing Have Substantial Opportunity Costs? (Affective theories)

High among the costs of school choice are the demands it places on families in terms of time and mental energy.

### 7.21 Thinking About School Choice in Advance

In both countries, there are families that start planning for secondary school well in advance. In my interviews, I encountered some parents that did so soon after birth, and others that considered the ramifications for secondary schools when choosing a primary:

Me: *When did you first start thinking about secondary schools for Ellie [daughter]?*

Brigitte (mother, Camden): *Unfortunately, I think nearly after she was born.*

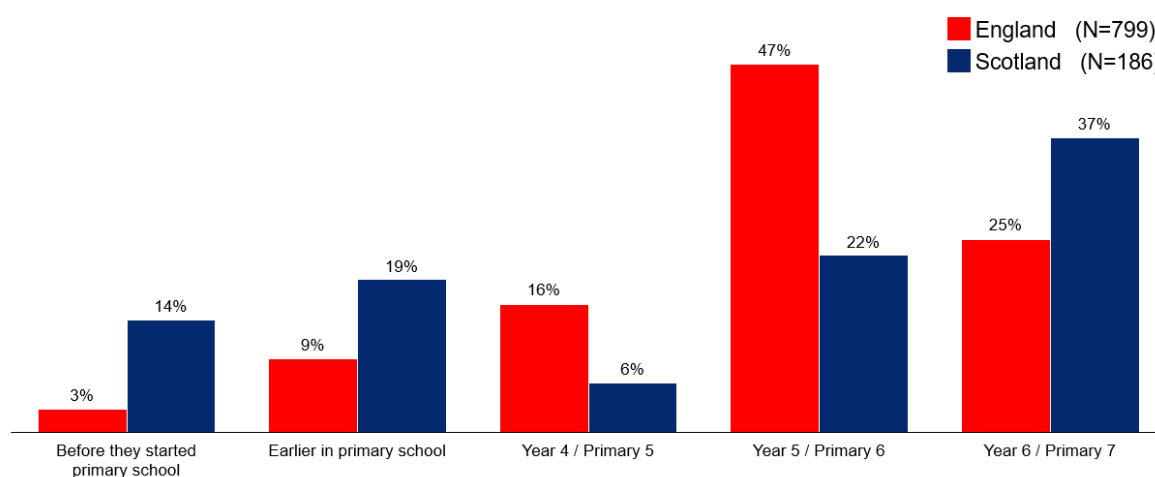
*"I've been thinking about this probably when I was pregnant. I've been anxious about it from then."* (Samantha, mother, Camden)

*"We started thinking about secondary school pretty much soon after he was born."* (Iona, mother, Scotstown)

*“So we didn't visit the secondary school but when we were choosing the primary school, we visited four or five of them or something to choose. Really to think ahead for the nursery, thinking about the primary school and what it means for the secondary school.” (Daniela, mother, Edinburgh)*

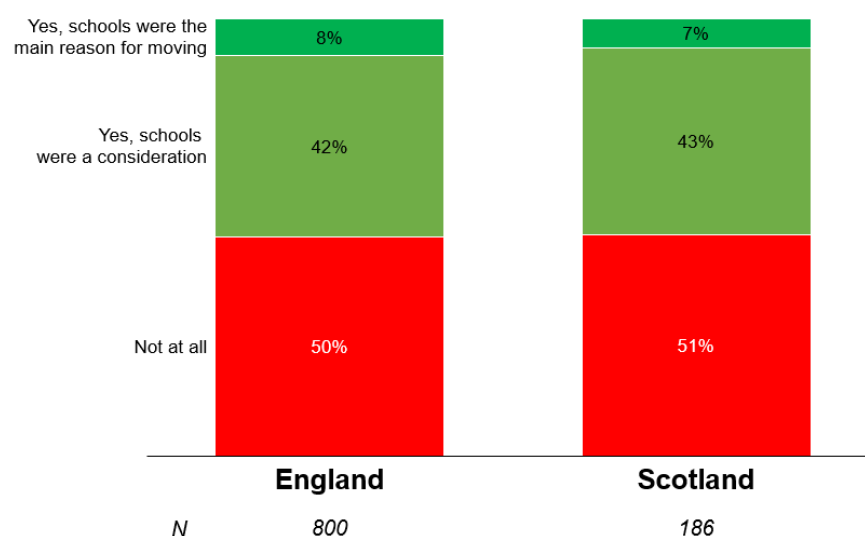
The survey shows that most parents start thinking about secondary school prior to the final year of primary. However, Scottish parents are more likely to start earlier, as figure 7.5 shows: 14% of parents in Scotland said they were considering secondaries before their child started primary, compared to 3% in England, and 33% of Scottish parents had done by the early years of primary school, compared to 12% in England.

Figure 7.5: “When did you first start thinking about which secondary school your child would attend?”



One possible explanation for this difference might be that the Scottish system incentivises parents to choose secondary schools by moving house when their children are younger, whereas English parents may have greater opportunity to exercise choice through the formal application process when their children are older. Yet as figure 7.6 shows, parents in England were no less likely to say that they moved to be nearer certain schools. In both countries, half of parents say that they at least considered schools when moving, with 7% of Scottish and 8% English parents saying that schools were their primary motive for moving.

Figure 7.6: “Was your decision to live in your current neighbourhood influenced by the schools in the area?”



These numbers tell us two things. First, for many families, in both England and Scotland, the process of choosing a school is wrapped into to the decision of where to live, occurring quite separately from the formal process of making applications. Second, ‘choice’ through residential mobility is often a fuzzy, imprecise process. Consistent with the survey, in my interviews I often found that school catchments were a consideration when moving house. However, it was not very common for parents to pick a specific school and move to try and secure a place there. Rather, it was more typical for them to move to a ‘desirable’ area, where they assumed that the schools (often multiple possible schools) would be good:

Lisa (mother, Edinburgh): *We used to be on the other side of Edinburgh in [neighbourhood], we wanted a bigger house because knew we were going to have more kids some at point as well. So yeah, it was definitely a deciding factor, the area and the schools within the area where a massive factor*

Me: *And was that specific schools, or just kind of -*

Lisa: *Not specific schools as such, just that we knew this was a nice area and that it had good schools to choose from.*

*“Our house, where it is, has been in both [School A] or [School B’s] catchment areas. Both those schools are very good.”* (Joe, father, Edinburgh)

*“To be honest, [School A] was my first choice, but [we moved to the catchment for School B] just the houses and what you could get with what you could afford.”* (Lalitha, mother, Scotstown)

This fuzziness explains why my survey indicates a higher proportion of parents engage in choice through moving than previous studies. The proportion of parents that moved primarily for a

school in England – 8% – is at the lower end of Francis & Hutchings’ (2013, 25) 8-18% range, but more in line with Montacute & Cullinane’s (2018, 22) 1-11%. However, my estimate that 42% of parents took schools into consideration when choosing an area to live is higher than previous estimates: 4-14% (Montacute and Cullinane 2018, 22), 22% (Coldron et al. 2008, 141), 12-32% (Francis and Hutchings 2013, 25). The discrepancy may be down to subtle differences in question wording and interpretation. The Sutton Trust surveys seem to be asking more about moves driven and motivated by school choice (the question they ask is “Which of the following have you ever done to get your child(ren) into a school?”), whereas my phrasing is more open to parents whose moves were prompted by other reasons, but considered the implications for schools among other factors. Coldron et al ask whether parents had taken catchment areas into account in their *last* move. By contrast, my survey question allows for the possibility that schools were a consideration in earlier house moves and not just the most recent one, and also allows for a more general awareness of schools than the more informed research that ‘catchment areas’ invokes. All this suggests that 50% is the upper bound of parents that exercise choice through moving, and that many of these parents may be considering schools only in a very loose way.

## 7.22 *The Formal Process of Choosing a School*

When it comes to the formal process of choosing a school, the difference between England and Scotland is far greater. Many of the families I spoke to in Scotland accepted their allocated catchment school automatically, without much reflection, debate or consideration:

*“It’s not choosing a school, it’s just a natural progression.”* (Wendy, mother, Dundee)

*“it’s not something you give serious consideration to personally, so it’s more just a case of the passage of time that was the school she was going to.”* (Alastair, father, Edinburgh)

*“we just kind of assumed she was going to [school A]. There was never any discussion.”* (Andrea, mother, Edinburgh)

*“I’ve never really questioned it. Me and my husband never sat and said ‘are we going to go here, are we going to choose somewhere else?’”* (Shona, mother, Scotstown)

*“It certainly wasn’t time consuming because it’s taken none...we’ve done nothing really, apart from sign a form saying [daughter’s] going to [School A], happy days!”* (Jenny, mother, Scotstown)

Such an approach was far rarer in England. Every parent I spoke to in Camden considered multiple schools. In Ipswich, three of the parents I spoke to said they had defaulted to the nearest schools for their older children:

*“I don't think with [older son] there was any question of him really going anywhere else because we didn't have any other experience and also it's so close to us.”* (Jane, mother, Ipswich)

*“Because I was so young and I didn't drive and I suppose that was convenient that he just went to the local school.”* (Linda, mother, Ipswich)

Sandra (mother, Ipswich): *Every single time I have used the application process I've put one choice down, even for the older two.*

Me: *But in those cases it was the -*

Sandra: *Feeder school and there was no danger of them not getting it so what's the point of busting a gut to have choice two and choice three.*

In all three cases, they made more active choices for their younger children. Jane and Linda both suggested they had been somewhat naïve in failing to research their options for their older children. Sandra said that while her older children had been content with their local school, her youngest son had decided from the outset he wanted to go elsewhere.

The survey confirms that half of Scottish parents only consider the one school, compared to 21% of English parents, as figure 7.7 shows. Even when they considered an alternative to their zoned school, Scottish families typically only considered the one: 35% of parents said that they considered a total of two schools. Overall, only 15% of parents in Scotland considered more than two schools, compared to 45% of parents in England. The average number of schools considered was 2.6 for parents in England, compared to 1.7 in Scotland.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Calculated by attributing 5.5 schools to parents who said they considered 5-6, 8.5 to those who said 7-10, and 11 to those who said 11+.

Figure 7.7: “How many secondary schools did you consider for your child?”

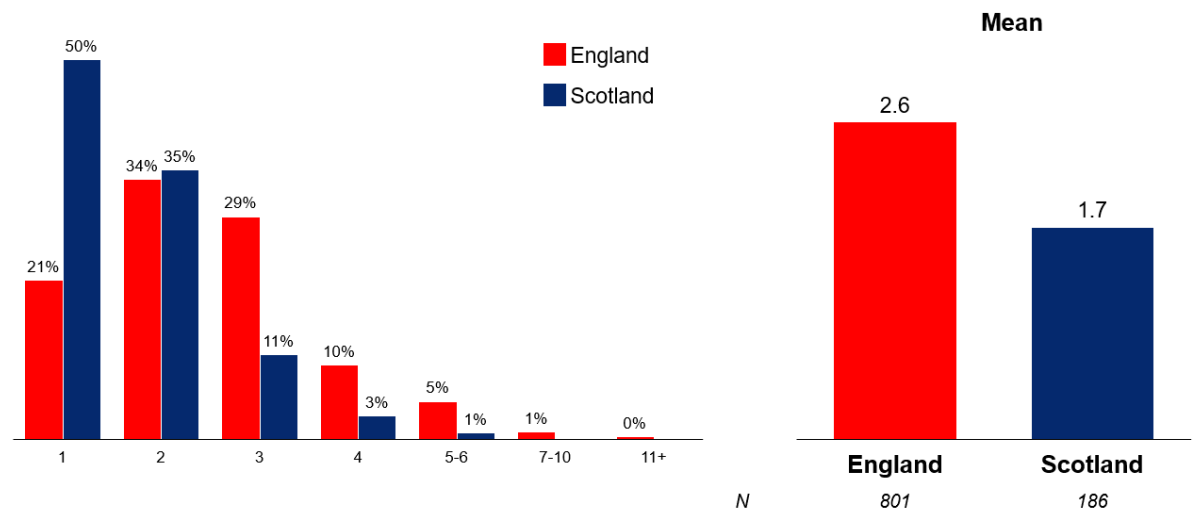
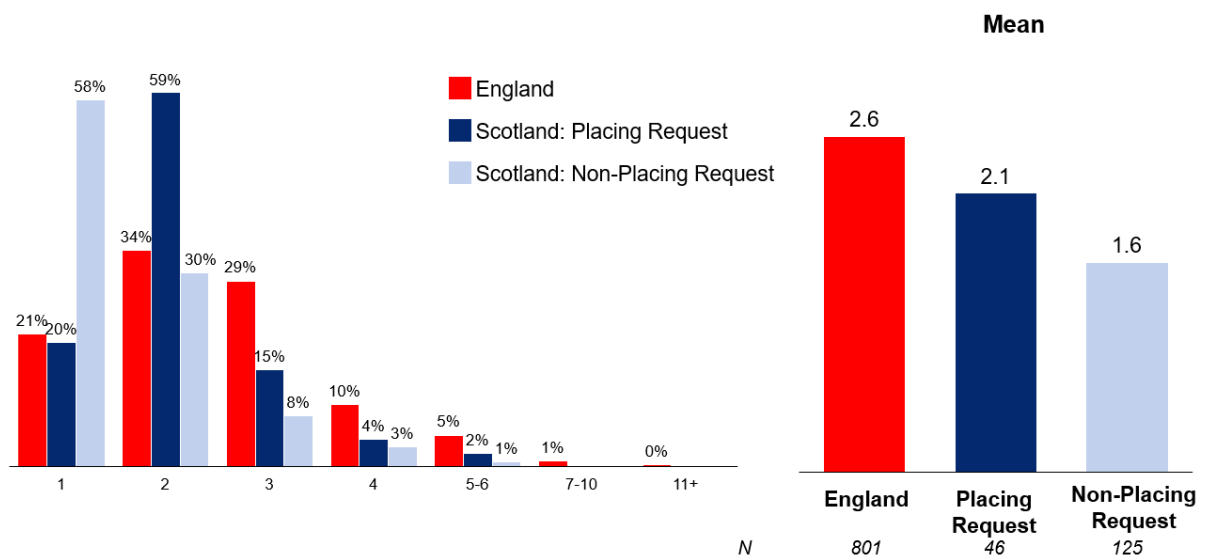


Figure 7.8 shows that Scottish parents that make a placing request consider an average of 2.1 schools each, in between the overall averages for Scotland and England. Indeed, a clear majority of these parents – 59% - consider exactly two schools. Stripping out parents that made placing requests, the proportion of Scottish parents that only consider the one school rises to 58%.

Figure 7.8: “How many secondary schools did you consider for your child?” (unweighted)



English parents also tend to research their options in greater depth. Figure 7.9 shows the proportion of parents in the survey that reported using different sources of information to find out about secondary schools. While a large majority of parents in England – 80% - say they attended school visits, only around half of those in Scotland (51%) did so. Ofsted reports (58%)

and school prospectuses (47%) were also heavily utilised in England. However, their equivalents in Scotland (inspection reports) were only used by a fifth of parents – perhaps because there is less of an incentive to make these available and user friendly than in England. Word of mouth was an important source of information in both countries, but even so, more English parents reported speaking to other parents to learn about schools. Interestingly, Scottish parents were more likely to report using online resources, such as local authority websites. This may reflect the greater role of local authorities in the Scottish school system and the relative lack of formal information sources. In line with previous research (Montacute and Cullinane 2018), the survey found that league tables were not among the leading sources of information in either country. However, given that league tables in Scotland are unofficial and not endorsed by the Scottish government, it is perhaps surprising that 20% of Scottish parents nevertheless claim to use league tables in their deliberations – just 10 percentage points fewer than in England, where league tables are officially sanctioned.

Figure 7.9: “Which of the following have you ever used to find out about a possible school for your child?”

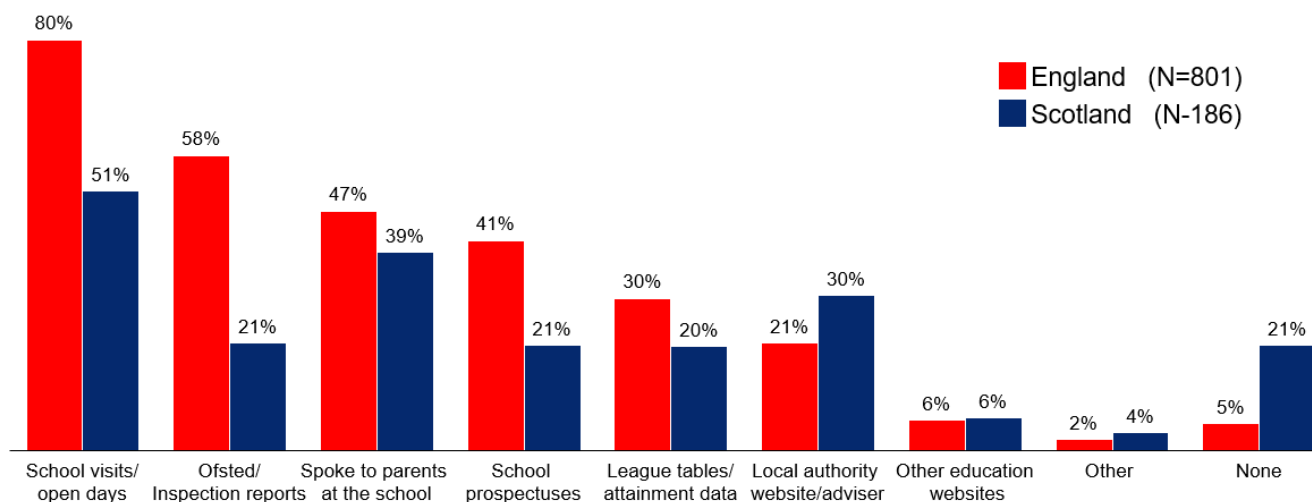
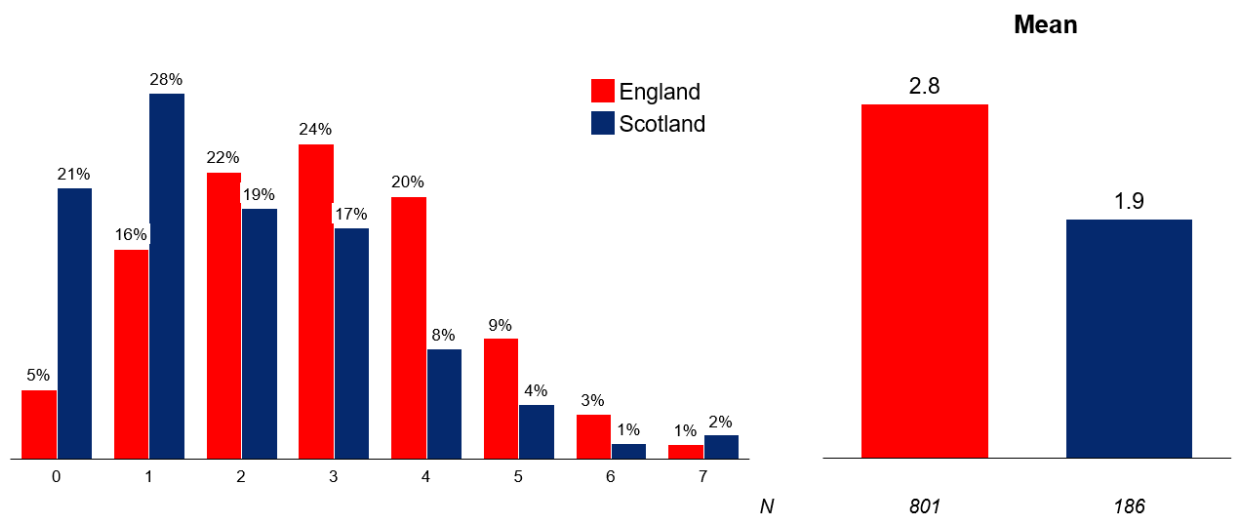


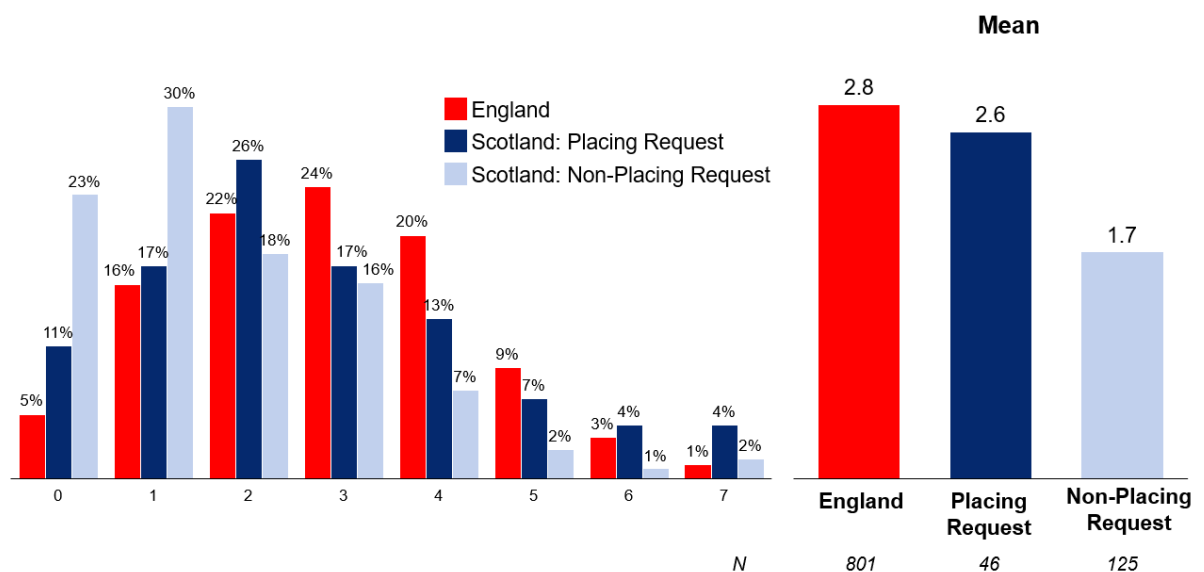
Figure 7.10 shows that parents in England use more sources of information. On average, English parents use 2.8 different sources, whereas Scottish parents use 1.9. Around a fifth of Scottish parents claim to do no research at all, compared to 5% of parents in England.

Figure 7.10: Number of sources of information used (from list in figure 7.9)



Again, parents that made placing requests were in between English parents and their fellow Scots, with 2.6 sources of information used on average.

Figure 7.11: Number of sources of information used (from list in figure 7.9, unweighted)



Admittedly, these are rather crude measures of intensity of research. A parent saying that they used school visits to inform their judgement does not tell us how many schools they visited. Saying they used Ofsted reports does not tell us how closely or perfunctorily they studied them. However, my interviews also suggest that the research process is more involved in England than in Scotland. It was striking that the phrase ‘no brainer’ came up repeatedly North of the border – for many parents there was little need to do detailed research because the choice of school was obvious:



*"I knew exactly, exactly knew where I was wanting her to go, and with [son] as well it was a no-brainer, it was a definite."* (Daphne, mother, Scotstown)

*"It certainly wasn't difficult, it was a bit of a no-brainer"* (Jenny, mother, Scotstown)

*"No brainer. I didn't really think about it in any more depth. You know, it's a brilliant school, it's closer, and it's brand new."* (Joe, father, Edinburgh)

*"But just because [School A] rates so highly. The facilities seem so amazing. It was just kind of just, didn't bother thinking too much about alternatives."* (Cheryl, mother, Edinburgh)

*"We just accepted he's going to [School A], end of story. There's never really been any question of that was where he was going"* (Victoria, mother, Dundee)

In other cases, the 'research' process was fairly cursory - a visit to the catchment school, or a few discussions with relatives, friends and neighbours to confirm that the school was, in fact, satisfactory:

*"it was just a check to say are we happy and was it the right direction? And the answer was yes."* (Frank, father, Edinburgh).

*"our default position will be, we'll go with the local secondary and we'll see how it goes...The assurance came from the engagement of the school, and then peers."* (Fred, father, Scotstown)

*"You're sending your child off to a new – you imagine horror – place. Then you go in and meet the people and you say actually it's not that bad."* (Sarah, mother, Dundee)

Similarly, for most of the Scottish children the transition to the catchment secondary was unquestioned:

*"I think she [daughter] was kind of like, that's where she was going, unless she saw something that made her not want to go. She was going there with her friends, but if she went there and said 'I really don't like this' then she would have come to me and said 'I really don't like it'."* (Sarah, mother, Dundee)

Me: *Are you aware of the option of other high schools other than [catchment school]? Or is it always kind of obvious?*

Lauren (student, Edinburgh): *Well, I knew that, like, I never really wanted to go to a different one. Because [older sister and brother] go here I know bits about it.*

Me: *So it was kind of the obvious one.*

Lauren: *Yeah.*

For a significant minority of families in England, choosing a school is similarly straightforward. As we have seen, 21% of parents consider only the one school, and 21% of parents use no more than one source of information. A further 34% consider only two schools. Yet for most English parents, school choice is a bigger undertaking than for their Scottish counterparts. The months of September and October - the period between the end of the summer holidays and the school application deadline - are a particularly busy and intense period without any analogue in Scotland. It is common for families to do two (or even three) 'cycles' of searching – an initial set of visits to identify and shortlist schools in autumn of years 4 or 5, and a more thorough research process to finalise the rank ordering in year 6:

*"We've been visiting schools in Camden for a long time because I started when [daughter] was in year 4 and I suppose I've been going every year since then. Six years of visiting schools." (Ruth, mother, Camden)*

*"I guess started thinking seriously in year 5, but I've given it a bit of thought in year 4 but I hadn't gone to see anything so I did most of my work year 5 for it." (Angela, mother, Camden)*

Indeed, as figure 7.5 shows, the majority of parents in England start delving into the question of school choice a year or two prior to submitting their applications: 16% in year 4 and 47% in year 5. Whereas 37% of Scottish parents leave off thinking about secondary schools until the final year of primary school, only 25% of English parents feel able to do the same.

### *7.23 Perceived Inconvenience of School Choice*

In the interviews, several families described the disruption caused by the process of choosing a school, particularly school visits. Many of these were held during the day, requiring the students to take time off school and the parents to take time off work. The children tended to see this as something of a treat:

Melissa (student, Camden): *I got to miss a lot of mornings off school.*

Michael (father, Camden): *You got to miss a lot of mornings off school, which you quite liked didn't you?*

For parents, by contrast, getting leave from work – sometimes taking as many as six half days in a matter of weeks – was less pleasant. At the same time, school visits held in the evenings

(and many families went to events both during the day and in the evenings) carried their own logistical challenges:

*"it's a six o'clock start, so it's a dash in quick, early tea, dash out. By the time you get back it's his bedtime, so it is just like rush rush rush rush rush."* (Sandra, mother, Ipswich)

*"I know it's only three evenings, but when you work full time then you've got to rush to an open evening after school and then we ended up spending about three hours at each one so trying to fit it into a busy life."* (Amy, mother, Ipswich)

*"We had to go on the website, find the open day, liaise with them, get registered, spend the evening there, leave work early, find someone to babysit her or she was coming with us. Yes, at the same time deal with their homework, you know, so very time consuming."* (Brigitte, mother, Camden)

*"There's an awful lot of schools to visit in a very short period of time. You're literally trying to have your day-to-day life. Kids are doing extracurricular activities and you know, life is really busy for a young person...you're trying to lead a very busy life and you're working and, you know, being there for everybody. It's quite hard and I mean, I guess that's why those two [the 'Difficult' and 'Time Consuming' cards] kind of really do fit together. Because it's difficult to ensure that you're really looking out there to cast your net as wide as possible, gather the information, to make the right informed decision. So I found, that it's important obviously, but it was quite challenging."* (Marion, Camden)

The impact this had varied between families. Angela, in Camden, was an extreme case: "I've finished a master's, but then I thought I would just not even bother to launch myself into full-time work again until I've made the decision just to work out what we needed to do". A number of parents remarked on how all-encompassing and wearying the autumn search is:

*"You literally have to cross out all your social engagements for the whole autumn term because you've got - going around open evenings is really tiring."* (Katy, mother, Camden)

*"I did feel like it sort of took over our lives for a couple of weeks."* (Amy, mother, Ipswich)

*"Absolutely shattering actually. One week we went to three open evenings and I was off work that week and if I'd been at work I would have been absolutely flat out because I was tired not being at work."* (Sandra, mother, Ipswich)

As the survey indicates, some families in Scotland – particularly those that made placing requests - found choosing a school similarly taxing. Pawel and Lizzie, both parents in Edinburgh, said that visiting out of catchment schools was time consuming. Lisa, trying to choose between her zoned Catholic and non-denominational secondaries, said of the decision "I feel like it took up

the whole of November and December”. Flora in Scotstown, who is a single mother, also struggled at times to cope with the demands of the process:

*“it was very much just me that was doing all the legwork as well, you know at some points you thought ‘if only somebody could come along and give me a bit of advice and tell me am I doing the right thing, am I doing the wrong thing, you know, I did find it a bit daunting”*

Despite these negative experiences, it is important to point out that many parents did not object to or resent the time commitment. For some that was because their particular circumstances eased the logistical challenges. For example, Yvonne, being self-employed, was able to arrange her work schedule around school visits and research. In other cases, this seems attributable to subjective differences in how onerous school choice is perceived to be – a time commitment that is burdensome and exhausting for one parent may be unproblematic for another. For instance, Ruth was keen to play it down: “I don't find it time consuming because it's a morning here and there”. In other cases, parents seemed loath to complain because researching schools is seen as a necessary activity, a discharge of their duty to their child:

Me: *Do you feel like it's taking up a lot of your time or do you...?*

Chanel (mother, Ipswich): *Well it has to really doesn't it? Because you're making that choice for your child. So I wouldn't say it's time consuming - I wouldn't say that at all, time consuming.”*

*“No, I kind of do that for everything anyway, I'm a bit of a details freak and I tend to do that with most stuff. It was time consuming, but it was not something I regret at all.”* (Lalitha, Scotstown)

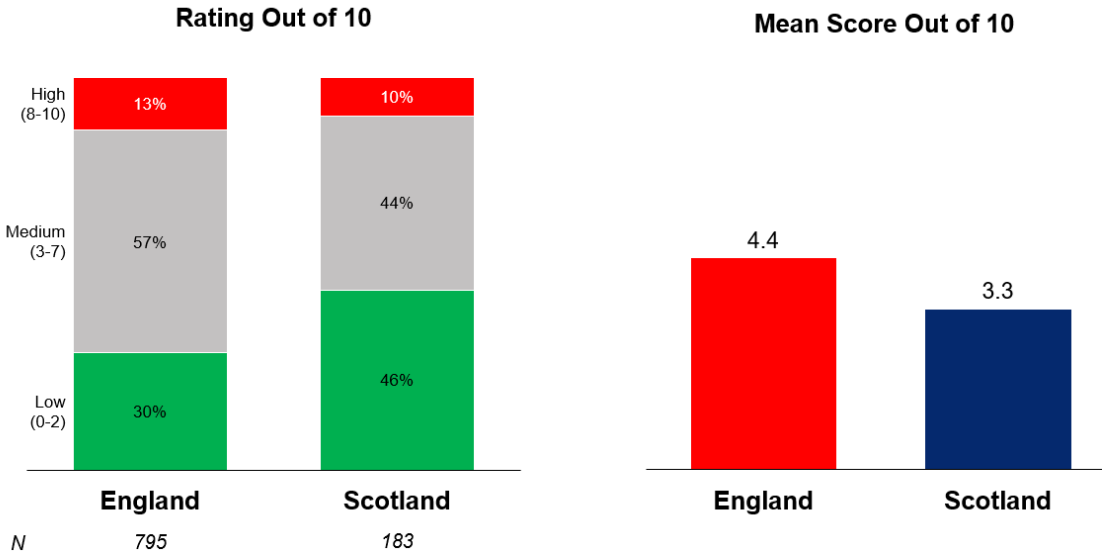
This attitude can be interpreted in different ways. On the one hand, it may be that choosing a school is such a high priority task that parents are willing to spend a lot of time on it, as they have nothing else more important they would rather do. Alternatively, it could be that because they see spending time on choice as obligatory, they do not feel able to complain about the amount of time they spend on it without sounding like a ‘bad parent’:

*“You have to put so much time into it as a parent. If you don't put that time into it then you're not bothered in your child's education, I would definitely say.”* (Khalida, Camden)

The survey shows that English parents rated the process of school choice as more time consuming and inconvenient – unsurprising, since as we have seen, they tend to research more schools in greater depth. Out of 10, where 10 represents extremely time consuming and

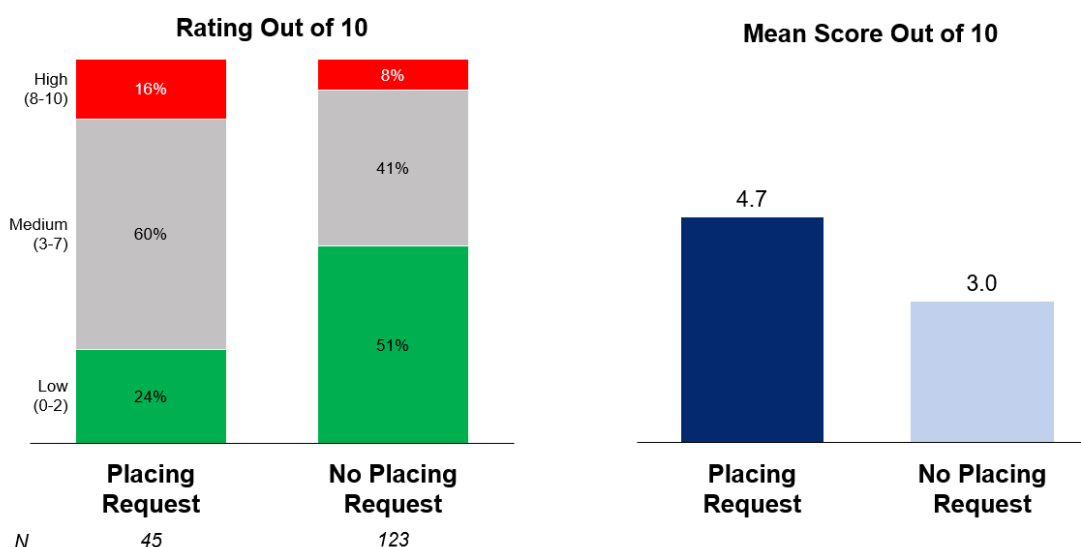
inconvenient, the average score among English parents was 4.4, whereas the average score for Scottish parents was 3.3. As figure 7.12 shows, 46% of Scottish parents rated the process as not very time consuming and inconvenient (0-2 out of 10), whereas the corresponding figure for English parents was 30%. Interestingly, there is a much smaller (and non-significant) gap at the higher end of the scale, with 13% of English parents rating it 8 or above, compared to 10% of Scottish parents. What this suggests is that the difference between England and Scotland is driven by the fact that more Scottish families find choosing a school quick and straightforward and more English families find it moderately inconvenient, but that there is little difference in terms of families finding it highly burdensome.

Figure 7.12: “To what extent did you find the process of choosing a school time consuming/inconvenient?”



The contrast is even starker when we distinguish between Scottish parents that did or did not make a placing request, as figure 7.13 shows. Fully half of parents that did not make placing requests rated the process as low for inconvenience. On average, parents that accepted their zoned school rated it as 3.0. By contrast, parents that did make a placing request found school choice comparably time consuming and inconvenient to the average parent in England, rating the process 4.7 out of 10.

Figure 7.13: “To what extent did you find the process of choosing a school time consuming/inconvenient?” – Scotland only (unweighted)



#### 7.24 Impact of Choice on Mental Energy

The opportunity cost of choice is not only in terms of time and energy, but also ‘mental space’. Yvonne in Camden described school choice as “something that consumed us the last year or so”, and according to Zofia in Ipswich “last six weeks it’s the main part of our lives”. Angela in Camden “thought it would be a relatively straightforward process, but it has actually taken a bit more thinking and thoughts than I had expected”. That means that mental energy that could be devoted to other tasks is focused on school choice: “it has taken up quite a big part of my brain power”.

This sense that parents in England have school choice constantly on their minds in the weeks leading up to the application deadline was reflected in the number of interviewees who described it as a dominant topic of conversation, foisted on anybody who would listen:

*“having had 500 conversations about it with other people over the last three months...anyone who stands still long enough because it's always the first thing on our mind.”* (Graeme, father, Camden)

*“For a couple of weeks it was all any of us could talk about whenever we went to a kid's party and other parents were there, that was the first thing we were all talking about.”* (Charlotte, mother, Camden)

*"It was constantly, constantly. My husband said 'you're just whining about it too much'."*  
(Khalida, mother, Camden)

*"I've been aware when talking to [partner], 'oh god, talking about schools again', but I know somebody who has been talking about schools for over a year and you're like 'oh my gosh, every time I see you you're obsessing about schools', it's like literally all they've been talking about for so long."* (Jill, mother, Ipswich)

The most extreme illustration of the mental toll of school choice was the example of Harry in Ipswich, who was homeless and in insecure employment, yet had his son's school choice added to his list of concerns. Even though "my day-to-day life is quite difficult and challenging and it consumes quite a lot of my time and my energy just getting through each day finding food, if I can get some work fine, finding somewhere to sleep, that kind of thing", "it's a large chunk of what's going on in my head at the moment making sure that he gets to the best school he possibly can...It's something that's in the back of my mind all the time". Worse still, the pressures in the rest of his life contributed to a sense of guilt that Harry wasn't doing enough: "it does weigh heavily on me sometimes I'm just so preoccupied just getting by day-to-day that it goes in the back of my mind and niggles me weighs me down as it were".

For Scottish parents, the transition to secondary school takes up less mental energy because it is typically more straightforward. The exception, again, is among parents that make placing requests or are undecided between their catchment options. For example, Lisa in Edinburgh said "I feel like we were thinking about it all the time".

The survey confirms that school choice loomed bigger in the minds of English parents than Scottish parents, and among parents that made placing requests than among those that did not. Asked to rate out of 10 how big a part of their life choosing a secondary school had been, where 0 represents 'I didn't choose/think about it at all', and 10 represents 'it was the main thing on my mind', the average score in England was 6.9, whereas in Scotland it was 5.9. Among Scottish parents, those that made a placing request the average score was 7.3, whereas for those that did not it was 5.6.

As figure 7.14 shows, 42% of English parents might be said to have been highly preoccupied by school choice, rating it 8 or more out of 10, compared to 31% of Scottish parents. As figure 7.15 shows, the comparable numbers are 46% for Scottish parents that made a placing request, and 26% for those that did not.

Figure 7.14: “While you were choosing a secondary school, how big a part of your life was the decision?”

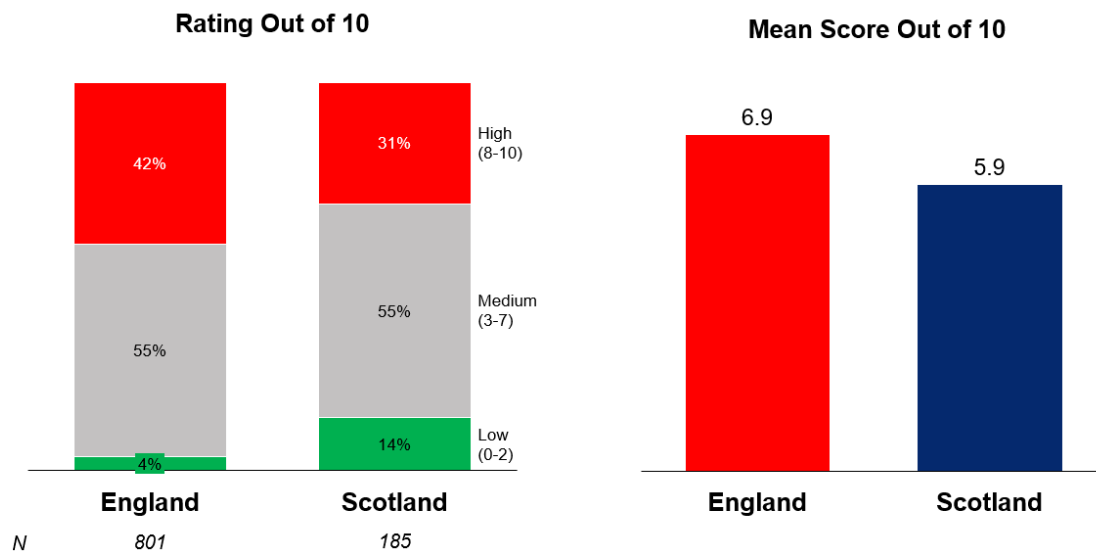
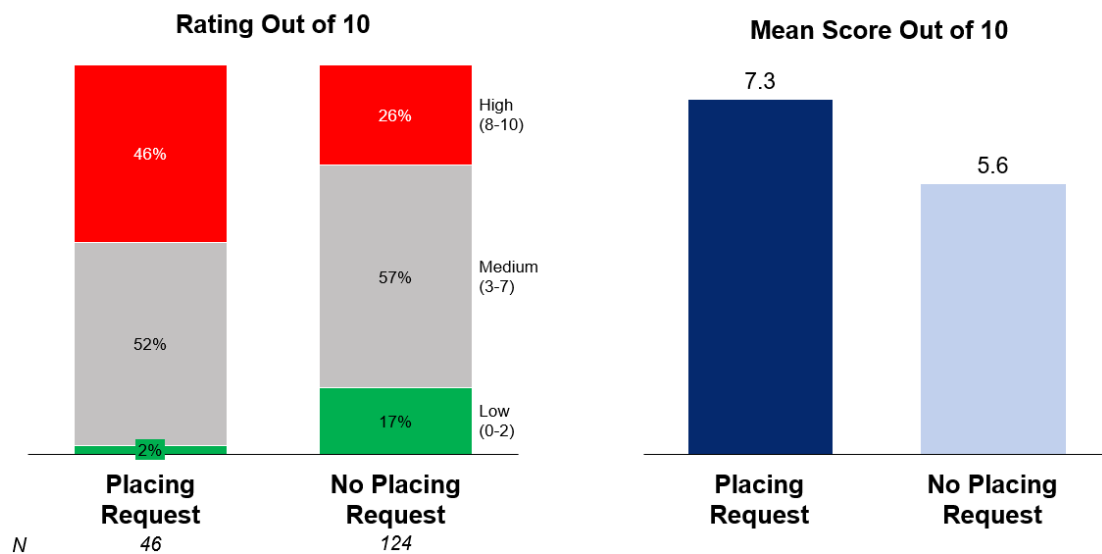


Figure 7.15: “While you were choosing a secondary school, how big a part of your life was the decision?” - Scotland only (unweighted)



### 7.3 Is Choosing Difficult? Does it Involve Trade-offs Producing Mental Conflict?

#### 7.31 Interview Findings

Accounts of the psychological costs of choice tend to portray it as *agonising*. That is, choosers are torn between similarly attractive or unattractive options, and the emotional turmoil comes



from the struggle to decide between them, recognising that every option comes with trade-offs. Some of the people I interviewed matched this description, but on the whole there were surprisingly few genuine dilemmas. Once people felt they had enough information about schools, they were generally confident and steadfast in their judgements. In fact, more commonly, the difficult part of choosing a school was the process before making a decision – finding, interpreting and processing the necessary information.

That is not to say families did not face tough decisions. For example, Angela in Camden found that different schools were better on different criteria – geographical convenience, exam performance and her impression of them from school visits: “they're all relatively close together so working out which one would be best in terms of a distance point of view. Some schools have got better results, but other schools have got a better gut feeling”. Similarly, Jill and her son Donny kept alternating their rank ordering of schools, based on each additional visit and discussion:

*“Every time we went to a school because I put the names of the schools on bits of paper and put them in the kitchen and moved them up and down as we went to see them as to how we liked them”* (Jill, mother, Ipswich)

*“I kept on changing my choice for which school I wanted to go to at the end”* (Donny, student, Ipswich)

In such cases, the indecision could have acute effects. Marie, a mother in Ipswich, kept second guessing herself: “I'm never really self-confident with any of my actions. I always query everything”. Zofia's flustered confusion was palpable in the interview:

*“Which is the best one, that's the pressure and you know it's not too much time and you know that you have to choose one. And you think, ‘this one is nice and this one is nice and this one is nice and that one is nice’ and you still think ‘So what should I do? How I should feel? I should ask or not?’”* (Zofia, mother, Ipswich)

Charlotte in Camden described the decision process in the most dramatic terms. Choosing a school, she told me, “really upset our equilibrium” such that “it was really deep in my psyche upsetting me in that way”. Indeed, “one night I actually didn't sleep”.

Where different family members had different preferences of school, this could lead to arguments. Eli described a school in Camden that he and his friends visited and liked, but which his mother disapproved of:

Eli: *I'm going to be honest. When we got back and had that argument it was horrible.*

Ruth: *We've had horrible arguments.*

Eli: *Went to bed, you know, mum didn't come tuck me up.*

While of course it is common for parents and children to have disagreements, it was clear from Eli and Ruth that school choice is more emotionally fraught than their typical rows:

Ruth: *It's probably a bit more painful, wouldn't you say?*

Eli: *It's more serious.*

Ruth: *Cos you feel whole futures are bound up in it and I think it's bigger than arguments about 'oh you haven't tidied your room' or 'you spent too long on Fortnite'. It does feel more serious and also irresolvable in a way because you can't particularly come to a compromise. So he wouldn't sit the test for [School A] so I accepted that but it still rankles. [mock outrage] It will forever. On my deathbed I'll bring it up!*

With active school choice rarer in Scotland, such dilemmas were predictably less common. Where they occurred, they were similarly tough to bear. Lisa in Edinburgh, weighing up the decision between her zoned Catholic and non-denominational schools, described a similar back-and-forth to her English counterparts:

*"There was lots of things to kind of think about, lots of components. Yeab, to go into the - you know what, we did so many pros and cons lists it was unreal, and it just kept changing, and it was quite stressful"*

That indecision was felt just as strongly by Lisa's son Angus, despite her best efforts to protect and reassure him:

*"Actually for three months we were really, really stuck between the two... And my parents were saying, like, 'Oh it's OK, you don't need to feel stressed you don't need to', and that just made me more stressed."*

Similarly, Beverley in Edinburgh described the process of choosing between her catchment state school and a private secondary as "Anxious, because I have changed my mind practically every day".

In both cases, the parents observed that the angst, paradoxically, was a result of having such good options, and even suggested that they might have been better off with less choice:

*"I think, actually, probably would have been an easier decision if one of them hadn't had such a good reputation as the other. But they both did, they both came so highly recommended. That was actually what made it difficult to choose."* (Lisa, mother, Edinburgh)

*"I feel like I was really lucky. And I think that's probably made it more difficult. Both options would be really good schools. I wish there was one I could just write off as a bad option. But no, they're both really good."* (Beverley, mother, Edinburgh)

Overall, though, such dilemmas were the exception. In fact, several families reported finding the decision straightforward:

*"I think it's quite easy to decide."* (Dimitrios, father, Camden)

*"So far it's been easy finding the number one."* (Harry, father, Ipswich)

*"For me it was very clear, no difficulty."* (Ioanna, mother, Camden)

In fact, I was surprised by how rarely families seemed to confront genuine trade-offs between the schools they considered, how often their preferred school was described as dominant across every criterion. Such perceptions may be accurate, but it was striking that families in the same area sometimes regarded different schools as obviously superior. I suspect there was an element of confirmation bias in these judgements: at some point, parents formed an impression that a particular school was 'good' and interpreted all further evidence in light of this impression, giving extra credence to evidence of the school's quality and playing down evidence to the contrary.

Yet many of those who said that the decision was straightforward and clear cut also told me that the process of choosing had been stressful. In some cases, this was because while the first preference school was clear, it was harder to decide on second, third and lower preferences: "The website opened and I just put [school X] first. Then on the last day before I submitted I put the rest" (Ioanna, mother, Camden).

Another reason is that parents often found it difficult to find reliable, trustworthy information on which to judge schools, and struggled to make sense of, synthesise and reconcile the various competing sources of information that they had. According to Katy, "from my point of view most stressful is the amount of information you had to process from different sources". Over the course of her interview, described in more detail in chapter 9, Zofia in Ipswich vividly displayed the overwhelming whirl of confusion that this can produce: "in some moment I was so so so struggled, so dizzy with so many information, too much information for me."

Parents I spoke to returned to three structural difficulties with evaluating and interpreting school information. The first is the fundamental epistemic challenge that the causal impact of a

particular school on a particular student is unknowable. While information is available at an aggregate or average level, it cannot be personalised to their child:

*"I think the question kind of presupposes that you can get information about a decision like this whereas I actually think it is so specific to the individual. It's not like, 'here is the information about the school and I can compare them', because you have to triangulate that with the personality of your child now and importantly projected forward for the next, like, six years, which I don't know what that's going to be like. I feel like it's partly why it's a ridiculous thing to have a system that's based on parents and/or children deciding at this point which school their child will go to. I don't feel like there is any amount of information that would equip me to make that decision."* (James, father, Camden)

*"Maybe if I could put her through both schools, come out at sixth form, I could say that actually they're completely different but at this point I can't see it."* (Michael, father, Camden)

*"There's just no point [looking at league tables]. I'm only concerned about my daughter's GCSEs at the end of the day. Overall, it wouldn't be what the rest of them get, it would be what did you get?"* (Khalida, mother, Camden)

The second issue is that the characteristics of schools are not stable from year to year. Senior management and teachers may change, the school's approach and culture may change, and student intakes may change. This is exacerbated by the fact that exam data, reputation and particularly inspection reports are typically a year or more out of date, while families need to forecast 5-7 years into the future for the whole length of student's tenure at the school.

*"You kind of don't know. One year it could be the school could be 'Good' by Ofsted and another year could be not good."* (Chanel, mother, Ipswich)

*"Schools are like clothes. Fashions come and go. There's not really a good or bad school really, they change so much."* (Eli, student, Camden)

*"That headteacher, she's obviously done a sterling job. What if someone comes along and poaches her, offers her more comfortable terms elsewhere, gives her a much bigger salary to go and run an easier to manage school somewhere closer to where she lives? She might be out tomorrow and then they won't be able to attract a replacement headmistress of similar calibre."* (Graeme, father, Camden)

Third, almost every source of information carries some degree of doubt and mistrust. This means that parents have to make tricky judgements about how much weight to put on different sources, given their limitations, and when to ignore them altogether. As Katy puts it:

*"I process information and data from different sources in my day job, but it was still quite challenging to look at it all because it's not just data that has its own caveats and things which have said already about results, but it's also you do also want to know about the so-called 'grey literature' of other people's opinions about a school, the Google reviews, everything, because from my point of view to know what other people have said - no matter how good, bad or in between - it helps form a decision and then you yourself have to take, the decision how much or little of that to actually believe."*

As we have seen, school visits are the most popular source of information about schools. Indeed, the families I interviewed did tend to find these the most useful way of evaluating their options. At the same time, several parents were concerned that these events were too short, similar, manufactured or stage managed to provide an accurate view of a school:

*"I don't think that teachers or heads being confident about showing the school around is a good measure in a way because they are so trained at maintaining a certain standard and showing certain things. It's their job, it's a PR job."* (Francesca, mother, Camden)

*"With the open day I think looking round the schools you get a feel for the actual schools but the presentation that the head gives at the open days in a way they're all the same and they're just spinning it out there."* (Amy, mother, Ipswich)

*"To be honest I do think that they are a bit of a waste of time. I think they're quite useful for the children to go to see the scale of it, but it's sales patter really, isn't it?"* (Angela, mother, Camden)

Misgivings about the reliability of word of mouth were even stronger, despite almost half of English parents and 40% of Scottish parents speaking to other parents to inform their choice. To a large extent this is because the rumour mill is often self-contradictory: different people may have wildly different perceptions of the same school. In general, those I interviewed tried not to rely too heavily upon the opinions of others, but found it difficult to tune them out entirely. In part, this is because such judgements frequently carry an implicit criticism that can seed a sense of doubt: if others reject your preferred school, it is natural for that to undermine your confidence in your judgement:

*"there's so little hard information, it's very fertile ground for any kind of rumour...I haven't been so aware of it in any other things that I've done, the influence of word of mouth. Just the fact that it's what other people's views are, however unfounded, is probably more important than any other factor."* (Graeme, father, Camden)

Eli (student, Camden): *There's a lot gossip about schools.*

Ruth (mother, Camden): *A lot of gossip. Everybody has opinions, often opposite and differing opinions so that's quite a hard field to navigate.*

*“just trying to take what other people say with a pinch of salt. Because every school, someone will tell you it's brilliant and someone will have some horror story about how we had to take their kids out of there for whatever reason. So you hear, like, good and bad stuff about every school.”* (Amy, mother, Ipswich)

Parents also had concerns regarding Ofsted reports – most commonly that school inspections took place too infrequently and so reports may not reflect the current quality of the school:

*“The only thing with Ofsteds is, is it what, four years, the main inspections? And Ofsted, it's four years out of date. I mean a school could change massively in four years.”* (Amy, mother, Ipswich)

*“when I looked into the Ofsted of [school] they actually haven't had a full Ofsted report in a long time. And they've just got this sort of ‘we'll only not give it an outstanding if somebody tells us otherwise’ which I wasn't expecting.”* (Charlotte, mother, Camden)

*“Ofsted doesn't necessarily get it right and what it doesn't reflect the atmosphere in the school.”* (Sandra, mother, Ipswich)

As in the survey, only a minority of parents I interviewed consulted league tables. Even those that do use them often treated such performance measures with some scepticism. In some cases, this was because of their complexity: “it's quite difficult to read the stats” (Samantha, mother, Camden). In others, it was because parents did not believe league tables took adequate account of school context:

*“they might have a massive GCSE pass rate because they've got lots of clever well looked after middle-class children there but that doesn't necessarily mean that a school that doesn't have really good result isn't a good school and isn't offering the best for all their pupils.”* (Jane, mother, Ipswich)

Most commonly, the perception was that performance measures are manipulated, particularly in school marketing materials:

*“And I know that numbers are a bit tricky, they could play around with them and sometimes the statistics they put there, unless you know the perspective of statistics, this could give you the wrong information...I mean, numbers, they don't lie, but you can play around with them.”* (Haile, father, Camden)

*“Statistic, that's another way of lying. I remember I learn statistics, I know how to build good statistics and good interpretation of some information in statistics and I know how it's looking and that is things that I know and understand it's good choosing good result of some research to showing you how something is the best. It's like a commercial, just a nice picture but that's not really true always.”* (Zofia, mother, Ipswich)

The difficulties of choosing a school seem to be less often about actually deciding between options, but about evaluating them in the first place. Unable to fully rely on school visits, inspections, word of mouth or league tables, collating and reconciling the different sources of information is a complex and tricky task. In Scotland, as we have seen, parents are less likely to seek such information out, and if they do so, it tends to be in a relatively light touch manner in order to confirm that their preferred school is indeed acceptable. Thus it is unsurprising that the process of choosing is less stressful and anxiety-provoking for Scottish families.

Those parents in Scotland that do want to make a comparative choice, for example, through a placing request, also had difficulties finding and interpreting relevant information:

Pawel (father, Edinburgh): *Not enough information and the information there is not very clear.*  
Daniela (mother, Edinburgh): *The only thing that I find confusing is we cannot actually clearly compare schools because, you know, it's just mainly about looking into the websites, asking other people, you wouldn't find a site or anything that will tell you what exactly the pros and cons of each school is and, yeah, that makes it more difficult.*

Scottish parents also lamented the unreliability of the grapevine:

*"you don't find parents who experience both schools. And people of course they tend to like what they had experience with so you get stories about most schools but you actually don't have a comparison."* (Pawel, father, Edinburgh)

*"coming in cold to a city where everybody talks about schools is really difficult. It's really difficult because everybody has an opinion and you can only listen to them."* (Beverley, mother, Edinburgh)

Scottish parents were as sceptical - perhaps more so - about league tables to their English counterparts:

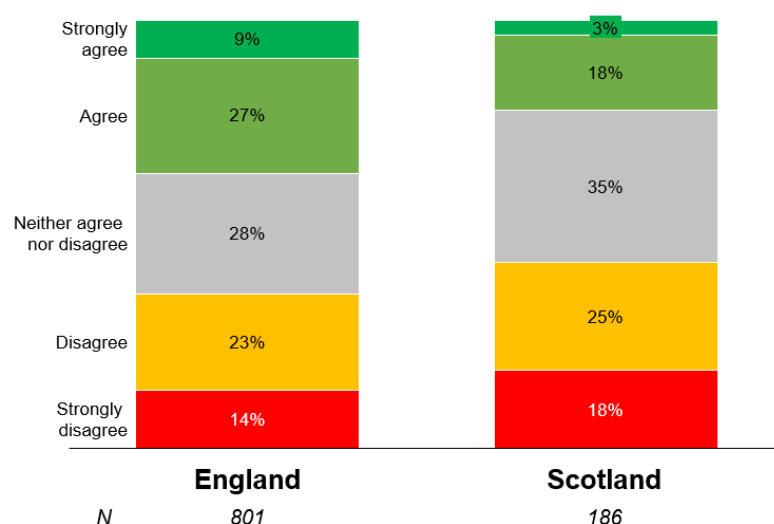
*"I personally don't buy into the league tables because you can manipulate them to get a score"*  
(Alistair, father, Edinburgh)

*"I have heard if the head teacher doesn't feel the kids are going to succeed she doesn't put them forward for those exams. I don't know if that's true. Because I wonder how skewed those league tables really are, you know."* (Ingrid, mother, Scotstown)

### 7.32 Survey Findings

The survey confirms that many parents found it hard reconciling conflicting evidence on schools, and that this issue was more common in England than in Scotland. Figure 7.16 shows that 36% of parents in England agreed with the statement “I found it difficult to choose a school for my child because different people and sources say different things”. In Scotland, the corresponding figure was 21%. Contrary to the interviews, though, the survey found no significant difference between parents that made a placing request and those that did not.

Figure 7.16: “I found it difficult to choose a school for my child because different people and sources say different things”



## 7.4 Is Choice Pressurised?

### 7.41 Interview Findings

Another way in which choice can have a negative emotional impact is through the burden of a sense of responsibility for a highly consequential decision. For some parents, particularly those in England, and those parents in Scotland making an active choice, there was indeed a sense that this was a high stakes matter. Zofia in Ipswich counted school choice among the biggest decisions she had ever faced, comparable to emigrating from Poland: “This decision for me it's on the same - almost the same - level like when we decided that we will be living in the UK”. This is because she felt her daughter’s success or failure in later life rests on which school she



attends. The pressure was particularly acute because it would be Zofia's daughter, and not her, who bears the consequences of her choice:

*"With every decision you need to be ready for the consequence, but in this moment it's the hardest thing is that that will be consequence not for me, it will be for my child. And I feel twice more responsibility for taking that decision because it's her life. And I could start doing something good or bad."*

The additional pressure of having to make a decision for somebody else was shared by parents both in England and Scotland:

*"It's easier to say it's a decision that will affect me, and if it goes all pear-shaped I'll find a way. This is somebody else and you have responsibilities"* (Dimitrios, father, Camden)

*"if it's changing a job, that's just me. This is the kids. And also, obviously, one of the options being free. The other option being expensive. You know, I thought what's the right thing to do for them? Would they be better getting the money after school, for university or a flat? So, I'm, I've lost a lot of sleep over this. Probably more so than changing job or buying a house."* (Beverley, mother, Edinburgh)

*"Obviously, there's still anxiousness because he's wanting to go to another school. Any even slightly bad experience he has he's always going to say that would never have happened, so that's only because there was a definite choice between the two."* (Tracy, mother, Scotstown)

It is left to Zofia's husband to talk her down, trying to persuade her (not altogether successfully), that the differences between the schools are not as grave as she imagines:

*"My husband told me 'don't worry in every school they teach more or less the same and it's depend on her whether she will be really wanting to learn something it doesn't matter in which school' and it was good that really calmed me down for a few minutes."* (Zofia, mother, Ipswich)

Similarly, Yvonne in Camden, turns to friends for reassurance that the educational consequences of her choice are not all that great:

*"I had to have a bit of a word with myself and we've got a friend whose parents are educational psychologists and she was saying that thing about, you know, a lot of it is down to parents, you can influence your child's education yourself, so I had to chill out."* (Yvonne, mother, Camden)

Flora in Scotstown was unconvinced by such arguments, insisting that school choice matters a lot, and so is a major responsibility:

*“Secondary school is a very very big important part of your child’s education, and it’s what happens in these next four to six years that tells you what’s going to happen next... They kept saying [daughter’s] the kind of child that would excel wherever you put her, so what school you put her to wouldn’t make any difference, you know, and I thought ‘yeah, that’s all very well, but primary school and secondary school, there’s a big difference’.” (Flora, mother, Scotstown)*

For Jane, whose son had social problems in primary school, the pressure was more about ensuring he could make the most of a fresh start:

*“What I was anxious about was making sure that things were different for [son] in year 7 than they had been in previous years. So that was the main thing I was anxious about, to get it right so things would improve for him” (Jane, mother, Ipswich)*

Lisa in Edinburgh argued that school choice mattered not only for her son’s future academic and professional prospects, but also because of its effects on his emotional wellbeing for the rest of his childhood:

*“So that, I mean, that’s that whole where you’re going to go, what job you’re going to do, where are you going to end up? And then there was also the other part of it, which is we’re both very aware of how formative high school is and, you know, being unhappy at high school is a disaster. it’s a real disaster and you need, we needed to make sure that wherever it was, was somewhere - I remember standing the kitchen having those conversations, and we just need to know that he’s going to be somewhere that he feels happy, supported, that he’s got friends that he doesn’t feel lonely, you know, that that he can find his own little group and, you know, kind of flourish and that.”*

Some children experience the pressure of school choice too. For Angus, Lisa’s son, the consequences of choosing the wrong school seemed potentially catastrophic: “this could ruin my education or it could really develop it. Because, you know, like, I could either do it really badly or really good.” Moreover, he felt the added weight of being the oldest sibling, and knowing that his decision would have ramifications for his younger brother and sister:

Angus (student, Edinburgh): *I was just like ‘ugh’.*

Me: *Because your decision’s going to have a knock on effect on them?*

Angus: *Yeah. Yeah. Because I don’t want to ruin their education either.*

Aisha in Camden had similar concerns: “I don’t exactly feel under pressure. The only reason I feel a little bit like that is because whichever school I go into that’s the one my sister is going to, so I feel like I’m doing all the hard work for the both of us.”

For English families, the pressure is exacerbated by the fact that many of their peers are also making choices at the same time, creating a sort of echo chamber effect, amplifying one another's stress and anxiety. In part, this functions through reinforcement of the magnitude of the stakes:

*"Everywhere you go, you're constantly being told this is such an important decision, you've got to make a sensible decision because it's going to affect the rest of your child's life."* (Jane, mother, Ipswich).

*"We kept on hearing so many feedbacks from all these parents. Some are really good and some are 'oh no, really...?'. It really makes your mind so undecided. There's so much pressure."* (Khalida, mother, Camden)

*"They're putting a lot of pressure on themselves, just indirectly they're putting a lot of pressure on us."* (Graeme, father, Camden)

At the same time, the social pressure operates by setting standards of what is considered appropriate or 'good' parenting that parents feel they have to live up to:

*"I have got more involved in the whole process than I really would have wanted to. You know, you kind of get sucked into it and other people's opinions."* (Angela, mother, Camden)

*"There is a lot of generated anxiety."* (Ruth, mother, Camden)

*"There is that parental competition thing and by the time you have a third child you really don't care about that, but it's that whose child walks first, whose talks first, who does this all that comes back out the cupboard, and it's 'well I went to five open evenings', 'well I went to six', I did this and I did that, and it's, like, 'really?'. And it felt really strange because it's the first time for a long time I've even contemplated that even looks vaguely like competitive parenting because I really don't like that sort of thing. As soon as you realise you're doing it you're just, like, 'nah, I am not doing that', because you just stress yourself out over stuff that doesn't matter."* (Sandra, mother, Ipswich)

*"as you say, you do get whipped up at the school gates, you get parents saying things like 'I would never send her to that school', all of that it's really hard to ignore."* (Yvonne, mother, Camden)

By contrast, Scottish families, simply because fewer of them were making an active choice, were far less likely to mention being influenced by others' actions and opinions.

In England, time constraints contribute to the sense of pressure. With the application deadline falling in October, barely a month after schools return from the summer holidays, the process can feel rather rushed:

*"you've got to make a decision, and it's an important decision, and to a certain extent you're under time pressure to do it"* (Amy, mother, Ipswich)

*"The pressure's on, isn't it? Only because I haven't really gone to look at [school X] yet and I just need to go in and visit and then look at everything and then give my reasons. So it's kind of like 'oh my god October is here now', and I haven't got long left to submit it."* (Chanel, mother, Ipswich)

*"A little pinch of pressurised. Because obviously there is the time element, 31st of October. I've been known, I'm one of those people, even though I'm thinking, I'm thinking, I need to do it, who leaves some things to the sort of last few days."* (Marie, mother, Ipswich)

At the same time, it is important to recognise that for many parents on both sides of the border, choosing a school carries little pressure. Often this is because their preferences are clear, or because all the options are acceptable:

*"in terms of feeling I'm OK, I haven't got any anxiety or any other serious concern."* (Haile, father, Camden)

*"As I'm talking to you I realise there isn't much anxiety actually, because very early on we just decided blissfully were going to decide between these two comprehensives and maybe that decision was quite big, maybe we should have up sticks and moved to Kent or Bucks something but that isn't seriously what we were doing and that would have been a hugely stressful thing."* (Michael, father, Camden)

*"Because again we have, fortunately, two good options so there's not one bad and one good, so yeah it makes it easier. Yeah, no, you can't go really wrong, you might get slightly better in one of them."* (Daniela, mother, Edinburgh)

Some parents also played down the influence of school, relative to the student's own ability and ability and their home environment. As we saw with Zofia and Yvonne, some try to talk themselves into this belief in order to reduce the pressure on themselves. However, for those inclined to hold it already, it naturally lowers the stakes because it implies school choice matters less to their child's ultimate success and happiness:

*"I'm not that worried about it. Because generally, the way you see life and everything, I know the limitations of the exams, and these schools are basically not that different. I know that the effort from the student themselves, their cognitive capacity, and the effort they are going to put into the study matters more than the school. Because there isn't a significant difference."* (Haile, father, Camden)

*"it's all about the child, isn't it, how it's going to learn. Because, alright, you can pick a school, but it's all about how she wants to learn, you know, and get her head down"* (Chanel, mother, Ipswich)

*"I don't know whether that's a worthwhile investment of time and money and inconvenience because you don't know how your child would have done anywhere else. And I'm a firm believer that actually if they are going to stick their head down and study, they're going to stick their head down and study, wherever they are. There are some schools that really won't invest in them, and it's about weeding out the ones where they might be left to rot in the corner, and the ones that will inspire them."* (Sandra, mother, Ipswich)

Parents typically tried to protect their children from the pressure of choosing a school, and my interviews suggested that these efforts were mostly successful:

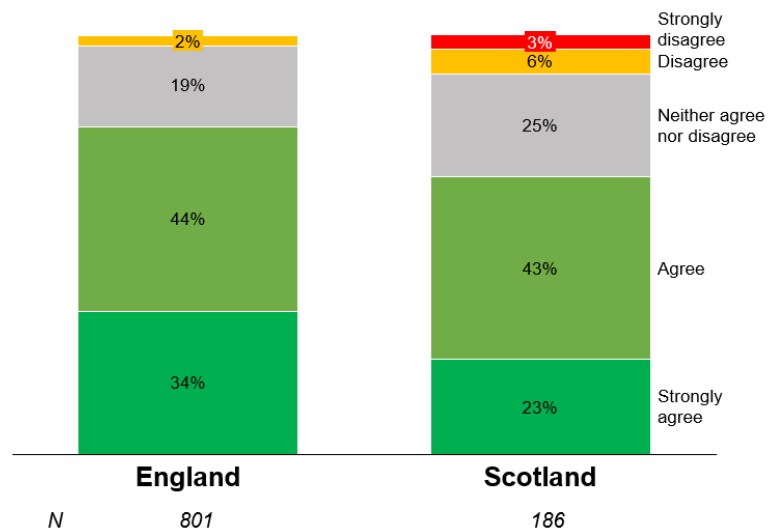
*"Sometimes when I'm falling asleep I'm like, 'hmm, will I like this school?' and then I fall asleep. But I don't really have like big meltdowns about it, just kind of like when my Mum tells me 'oh you didn't get through this exam' or 'you did get through this one', I don't go 'yay!' or 'no!', I just kind of say 'OK!', and I'm happy or sad."* (Aisha, student, Camden)

*"once I knew what I was choosing or what I thought about the schools, I found it a lot easier to stop worrying about it because I know that they're all good schools."* (Melissa, student, Camden)

## 7.42 Survey Findings

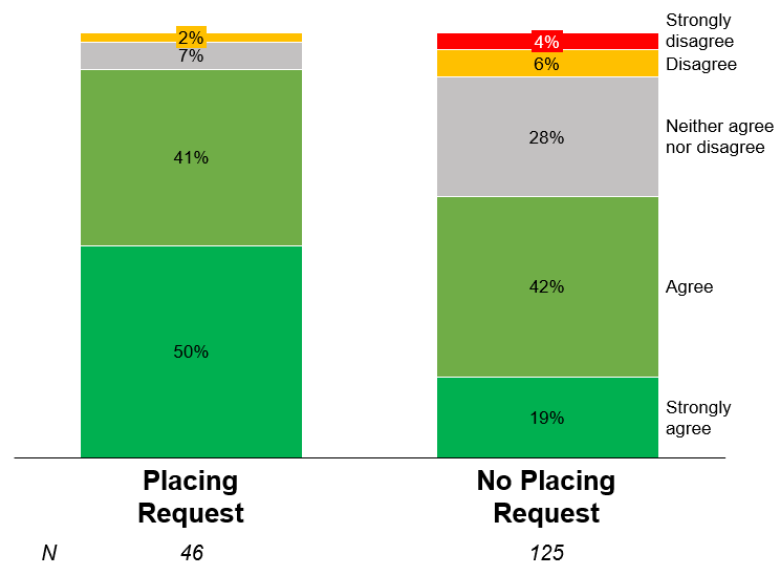
In the survey, I tried to gauge the perceived pressure associated with school choice by asking parents to what extent they agree with the statement "My choice of school will have a significant effect on my child's success and/or happiness". Figure 7.17 shows that English parents tend to think school choice is more consequential: 34% strongly agree with the statement, compared with 23% of Scottish parents. However, the gap is not large. Overall, the vast majority of parents in both countries believe that school choice will have a significant impact on their child: 78% in England and 66% in Scotland.

Figure 7.17: “My choice of school will have a significant impact on my child’s success and/or happiness”



Bigger, in fact, is the gap between Scottish parents that made a placing request and those that did not. As figure 7.18 shows, the view that school choice is highly consequential is almost universally held among parents that made a placing request. By contrast, parents making placing requests tend to think school choice matters less – only 19% of them strongly agreed with the statement, compared to 50% of parents that made a placing request.

Figure 7.18: “My choice of school will have a significant impact on my child’s success and/or happiness” – Scotland only (unweighted)



## 7.5 Does Choice Generate Regret?

### 7.5.1 Interview Findings

In chapter 3, we saw that a potential drawback of choice is that it increases the risk of regret – both anticipated regret (a fear of closing off options by choosing in case they turn out to be better) and post-decision regret (worrying about having picked the wrong option). Indeed, a number of parents in England expressed such sentiments:

*“It’s a big decision and you’re worried that you’re going to make the wrong decision or do something that you’re not happy with.”* (Ruth, mother, Camden)

*“It was stressful because it’s an important decision to make. I think making any important decision is stressful because you always worry that you’ve made the wrong decision or whatever.”* (Amy, mother, Ipswich)

*“It could be the wrong choice, could be the right choice. There’s so much, you know? On that child, and on the parents. Even now that she’s gone to [School A], I’m still saying ‘Have I made the right choice? Is it still gonna work for her?’ I mean, the doubt’s a constant thing.”* (Khalida, mother, Camden)

This self-doubt was linked explicitly by some participants to the fact that they had been given a choice, which made them very conscious of the ability that they could have chosen otherwise. This left them second guessing themselves, and wondering whether the alternatives would have been better:

*“I suppose it’s if you give someone a choice of anything there’s always going to be some battle inside yourself, that ‘am I making the right decision?’ Just by giving someone the ability to choose that’s going to happen.”* (Jack, father, Ipswich)

*“I always wonder whether I’m doing the right thing but that’s being a parent, you know, because they depend on you. That’s the thing which is so exciting but also so daunting. Don’t have kids if you want to keep your sanity and your peace of mind because you’ll never have peace of mind, you’ll never sleep well again.”* (Marie, mother, Ipswich)

Charlotte in Camden described the difficulty she had in putting the rejected option out of her mind:

*“Now that that [School A] is our first choice I’ve got no regrets about it. but I do still think about [School B] and the space and the new building, that they’re doing so much building work, and the teachers were so gushing about their school they obviously loved it so...but at some point you just have to say ‘right, decision’s made’.”* (Charlotte, mother, Camden)

Choice brought the prospect of regret for some of the English children as well:

*"it's in a weird sense where I can't really control it, but I feel I might want to go to a school and then it's not good. Under pressure that I might make a wrong decision."* (Eli, student, Camden)

Me: *And what did you find difficult or stressful about it?*

Donny (student, Ipswich): *Thinking that if I choose that then I won't be able to see what the other school is like when it's - actually doing it for like a month, I wouldn't be able to actually try them out.*

Regret was only an issue in a minority of cases, though, primarily in England. For the most part, families on both sides of the border were secure in their judgements. When I asked people explicitly how worried they were about choosing the wrong school, the most common reaction was to dismiss such concerns:

*"I don't think I've got it wrong."* (Linda, mother, Ipswich)

*"I'm not worried now, no, it will be fine."* (Angela, mother, Camden)

*"I am sure that we've made the right choice in both cases and, yeah, it's definitely led to the best outcomes I think for our children so far."* (Jane, mother, Ipswich)

*"I think about it occasionally. But I think about it more because I think we made the right decision. And it's quite nice to have made the right decision."* (Lisa, mother, Edinburgh)

Me: *is that something you've thought about at all? That [School A] might be not the best option?*

Cheryl (mother, Edinburgh): *It just feels like it is. And wherever you live, he's got all these friends going. Seems like quite a good school. So yeah, kind of putting my faith in that.*

*"I won't know until she actually starts there if [School A] was the right choice or if it wasn't, but at the moment my gut feeling is we've made the right choice."* (Flora, mother, Scotstown)

*"I think it's absolutely the right decision for our kids."* (Tracy, mother, Scotstown)

This might reflect the confirmation bias I suggested was at work: if there is no trade-off to be made between schools, the choice is obvious and there is no prospect of getting it wrong. Another factor that mitigated the potential for regret was the belief that school choice is not an irrevocable decision. A number of parents insisted that the consequences of choosing the wrong school could not be too bad, because they would change school if things started to go wrong:



*“I did sort of think, ‘oh, what if she goes, she gets bullied, she really hates it’. And I thought, ‘well, we’re well served by other schools and we would be able to change’. So that’s the way I sort of rationalised it. I tried not to be too anxious about it.” (Kelly, mother, Camden)*

*“If it doesn’t work, I know that if it’s really bad we pull her out. There’s home schooling, we can find somewhere else so it’s not final final. That probably says more about our own situation to many things rather than the school, but I don’t rely on the school.” (Dimitrios, father, Camden)*

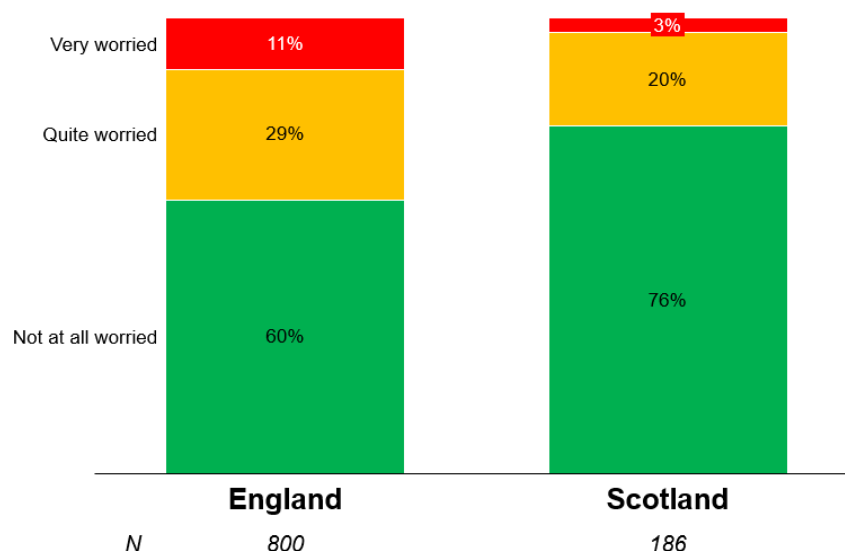
*“If I knew that my daughter is suffering in school and not having a great time, you do something about it rather than just let them coast through five years of misery” (Aaliyah, mother, Camden)*

*“There’s always another alternative so the worst-case outcome isn’t a complete and utter disaster” (Sandra, mother, Ipswich)*

## 7.52 Survey Findings

The survey confirms that only a minority of parents seemed regretful, and that this minority was larger in England than in Scotland. As figure 7.19 shows, 11% of English parents said that they were very worried about choosing the wrong school, compared to just 3% of Scottish parents. 76% of Scots were not at all worried, compared to 60% of English parents.

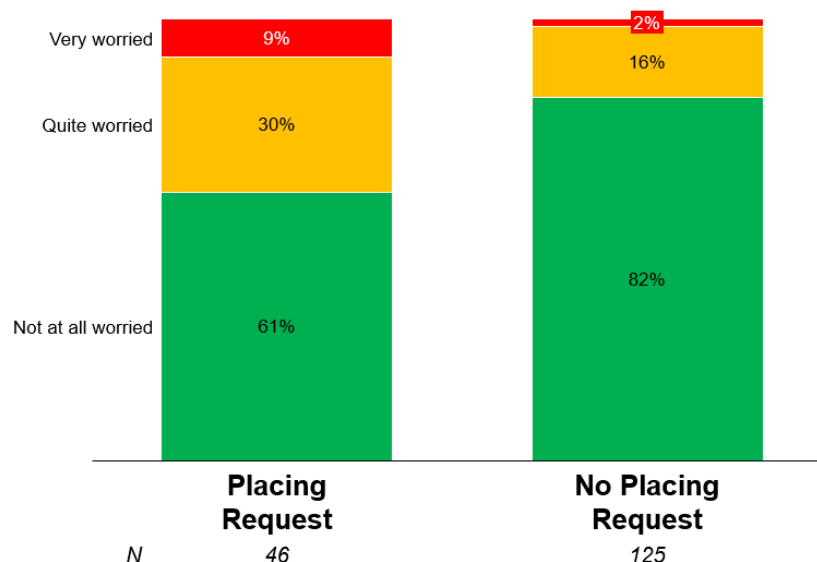
Figure 7.19: “How worried are you that you have chosen the wrong secondary school?”



This difference is driven by parents that did not make a placing request, 82% of whom are confident that their catchment school is right for their child and only 2% of whom are ‘very worried’ about getting it wrong. By contrast, only 61% of Scottish parents that made placing

requests are ‘not at all’ worried about their choice, near identical to the figure in England.

Figure 7.20: “How worried are you that you have chosen the wrong secondary school?” – Scotland only (unweighted)



## 7.6 Does Choice Unrealistically Raise Expectations?

Another theory posits that choice may unreasonably inflate expectations, setting choosers up for disappointment. This is difficult to test empirically. However, in section 4.42, I discussed some evidence in the existing literature that English parents tend to be more perfectionist, and that Scottish parents are more likely to ‘satisfice’ and be content with a school they think is adequate, even if it is not the best possible option.

In my study, there were families on both sides of the border that did not seem overly committed to their first-choice school. In Scotland, this took the form of people saying they would be content to attend a different school if the catchments had been drawn differently:

*“We weren't thinking ‘Oh, don't want them to go to any of these schools’. We're quite happy. If they'd said, I suppose, if they'd said that she had to go to [School A] I'd have had reservations, but I'd have given it a go.”* (Andrea, mother, Edinburgh)

*“I think they're all of a similar standard of school. So I mean, I dinnae think there'll be much of a difference between [School A] and say [School B] or [School C]. Maybe I'm wrong, but I wouldn't think so.”* (Andy, father, Dundee)

*“You know, I think there's probably a lot of worried parents in [area] in regards to looking at the [School A]/[School B] thing but I don't think there's anything to worry about. They're both*

*very good schools, very good performing schools, you know, and I think the boys would be OK to go to either of them.”* (Victoria, mother, Dundee)

Similarly, in England, several parents insisted that they had a number of acceptable options and that they would be content with any of them:

*“I have no doubt if we went to [School A] he would get really, really good GCSE results. However, I’m hoping that at [School B] he’ll get really, really good GCSE results as well.”* (Jane, mother, Ipswich)

*“our attitude to it as parents is these are London comprehensives, very different sort of school I went to, strengths and weaknesses, and they’re actually all quite similar, actually, in terms of ethos...when you’re trying to choose between two things that are quite similar there’s a tendency to exacerbate the differences and not see that actually they are just similar. The vanity of small differences, there is that sort of idea. So at some point when you discuss those two you start thinking about [School A] is slightly stricter or whatever. They’re just culturally really, really similar and we’re quite happy with that.”* (Michael, father, Camden)

At the same time, even in Michael’s quote above there is a sense that the fact of choosing encourages families to attend to, and perhaps exaggerate, the minor differences between schools. Certainly, the attachment that some of my English participants displayed to their first choices went far beyond what I found in Scotland:

*“I can just picture it. For some reason when I picture [School A], like getting in, I picture bells in the background, like Christmas.”* (Eli, student, Camden)

*“it was very stressful. I was pretty easy going, I had the choice of two schools when my husband really wanted one, so we did argue about it... my husband is a lawyer and he will go for it.”* (Brigitte, mother, Camden)

Moreover, parents in England were more likely to express maximising attitudes to school choice, framing it as a matter of finding the ‘best’:

*“Making decisions for your children you always really feel you ought to be choosing the very best possible thing so in a way having all this choice it is a bit stressful in a way because you’ve got to compare them and trying to work out which one is going to be the very best.”* (James, father, Camden)

*“as an individual I am really striving, really high standards, really high benchmarks, very competitive...so it’s invariable that I bring this into my mothering and my parenting choices”* (Samantha, mother, Camden)

Thus, while most parents in England and Scotland were content with a range of options, suggesting reasonable expectations, there were some English parents that expressed more

perfectionist views, perhaps raising expectations unrealistically high.

## 7.7 Choice and Uncertainty

Over the course of my interviews, it became clear that school choice affects families' welfare in a way that was not anticipated in my theoretical discussion: by creating uncertainty. Indeed, the fact that families that had made an application to a school had to wait so long to find out if it was successful was perhaps the greatest source of stress and anxiety that I encountered.

Since the criteria used to allocate school places in England are not always transparent or well understood, and because even geographical catchment areas shift from year to year depending on the popularity of a school (growing tighter if there are more applications), many parents were unsure whether they would get into their preferred schools:

*"In the top band of [School A], it is 1.7 miles...and so I've done that research so I've seen that's quite small. He probably would get in, probably probably, but you never know because it's very elastic. You don't know who the children in care are, or the children with special needs, or the children with siblings or who's actually living close, you know, it's a bit unknowable."* (Samantha, mother, Camden)

*"it's like a bit of a game of chance because you don't quite know. Because what you don't know is how many other people apply for the schools you want."* (Sandra, mother, Ipswich)

*"I'm going to be absolutely terrified come 1st of March, because we live, the catchment area is .8 and we are .7, and the school is getting more popular so no I'm feeling really nervous."* (Yvonne, mother, Camden)

*"Katy told me, 'But you know that the catchment area has been shrinking. Have you seen the last three years?' And I went immediately and I checked, and I mean literally from 2.2 to 1.5 to 0.9."* (Ioanna, mother, Camden)

Several parents complained about the length of time it takes for this uncertainty to be resolved. For example, Ruth described the period between applications being submitted in October and offers being made in March as "six months of agony". Parents' frustration at the local authority apparatus indicates a high degree of concern and mental stress:

*"I don't really see why it takes that long. I think we can probably get that done a lot quicker really."* (Jane, mother, Ipswich)

*"We still will be in the middle of nothing for the next few months...I'm thinking it's not fair, sorry, if I have to be honest, only eight weeks or nine weeks they should [give me]. I should give them the same time and expect that. Of course I know that it's quite complicated process but it's technology and a lot of workers and I think that they don't do that first time, why they need a few months keeping me in that horrible stress what will be happen in the spring?" (Zofia, mother, Ipswich)*

This long waiting period creates a space to be filled with rumour and catastrophising. Several parents expressed the fear that they would not get a place at any of their chosen schools and would simply be allocated a school by the local authority:

*"you hear stories from other parents who have gone through the process already and there's this one lady already who applied last year and didn't get any of her choices and settled for one school and were on the waiting list for their favourite school and then weren't actually confirmed to get it till right at the end of term and that is the reality of what I'm actually thinking could possibly happen to my daughter because we're just outside last year's furthest distance where they accepted a child and I think, well, as a statistician, it could go either way." (Katy, mother, Camden)*

*"There is a niggling concern that we won't get any of those three." (Graeme, father, Camden)*

*"I've also heard that you might not get your three, they sometimes might choose a school for you if you don't get your three. So that's been quite stressful thinking about that also. A bit stressful, I think, knowing that." (Chanel, mother, Ipswich)*

*"there is always that stress there of 'what if they are all oversubscribed?' when you don't want to fall back on your catchment school. You just feel like you're taking a bit of a risk." (Amy, mother, Ipswich)*

Overall in England, over 95% of children receive an offer at one of their preferred schools (Gov.uk 2020). Yet the key point is that a much larger proportion of families believe themselves to be at risk of such an outcome. Interestingly, parents in Ipswich were about as likely to fear missing out on all their chosen schools as those in Camden, despite the fact this occurs in only 3% of cases in Suffolk (the local authority encompassing Ipswich), compared to 6% in Camden borough (Gov.uk 2020).

Families in Scotland that made placing requests also suffered from the uncertainty. They faced a similarly anxious wait to hear whether their applications had been successful:

*"I was phoning up all the time, asking where I was in the list, what number she was and that...It was difficult, and I suppose anxious as well, definitely, difficult of not knowing if we were getting in, stressful, just all worrying about if she was getting in." (Daphne, mother, Scotstown)*

*"Just the not knowing. It was a bit like wandering around in a dark room, if you know what I mean, just not knowing what the outcome would be."* (Flora, mother, Scotstown)

At the same time, for Scottish parents that were content with their zoned school, the relative security of the Scottish system was seen as a virtue:

*"I really I wouldn't like not to know where she was going."* (Jackie, mother, Dundee)

*"I think certainly from our perspective having that certainty was quite comforting. Once we'd made this decision that this is where we were going, then at least we had some certainty in terms of what their education path is going to be looking like."* (Frank, father, Edinburgh)

*"It's been quite plain sailing for me, because I knew where they were going to go."* (Adele, mother, Dundee)

A few parents reflected explicitly on the contrast this posed against the English system (some made the comparison spontaneously, others at the end of the interview when I explained the purpose of the study):

*"First impression is that that sounds a bit scary. You've got your heart set on a local school and maybe there's suddenly some doubt put on whether you can get into that school, I think that would be quite unnerving really. Because then it wouldn't matter which house you bought, because there's no guarantee you'd get into the school of your choice, and I don't think I would like that one bit actually."* (Ingrid, mother, Scotstown)

*"We've got family here in England...And they're always a little bit jealous of us where we just say, 'well we're in the catchment so of course, we will get into that school'. Like, there's no, we don't need to think about not getting in the school because we will."* (Lisa, mother, Edinburgh)

Victoria (mother, Dundee): *I think that's quite scary actually the system they have down South*

Me: *Why do you think it's scary?*

Victoria: *For me, I would find that quite stressful and worrying, 'am I going to be able to get my child in the school I've requested?'*

An important consequence of the Scottish system, with most children in a primary school knowing years in advance that not only they but also most of their classmates will be attending the same catchment secondary is that it offers continuity. This continuity was highly valued by Scottish families, and made it easier to smooth the transition and allay anxieties. For example, in Dundee, secondary schools allow incoming students to name three friends that they would

prefer to share a class with, and guarantee that they will be placed with at least one of them in their first year:

*"I think from a transition point of view, even comfort in their head, knowing there will be somebody there that they know and especially if it's out of the top three, so it's going to be somebody close, so even that is a good thing"* (Jackie, mother, Dundee)

Similarly, Nathan and Zoe were grateful for the longer transition period and the support their autistic son received:

Nathan (father, Dundee): *They're great. The school has been fantastic.*

Zoe (mother, Dundee): *They've put an extra transition for him, haven't they?*

Nathan: *They've put in an enhanced for him so they basically, the way it works, I think they informed the secondary that he might need a little bit extra help to sort of fit in and to keep an eye on basically, so they've been great, they've been really good.*

Conversely, families in England expressed frustration at trying to get ready for secondary school without knowing which one they would be attending:

*"It would be very nice to say to [son] 'This is where are you going to go. Let's start facing into that, whatever that is and preparing and thinking about what it will be like'."* (Samantha, mother, Camden)

Further, some described a coordination problem, with friendship groups that want to stay together struggling to avoid being scattered to different schools:

*"I was kind of anxious about 'will I be with all my friends? What's going to happen?'. But then I found out all of my friends are going to that school so I'm just, like, happy about that and we'll all be able to stay together."* (Ellie, student, Camden)

Jack (father, Ipswich): *I suppose the thing with the friends is no one knows yet if they're going to be together next year in September.*

Amy (mother, Ipswich): *That's the thing with most of her friends not wanting to go to [nearest school] either. You're all applying for different schools, aren't you, so it's always a bit uncertain. Whereas I think if it was just a case of, like, you lived in a little village where there was only really one high school and you were all going to go there and you didn't even question it then you probably wouldn't really talk about it at all.*

*"And you [daughter] wouldn't like that full stop. Just the uncertainty of it. Having to tell your friends 'I'm probably not going to be at school with you, but maybe I will, and this will be first choice and second choice'. Anything like that and she would have hated that. A reason we didn't do [School A] was just the not knowing. She'd have hated not being certain until May or June or whatever. And not knowing who of your friends you're going to go with."* (Michael, father, Camden)

At the same time, it is worth noting that some parents tried to discourage their children from being too influenced by their peers in their choice of school:

*“It’s 50/50. Because it’s you want to know that you’ve got one at least one friend from your primary school, because obviously making new friends is a big thing isn’t it? Making friends, and it’s not about friends because you go to school to learn, but it comes along the way because you don’t want it to affect your work, do you?”* (Chanel, mother, Ipswich)

*“The ideal thing is that he has a chance to go where he has chosen to go - if this is based on academic reason and not friends only.”* (Franco, father, Camden)

Indeed, some emphasised the opportunity for a fresh start, and the opportunity to make a different set of friends in another part of town:

*“it’s a big moment in your life leaving friends behind... we’ve ended up picking a school that far fewer of her classmates will be going will be applying to.”* (Angela, mother, Camden)

*“if you’re just going to [catchment school], you’ve just got to walk to school and you’re walking back, whereas they get to know a lot more people.”* (Daphne, mother, Scotstown)

## 7.8 Conclusion

In this chapter, I’ve considered the evidence from my interviews and survey that families are worse off in at least some ways as a result of choosing schools. I have shown that school choice can be inconvenient, time consuming, stressful and anxiety-provoking. I have also shown that it is all those things to a greater extent for English families than Scottish families, and within Scotland, for families making placing requests. It is obvious why school choice takes up more time and energy for some families – those that live in England or make placing requests do more research, and do it in greater depth, considering more schools and using more sources of information. There is greater variation in the reasons why people find school choice so stressful and anxiety-provoking. Most families do not find the choice particularly agonising, in the sense of being torn between different options. Nor do they feel great regret or doubt once they submit their applications. To the contrary, most of the families I spoke to were remarkably confident in their judgements. However, for those families that are unsure about making the right choice, the process can be extremely painful. A more common issue is evaluating and synthesising the different sources of information about schools, none of which are fully trusted. A sense of pressure, in the belief that school choice will have significant ramifications for the child’s future



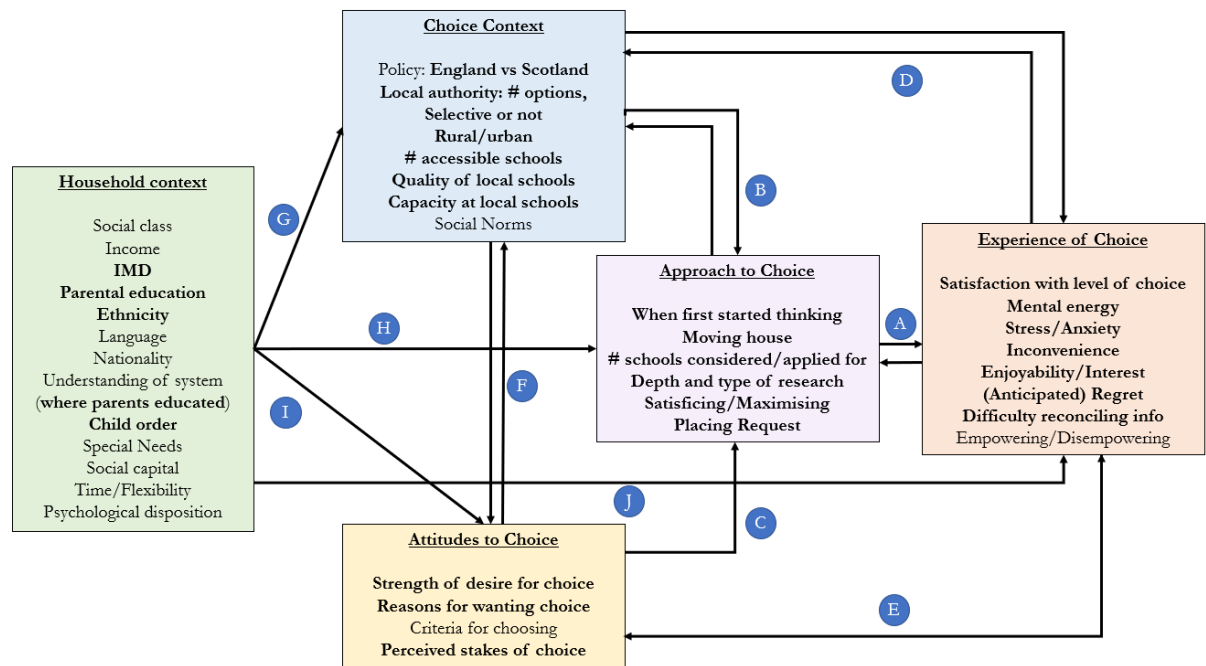
also contributes to the stressfulness of the situation. However, perhaps the greatest single source of angst is the uncertainty of choice. The long purgatory of not knowing the outcome of the application, the fear of being given an unsatisfactory school or being separated from one's friends, and the difficulty of planning for the future, all make the transition to secondary school more unpleasant.

## **8. How Do Experiences of Choice Vary Between Different Types of Families?**

In the previous two chapters, I examined how experiences of secondary school choice differ between families in England and Scotland. In chapter 6, I looked at the extent to which choice brings the benefits expected by its proponents: fulfilling desires, enhancing freedom and autonomy and bringing empowerment and enjoyment. In chapter 7, I explored the potential drawbacks of choice: stress, anxiety, uncertainty and opportunity costs. In both cases, I focused on the aggregate national pictures. In this chapter, I will dig a little deeper and investigate how experiences of choice vary between different types of families within each country: how do family background, location, beliefs and attitudes or approach to choice affect how stressful, empowering or interesting people find school choice?

I do this for three reasons. Firstly, some of these differences are of intrinsic interest. If the benefits of school choice accrue disproportionately to socially advantaged families, or the costs to the socially disadvantaged, the role of the policy in exacerbating inequalities will count against it. Secondly, some of these differences may help explain the channels and mechanisms through which school choice policies affect experiences of the process – in turn, identifying certain ‘enabling factors’ or ‘risk factors’ for positive or negative experiences. For example, in this chapter I will examine the extent to which the stressfulness of choice can be explained by the number of schools a parent considers or the amount of research they do. This in turn may elucidate some of the trade-offs involved in increasing or decreasing choice, or ways in which the experience of choice may be improved for parents. Thirdly, examining these differences can help put the findings of the previous two chapters in perspective. How big are the differences we have found between England and Scotland? One way to judge is to compare them against the differences between rural and urban parents, rich and poor parents, or parents choosing for an older or younger child.

Figure 8.1: *Why experiences of choice might vary between families*



Note: Arrows reflect direction of causation, bolded factors are captured in survey

Figure 8.1 reproduces the framework I introduced in chapter 5, mapping out the different types of factors that can help explain why different families have different experiences of school choice: household context, choice context, attitudes to choice and differences in approach. In this chapter, I examine some of the relationships mapped out in figure 8.1, primarily using data from the survey. As a result, my discussion will focus almost entirely on parents as I was not able to survey any children.

The chapter proceeds as follows. Section 8.1 looks at the overlap between different experiences of school choice (the box on the right-hand side of figure 8.1). It finds that the parents who found school choice stressful were highly likely to find it anxiety-provoking, inconvenient and mentally draining. However, reported stress is less closely related to how interesting parents found choice or their satisfaction with their level of choice. Consequently, the rest of the chapter investigates stress, interest and satisfaction as three separate outcomes. Section 8.2 looks at the relationship between parents' approach to choice and their experiences of it (pathway A in figure 8.1). Section 8.3 examines how attitudes to choice are associated with differences in experience (E); 8.4 does the same for differences in choice context (D). Finally, 8.5 looks at how differences in household background affects experiences of choice, both directly and through choice context, approach and attitudes (J).

To reiterate from chapter 5, the tables in this chapter summarise the results of bivariable, rather than multivariable, regressions. Their purpose is not to control for other variables, but to summarise a large number of two-way relationships succinctly, to help achieve a rich description of the characteristics associated with having a more positive or negative experience of school choice. All survey respondents – 801 in England, 186 in Scotland – are included in the analysis unless stated.

## 8.1 How Far Do Positive and Negative Experiences of Choice Overlap?

In the survey, parents were asked to rate their experiences of school choice using six different 0-10 scales, in terms of how stressful, anxiety-provoking, inconvenient, enjoyable and interesting they found it, as well as how big a part of their life it was. I begin the analysis of this chapter by exploring the relationship between these different ratings. Figure 8.2 presents the result of a series of bivariable linear regressions, where the bolded variable is the dependent variable, and the italicised terms below it are independent variables.

Figure 8.2: Summary of results from a series of bivariable linear regressions between pairs of variables characterising experience of choice (unweighted)

	Coefficient	p-value
<b>Stressfulness</b>		
<i>Anxiety</i>	.864	0.000
<i>Inconvenience</i>	.748	0.000
<i>How big a part of life</i>	.630	0.000
<i>Enjoyability</i>	.085	0.016
<i>Interestingness</i>	.283	0.000
<b>Anxiety</b>		
<i>Stressfulness</i>	.866	0.000
<i>Inconvenience</i>	.673	0.000
<i>How big a part of life</i>	.626	0.000
<i>Enjoyability</i>	.089	0.012
<i>Interestingness</i>	.293	0.000
<b>Inconvenience</b>		
<i>Stressfulness</i>	.677	0.000
<i>Anxiety</i>	.610	0.000
<i>How big a part of life</i>	.482	0.000
<i>Enjoyability</i>	.150	0.000
<i>Interestingness</i>	.265	0.000
<b>How big a part of life</b>		
<i>Stressfulness</i>	.351	0.000
<i>Anxiety</i>	.347	0.000
<i>Inconvenience</i>	.297	0.000

<i>Enjoyability</i>	.244	0.000
<i>Interestingness</i>	.354	0.000
	<b>Enjoyability</b>	
<i>Stressfulness</i>	.070	0.016
<i>Anxiety</i>	.073	0.012
<i>Inconvenience</i>	.134	0.000
<i>How big a part of life</i>	.357	0.000
<i>Interestingness</i>	.758	0.000
	<b>Interestingness</b>	
<i>Stressfulness</i>	.218	0.000
<i>Anxiety</i>	.226	0.000
<i>Inconvenience</i>	.226	0.000
<i>How big a part of life</i>	.488	0.000
<i>Enjoyability</i>	.713	0.000

*Note: Darker shading indicates stronger association. Green = associated with better experience; Red = associated with worse experience; Grey = non-significant*

Figure 8.2 shows that the three negative experiences overlap substantially – the more anxiety-provoking, inconvenient or time consuming a parent finds school choice, the more stressful they are likely to find it, and vice versa. Stress and anxiety are particularly highly correlated: every 1 point increase in one results in a 0.9 increase in the other (.864/.866 to be precise). Figure 8.2 also shows that positive experiences are closely related to one another. Every 1 point increase in how interesting a parent finds school choice is associated with a 0.758 increase in their enjoyment of it.

Figure 8.2 seems to suggest that parents that have more positive experiences are also somewhat more likely to have negative ones, though the relationship is relatively weak. For example, every 1 point increase in how enjoyable a parent finds school choice is associated with a 0.1 point increase in how stressful they find it. Every 1 point increase in interestingness corresponds to a 0.3 point increase in stress. This may be explained by the possibility that more engaged parents are likely to have both more positive and negative experiences. Figure 8.2 also shows that parents that said school choice was a bigger part of their life found it more stressful, anxiety-provoking, inconvenient, time consuming, enjoyable and interesting. This is not especially surprising: it is understandable that those that buried themselves less deeply into the process choice would have more neutral experiences, for good and for ill.

The survey used different formats of questions to capture other aspects of parents' experiences: their satisfaction with their level of perceived choice, their level of concern about choosing incorrectly (regret) and the difficulty they had in processing information. Figure 8.3 shows how these relate to the experiences already considered, presenting the results of a series of bivariable binary logistic regressions, where the outcome variables are respectively: i) parents saying they

‘had enough choice’<sup>24</sup>, ii) parents saying they are ‘quite worried’ or ‘very worried’ about choosing the wrong school and iii) parents agreeing with the statement “I found it difficult to choose a school for my child because different people and sources say different things”.

Figure 8.3: Summary of results from a series of bivariable binary logistic regression between pairs of variables characterising experience of choice (unweighted)

	Marginal Probability (percentage points)	p-value
<b>Satisfied with level of choice (mean = 75%)</b>		
<i>Stressfulness</i>	-4.32	0.000
<i>Anxiety</i>	-3.99	0.000
<i>Inconvenience</i>	-3.78	0.000
<i>How big a part of life</i>	-1.44	0.031
<i>Enjoyability</i>	2.26	0.000
<i>Interestingness</i>	2.13	0.000
<b>Worried about making the wrong choice (regret) (mean = 38%)</b>		
<i>Stressfulness</i>	6.97	0.000
<i>Anxiety</i>	6.47	0.000
<i>Inconvenience</i>	7.23	0.000
<i>How big a part of life</i>	4.74	0.000
<i>Enjoyability</i>	0.37	0.531
<i>Interestingness</i>	1.04	0.092
<b>Find it hard to reconcile information (mean = 43%)</b>		
<i>Stressfulness</i>	5.92	0.000
<i>Anxiety</i>	5.43	0.000
<i>Inconvenience</i>	5.74	0.000
<i>How big a part of life</i>	4.95	0.000
<i>Enjoyability</i>	1.90	0.005
<i>Interestingness</i>	3.13	0.000

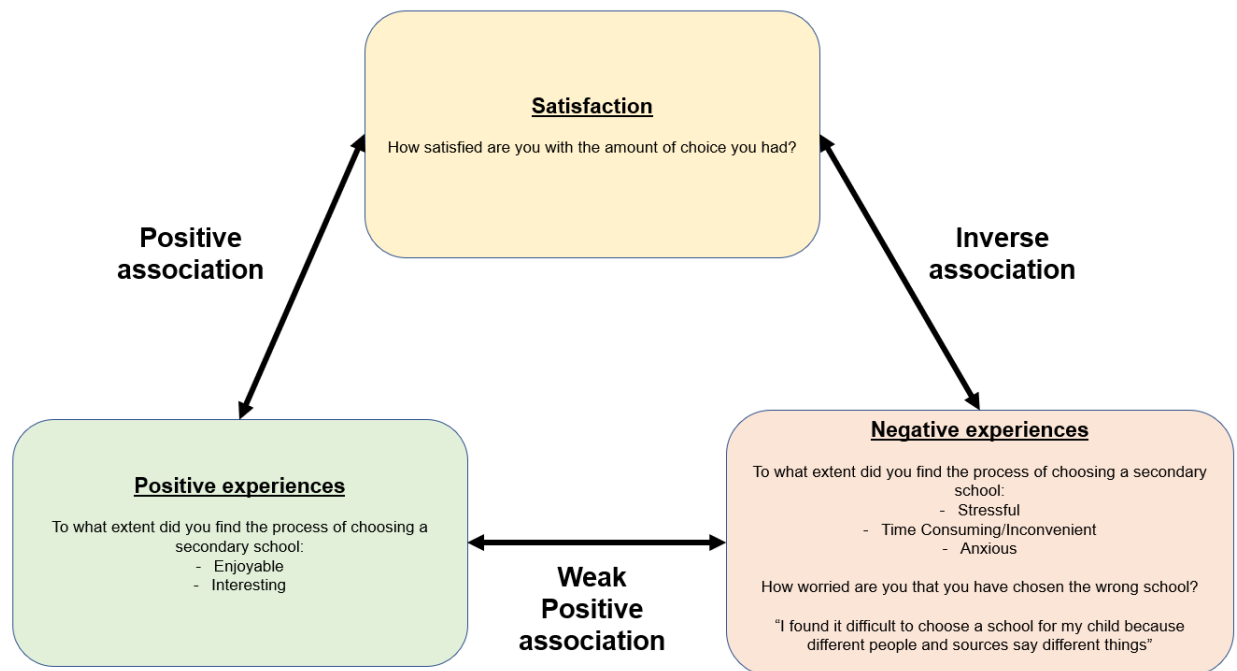
Note: Darker shading indicates stronger association. Green = associated with better experience; Red = associated with worse experience; Grey = non-significant

It shows that regret and finding it hard to reconcile conflicting information are closely related to other negative experiences: stress, anxiety and inconvenience. For example, on average, for every 1 point increase out of 10 in stress, anxiety and inconvenience, the likelihood of reporting regret rises by 7 percentage points, and the probability of finding it hard to process information rises around 5-6 percentage points.

<sup>24</sup> Recall from figure 6.8 that almost all parents that did not say they had enough choice felt they had too little. Only 1% of parents said they had too much.

Parents' satisfaction with their level of perceived choice follows a different pattern to the variables we have considered so far. Parents that report more negative experiences – finding choice more stressful, anxiety-provoking, inconvenient and time consuming – are less likely to say they have enough choice. At the same time, parents that report more positive experiences – finding choice more enjoyable or interesting – are *more* likely to say they have enough choice.

Figure 8.4: Schematic of relationship between experience outcomes



Putting these together, we can discern at least three separate clusters of experience, illustrated in figure 8.4. First, negative experiences - stress, anxiety, inconvenience, regret and struggling to reconcile different sources - tend to go together. Second, positive experiences - enjoyment and interest - tend to go together, and are weakly but positively associated with negative experiences. Satisfaction with perceived choice is positively associated with positive experiences and negatively associated with negative experiences. As I described in chapter 5, in the following sections, I will take one measure from each of these clusters when discussing the relationship between different family characteristics and parents' experiences of choice. I will focus on stress as the paradigmatic negative experience because it is the one that tended to come up most spontaneously in interviews (see 7.11). In terms of positive experiences, I shall focus on how interesting parents found school choice: as we saw in 6.22, parents I interviewed considered 'interesting' a more appropriate expression than 'enjoyable' in my interviews. Satisfaction with perceived choice is the only variable in its cluster so I will take that forward too.

## 8.2 How Do Parents' Approaches to Choice Affect Their Experience?

In this section, I consider the relationship between parents' approach to choice and their experience of it (*A in figure 8.1*). Figures 8.5 and 8.6 present the results of a series of bivariable regressions, with reported stress, interest and satisfaction with level of perceived choice as the outcome variables, reported separately for the English and Scottish samples. As discussed in chapter 5, I have chosen to use bivariable, rather than multivariable, regressions, because I am interested in the relationship between pairs of variables in order to build rich description, rather than attempting to control for confounders.

*Figure 8.5: Summary of results from a series of bivariable linear regressions (stressfulness/interestingness) and bivariable logistic regressions (satisfaction with level of choice) relating approach to choice to experience – England only*

	Stressfulness		Interestingness		Satisfaction with level of choice	
	Coeff.	p-value	Coeff.	p-value	Marginal Probability (percentage points)	p-value
<i>When first started thinking about choice:</i>						
<i>Before primary</i>	-.113	0.847	-.624	0.223	0.10	0.991
<i>Early primary</i>	-.007	0.984	-.615	0.040	-8.36	0.086
<i>Year 4</i>	.431	0.111	.275	0.247	-3.02	0.456
<i>Year 5</i>	.187	0.350	.107	0.544	0.43	0.890
<i>Year 6</i>	-.554	0.017	.051	0.803	5.75	0.122
<i>Whether moved for school:</i>						
<i>Schools were main reason for moving</i>	.075	0.838	.492	0.122	-5.36	0.310
<i>Schools were a consideration</i>	.397	0.050	.066	0.710	-1.76	0.570
<i>Number of schools considered</i>	.593	0.000	.332	0.000	-2.46	0.018
<i>Number of sources used</i>	.487	0.000	.373	0.000	-0.71	0.476
<i>Visited a school</i>	.312	0.213	.762	0.000	3.88	0.298
<i>Used inspection reports</i>	1.125	0.000	.521	0.003	-2.73	0.381
<i>Spoke to other parents</i>	.569	0.004	.403	0.021	0.43	0.890
<i>Used prospectuses</i>	.932	0.000	.782	0.000	-1.00	0.747
<i>Used league tables</i>	1.028	0.000	.517	0.007	-2.09	0.529
<i>Used local authority website</i>	.831	0.001	.843	0.000	-4.26	0.243
<i>Used other educational websites</i>	1.745	0.000	1.262	0.001	-6.12	0.312

*Note: Darker shading indicates stronger association. Green = associated with better experience; Red = associated with worse experience; Grey = non-significant*



Figure 8.6: Summary of results from a series of bivariable linear regressions (stressfulness/interestingness) and bivariable logistic regressions (satisfaction with level of choice) relating approach to choice to experience – Scotland only (unweighted)

	Stressfulness		Interestingness		Satisfaction with level of choice	
	Coeff.	p-value	Coeff.	p-value	Marginal Probability (percentage points)	p-value
<i>When first started thinking about choice:</i>						
<i>Before primary</i>	-1.173	0.081	-1.990	0.001	4.70	0.636
<i>Early primary</i>	-.804	0.162	-.1524	0.766	2.36	0.776
<i>Primary 5</i>	.651	0.455	-.223	0.777	1.82	0.886
<i>Primary 6</i>	1.125	0.030	1.124	0.015	-1.78	0.806
<i>Primary 7</i>	-.005	0.992	.191	0.646	-2.71	0.677
<i>Whether moved for school:</i>						
<i>Schools were main reason for moving</i>	2.150	0.017	1.671	0.039	-12.92	0.242
<i>Schools were a consideration</i>	1.049	0.020	.385	0.343	5.65	0.384
<i>Number of schools considered</i>	1.546	0.000	1.054	0.000	1.49	0.685
<i>Number of sources used</i>	.702	0.000	.416	0.000	0.38	0.840
<i>Visited a school</i>	1.068	0.017	1.332	0.001	10.10	0.109
<i>Used inspection reports</i>	2.112	0.000	.848	0.079	-11.11	0.117
<i>Spoke to other parents</i>	.992	0.029	.452	0.269	5.78	0.378
<i>Used prospectuses</i>	1.613	0.003	.781	0.108	-6.39	0.385
<i>Used league tables</i>	1.356	0.012	.558	0.252	-14.54	0.037
<i>Used local authority website</i>	1.835	0.000	1.185	0.005	13.77	0.058
<i>Used other educational websites</i>	2.643	0.001	1.642	0.021	7.12	0.564

Note: Darker shading indicates stronger association. Green = associated with better experience; Red = associated with worse experience; Grey = non-significant

Figures 8.5 and 8.6 show that parents with different approaches to school choice vary significantly in how stressful and interesting they find the process, and that the variation is particularly large in Scotland. Barring a couple of exceptions, approach to choice has limited association with satisfaction with perceived choice.

Each additional school that a parent considers is associated with 1.5 points more stress and 1.1 points higher interest in Scotland and 0.6 points more stress and 0.3 points higher interest in

England. Parents that consider more schools are also less likely to be satisfied with their amount of perceived choice if they are in England, but not in Scotland.

Parents that did more research also found choosing a school both more stressful and interesting. For each additional source of information used, reported stress rose by 0.7 points in Scotland and 0.5 points in England, while reported interest rose by 0.4 points in both. This relationship holds for each of the different sources of information covered in the survey. Using ‘harder’ sources of information, such as inspection reports and league tables, seems to have a greater effect on stress than less formal sources such as word of mouth and school visits.

In England, parents that leave thinking about school choice until the final year of primary school are the least stressed. By contrast, those that start thinking about it a year or two in advance (parents that are likely to go on multiple rounds of schools visits) tend to find it the most stressful, although they also find it most interesting. In Scotland, considering secondary schools very early (prior to primary school) is associated with less stress, but also with finding the process less interesting. Given that this group considered fewer schools and used fewer sources of information, it is likely that this lack of stress and interest results from settling on a school with minimal fuss or difficulty. Parents whose decision to move house was influenced by schools found the process more stressful and interesting if they were in Scotland, but not England.

Putting this all together contributes to the sense that there is a trade-off between the depth of engagement with school choice and the level of stress that it brings. Just as we saw in section 8.1 that parents that considered school choice a bigger part of their lives tended to find it more stressful but also more interesting, the same is true for parents that consider more schools and do more and different types of research. At the same time, the approach taken to choice has less of a clear effect on parents’ satisfaction with the level of choice they have. Those that consider more schools are less satisfied, but satisfaction is unrelated to the amount of research done or how early parents start considering schools. Of course, these results are merely suggestive, and we cannot from this sort of analysis rule out the possibility of reverse causation, or the influence of some other underlying variable. For example, parents may consider more schools because they find the process interesting, or because they are dissatisfied with the obvious options. Or underlying structural conditions (e.g. poorly performing local schools) may produce both stress and the impetus to consider more options. Over the following sections, I address some of these possibilities, looking at how parental attitudes and choice context affect experiences of school choice.

### 8.3 How Do Parents' Attitudes to Choice Affect Their Experience?

In this section, I explore how parents' attitudes to school choice – its perceived value and significance – affect their experiences of the process (*E in figure 8.1*). As in the previous section, I look at how these differences in attitudes are related to stress, interest and satisfaction with perceived choice through a series of bivariable regressions. Specifically, the attitudinal questions I use ask about how important it is to have choice, why it is important to have choice and how significant the impact of choice is likely to be. The results are presented in figures 8.7 and 8.8.

Figure 8.7: Summary of results from a series of bivariable linear regressions (stressfulness/interestingness) and bivariable logistic regressions (satisfaction with level of choice) relating attitudes to choice to experience – England only

	Stressfulness		Interestingness		Satisfaction with level of choice	
	Coeff.	p-value	Coeff.	p-value	Marginal Probability (percentage points)	p-value
<i>'Very important' to have choice</i>	1.534	0.000	.841	0.000	-4.93	0.235
<i>'Strong agree'/'Agree': If I knew my child would get into a reasonably good school anyway, I wouldn't care about having a choice"</i>	.179	0.376	.104	0.556	-5.20	0.090
<i>Top reason for wanting choice:</i>						
<i>Getting best possible school</i>	.266	0.185	.252	0.152	-0.80	0.795
<i>Right culture and ethos</i>	.129	0.655	.082	0.746	0.11	0.980
<i>Control over the process</i>	-.005	0.987	.057	0.825	-1.23	0.783
<i>Know better than anybody else what is right for my child</i>	-.370	0.246	.184	0.511	1.72	0.730
<i>To avoid catchment school</i>	-.409	0.309	-.796	0.023	-8.67	0.126
<i>Happy for child to attend catchment</i>	-1.366	0.000	.330	0.060	8.22	0.007
<i>Believe choice of school has significant impact on child's success and/or happiness</i>	1.082	0.000	.967	0.000	-0.67	0.857

Note: Darker shading indicates stronger association. Green = associated with better experience; Red = associated with worse experience; Grey = non-significant

Figure 8.8: Summary of results from a series of bivariable linear regressions (stressfulness/interestingness) and bivariable logistic regressions (satisfaction with level of choice) relating attitudes to choice to experience – Scotland only (unweighted)

	Stressfulness		Interestingness		Satisfaction with level of choice	
	Coeff.	p-value	Coeff.	p-value	Marginal Probability (percentage points)	p-value
<i>‘Very important’ to have choice</i>	1.600	0.000	1.808	0.000	-8.32	0.210
<i>‘Strong agree’/‘Agree’: If I knew my child would get into a reasonably good school anyway, I wouldn’t care about having a choice”</i>	.397	0.377	.259	0.519	2.13	0.737
<i>Top reason for wanting choice:</i>						
<i>Getting best possible school</i>	1.437	0.001	1.515	0.000	1.03	0.872
<i>Right culture and ethos</i>	.534	0.447	-.601	0.342	-8.88	0.335
<i>Control over the process</i>	.626	0.430	.547	0.444	-12.33	0.222
<i>Know better than anybody else what is right for my child</i>	-1.002	0.162	-.601	0.342	22.71	0.105
<i>To avoid catchment school</i>	-1.843	0.060	-1.239	0.144	22.92	0.243
<i>Happy for child to attend catchment</i>	-2.233	0.000	-.660	0.128	9.38	0.152
<i>Believe choice of school has significant impact on child’s success and/or happiness</i>	1.502	0.002	2.150	0.000	5.99	0.373

Note: Darker shading indicates stronger association. Green = associated with better experience; Red = associated with worse experience; Grey = non-significant

Figures 8.7 and 8.8 show that parents with a stronger desire for choice – those that think it is ‘very important’ as opposed to merely ‘somewhat’ or ‘not at all’ important - are more likely to find it stressful, but also to find it more interesting. There is also a strong relationship between the perceived stakes of choice and parents’ experiences: those that believe choice matters more in terms of its consequences for their child’s success and happiness also find it both more stressful and more interesting. Figure 8.8 further suggests that parents in Scotland that see choice as an opportunity for ‘maximising’ – those who say their foremost reason for wanting choice is to get their child into the ‘best possible school’ – find choice more interesting and stressful, though there is no such relationship in England. Conversely, there is some weaker evidence that parents that take a ‘satisficing’ approach find choice less interesting and stressful. Though I did not ask about satisficing directly, we would expect parents that are motivated to

choose by ‘push’ factors (avoiding their catchment school) to be more satisficing in their approach (Adler, Petch, and Tweedie 1989). Moreover, we might expect parents that are content with their catchment schools to be more likely to be satisficing, as this would seem to reflect a less exhaustive search process. Figures 8.7 and 8.8 show that parents who want choice primarily to avoid their catchment school, and those that are happy for their child to attend the catchment school, find school choice less stressful – although the relationship between stress and wanting choice to avoid the catchment school falls just short of statistical significance.

As with approach to choice, I was unable to find much of a significant relationship between parents’ attitudes and their satisfaction with the level of choice they have. The only exception – perhaps unsurprisingly – is that parents that are satisfied with their catchment school are more likely to be satisfied with the level of choice that they have.

#### **8.4 How Does Parents’ Choice Context Affect Their Experience?**

Parents’ experiences of school choice are likely to depend as much on the context in which they find themselves as on their attitudes or behaviour (*D in figure 8.1*). Most obviously, the level of formal and substantive choice that families have is affected by differences in national government policy, which are the overriding focus of this thesis. However, there are also differences in local policy: local authorities in England may permit families to express between three and six preferences on their application forms. There are also differences in geography: the number of feasible options will be affected by whether a family lives in a rural or urban area, and consequently how many schools they have accessible to them. As we have already seen, choice is not only a function of the number of options a person has, but also how likely they are to actually get them, with application success rates varying widely between schools and areas. Finally, a family’s choice context affects the type and quality of options open to them – different areas are more or less likely to have selective, religious or independent schools, and the academic performance of local schools may differ.

To examine how these differences in choice context affect parents’ experiences of choice, I linked the first part of survey respondents’ postcodes to their local educational authority and to the schools in their area. Based on their local educational authority, I determined how many preferences they were allowed to express, the proportion of pupils at independent schools and the proportion of state secondary pupils at faith or selective schools within the local authority,

as well as the proportion of students in the area getting their first-choice school. Based on their postcode, I classified them as living in a rural or urban area, and also identified the number of schools and average academic performance of schools within 5km.<sup>25</sup> Given the imprecision of these estimates of average local school performance, to avoid spurious accuracy, I have converted them into a relative measure, based on the survey quartiles.

While these measures offer an indication of the local environment within which parents are choosing, they may be more or less accurate in specific cases. Average measures may not reflect the part of the local authority in which a person lives, or the fact that schools in other local authorities are open to them. The postcode data gathered in the survey comes with a degree of imprecision as well, since postcode areas are quite large. However, they can offer some suggestive results.

Figure 8.9 shows the relationship between choice context and experience of choice for parents in England.

*Figure 8.9: Summary of results from a series of bivariable linear regressions (stressfulness/interestingness) and bivariable logistic regressions (satisfaction with level of choice) relating choice context to experience – England only*

	Stressfulness		Interestingness		Satisfaction with level of choice	
	Coeff.	p-value	Coeff.	p-value	Marginal Probability (percentage points)	p-value
<i>Number of preferences on local authority application</i>	.284	0.000	.109	0.108	-3.95	0.001
<i>Rural</i>	-.764	0.039	.203	0.527	8.54	0.173
<i>Number of state secondary schools within 5km</i>	.0513	0.000	.011	0.227	-0.60	0.000
<i>Proportion of students in local authority getting first preference</i>	-.060	0.000	-.015	0.098	0.64	0.000
<i>Proportion of state secondary students in local authority attending selective schools</i>	.011	0.305	.006	0.500	0.08	0.605
<i>Proportion of state secondary students in local</i>	-.007	0.404	.011	0.112	0.16	0.206

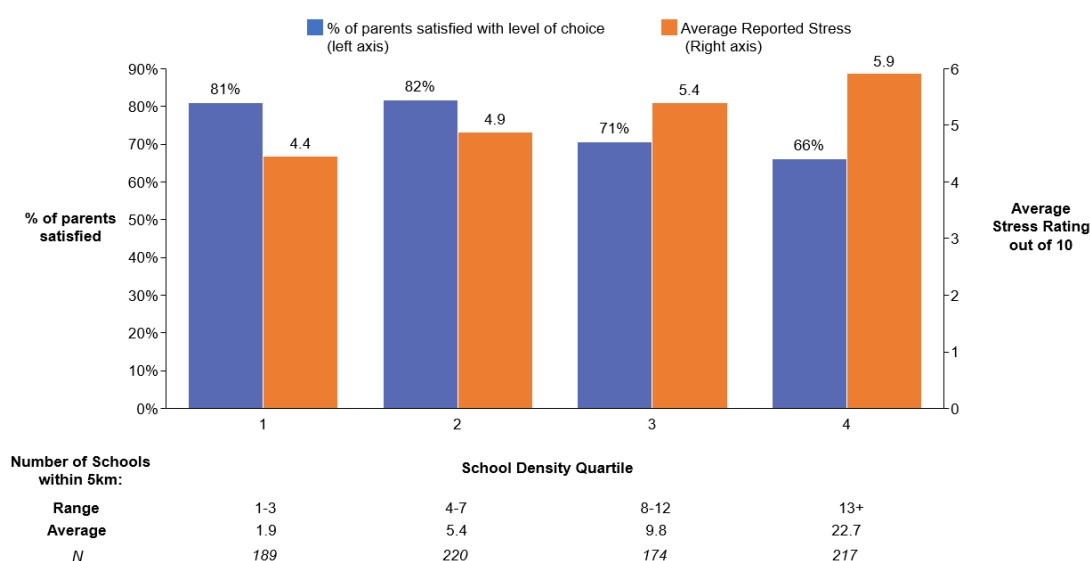
<sup>25</sup> For each outward postcode, I calculated ‘average’ coordinates from the full postcodes within the zone. I then used those coordinates to calculate the number of nearby schools and their average Ofsted rating using a database collating coordinates and performance data on every school in England kindly provided by Ellen Greaves of the University of Bristol. I created coordinates for Scottish schools by putting school postcodes (Scottish Government 2019) through an online geocoder (‘Doogal.Co.Uk’ n.d.) and linked schools by name to public examination performance data (Denholm 2019).

<i>authority attending faith schools</i>						
<i>Proportion of primary and secondary students in local authority attending independent schools</i>	.028	0.078	.018	0.189	-0.48	0.037
<i>Quartile of Average Academic Performance of schools within 5km</i>	.053	0.544	.107	0.159	0.08	0.953

*Note: For proportion variables, coefficient represents effect of a percentage point increase on the outcome. Darker shading indicates stronger association. Green = associated with better experience; Red = associated with worse experience; Grey = non-significant*

Perhaps the most striking and apparently perverse finding is that parents with more options available to them are less satisfied and more stressed. Those that have more schools in their vicinity and that are permitted to express more preferences are less likely to say they had enough choice. 80% of parents in local authorities allowing three preferences say they have enough choice compared to 67% of those in local authorities permitting six preferences. As figure 8.10 shows, those numbers are strikingly similar to the effect of local school density. Just over 80% of parents in the bottom half of survey respondents in terms of local school density (fewer than 7 schools within 5km) are satisfied with their perceived level of choice. By contrast, 66% in the top quartile (23 schools on average within 5km) are satisfied. Parents with three or fewer schools within 5km rated the process 4.4 out of 10 in terms of stressfulness. Those with more than 12 rated it as 5.9 out of 10. Parents in rural areas tended to be less stressed (although no less likely to be dissatisfied).

*Figure 8.10: Satisfaction with choice and stressfulness by school density quartile – England only*



This mirrors the pattern we saw in chapters 6 and 7: just as families in Scotland seemed to be less stressed and dissatisfied than families in England despite having less formal choice, so within England, parents in areas of less formal choice appear to have less negative experiences.

These findings are at least partly explained by the fact that choice tends to be less efficacious for parents with more options, and so they may have less substantive choice. Local authorities are more likely to canvass additional preferences if a substantial number of families do not get any of their top three. Places with higher school density tend to have fewer successful first preferences. It is clear from figure 8.9 that parents living in local authorities with lower application success rates are far more stressed and far less likely to be satisfied with their perceived level of choice. Living in a local authority where the share of children receiving their first choice is 10 percentage points lower – equivalent to the difference between Camden and Waltham Forest or between Liverpool and Salford – is associated with a 0.6 point increase in reported stress and a 6 percentage point increase in the probability of being dissatisfied with the level of choice.

Though we might have expected parents with a higher performing set of schools to choose from to have a better experience, there was in fact no relationship between Ofsted ratings for local schools and reported stress, interest or satisfaction. Nor did having more selective or faith schools make any difference. However, living in a local authority where more children attend private schools did increase dissatisfaction and was associated with higher stress (though this relationship was not statistically significant). This may be because living in an area where many other families send their children to private schools increases the perceived pressure on parents, something that a few of my interview participants suggested. Alternatively, it could be because private school demand is higher in places where navigating the state system is more stressful, causing more families to ‘opt out’.

As figure 8.11 shows, the picture is completely different in Scotland, where local context is generally unrelated to experiences of choice. North of the border, there is almost no systematic relationship between local school density or the success rate of placing requests and levels of stress, interest and satisfaction with choice. As in England, local school performance does not make a difference either. The only comparable phenomenon between the two countries is that parents in local authorities with a higher share of privately educated students are significantly less satisfied with their perceived level of choice.



Figure 8.11: Summary of results from a series of bivariable linear regressions (stressfulness/interestingness) and bivariable logistic regressions (satisfaction with level of choice) relating choice context to experience – Scotland only (unweighted)

	Stressfulness		Interestingness		Satisfaction with level of choice	
	Coeff.	p-value	Coeff.	p-value	Marginal Probability (percentage points)	p-value
<i>Rural</i>	.321	0.632	.321	0.586	-11.88	0.158
<i>Number of state secondary schools within 5km</i>	.043	0.398	.006	0.890	0.04	0.958
<i>Proportion of placing requests granted</i>	-2.967	0.215	-2.344	0.268	-0.15	0.664
<i>Proportion of state secondary students in local authority attending faith schools</i>	1.168	0.458	.465	0.739	0.01	0.961
<i>Proportion of primary and secondary students in local authority attending independent schools</i>	7.177	0.164	5.421	0.237	-1.50	0.024
<i>Quartile of Average Academic Performance of schools within 5km</i>	.029	0.877	-.011	0.949	1.91	0.476

Note: Red = associated with worse experience; Grey = non-significant

## 8.5 How Does Household Context Affect Parents' Experience of Choice?

I now turn to the relationship between household context and experiences of choice (*J* in figure 8.1). The main measure of socio-economic status captured in the survey is the parent's level of education. This is of interest in its own right, since parents' previous experiences with the education system often affect their actions in relation to their children's education (Gorard 1997b). It also provides an indication of how socially advantaged they currently are. From survey respondents' postcodes I also derived the index of multiple deprivation (IMD) for the area in which they live, and sorted survey respondents into equal quartiles (separately for England and Scotland, because Scottish IMDs are separate). Strictly speaking, this relates to where they live rather than their personal characteristics, so some might consider this more relevant to choice context than household context. However, I am using it here – as IMD is often used – as a proxy for household deprivation, assuming that people in socially disadvantaged areas are more likely to be socially disadvantaged themselves. In the survey, I captured respondents' ethnicity and where they were educated, and we can use this to determine whether ethnic minorities or

people brought up abroad (i.e. mainly immigrants) have better or worse experiences. In this section, I will also look at the effect of child order – whether the child in question had older siblings – as in my interviews, this often influenced the process of choosing for the younger sibling.

As in the previous sections, I ran a series of bivariable regressions to explore the relationship between household context and how stressed, interested or satisfied parents were.

*Figure 8.12: Summary of results from a series of bivariable linear regressions (stressfulness/interestingness) and bivariable logistic regressions (satisfaction with level of choice) relating household context to experience – England only*

	Stressfulness		Interestingness		Satisfaction with level of choice	
	Coeff.	p-value	Coeff.	p-value	Marginal Probability (percentage points)	p-value
<i>University educated</i>	.569	0.007	.085	0.647	-7.36	0.020
<i>Index of Multiple Deprivation Quartile (higher = less deprived)</i>	-.300	0.001	.049	0.531	1.77	0.193
<i>Schooled outside UK</i>	1.171	0.004	.158	0.656	-17.32	0.001
<i>Non-white ethnicity</i>	.772	0.014	-.134	0.627	-14.65	0.001
<i>Only/ oldest child</i>	.953	0.000	.251	0.152	-9.54	0.002

*Note: Darker shading indicates stronger association. Green = associated with better experience; Red = associated with worse experience; Grey = non-significant*

*Figure 8.13: Summary of results from a series of bivariable linear regressions (stressfulness/interestingness) and bivariable logistic regressions (satisfaction with level of choice) relating household context to experience – Scotland only (unweighted)*

	Stressfulness		Interestingness		Satisfaction with level of choice	
	Coeff.	p-value	Coeff.	p-value	Marginal Probability (percentage points)	p-value
<i>University educated</i>	.071	0.877	.351	0.391	0.68	0.917
<i>Index of Multiple Deprivation Quartile (higher = less deprived)</i>	-.186	0.338	.004	0.982	-0.71	0.795
<i>Schooled outside UK</i>	.404	0.596	.661	0.336	-7.41	0.456
<i>Non-white ethnicity</i>	1.001	0.288	.308	0.717	-10.99	0.363
<i>Only/ oldest child</i>	.335	0.464	-.071	0.862	-15.71	0.021

*Note: Red = associated with worse experience; Grey = non-significant*

Figure 8.12 suggests that the relationship between social disadvantage and parental experience of school choice in England is ambiguous. On the one hand, university educated parents find school choice more stressful and are less likely to feel they have enough choice (figure 8.14). On the other hand, parents that live in more deprived areas find choice more stressful (figure 8.15). By contrast, in Scotland, there is no statistically significant relationship between parental education or IMD and experience of choice (figure 8.13).

Previous studies have tended to suggest less advantaged families find choice more confusing and disorientating. However, these findings suggest a more nuanced picture. On one measure of social advantage – educational attainment – better-off parents have a worse experience, finding choice more stressful. Perhaps this should not be surprising – previous research has shown that parents with higher social class, education and income tend to be more engaged with school choice (Montacute and Cullinane 2018), and it is understandable if this deeper engagement brings greater worry. However, this does not explain why using a different measure of social advantage – IMD – the conventional wisdom is vindicated.

*Figure 8.14: Reported Stress and Satisfaction Level by parental education*

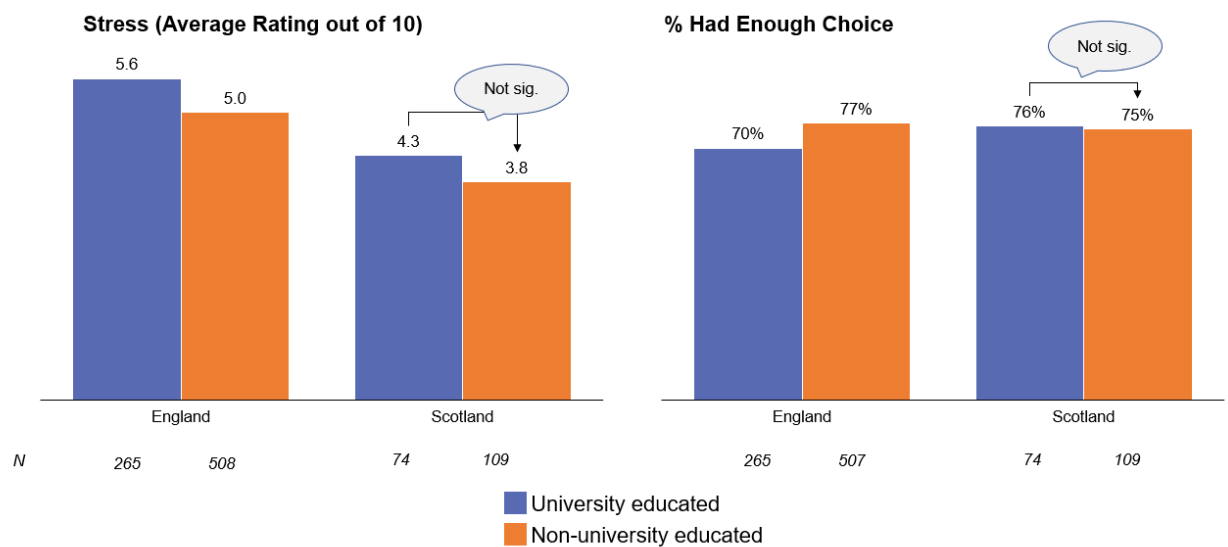
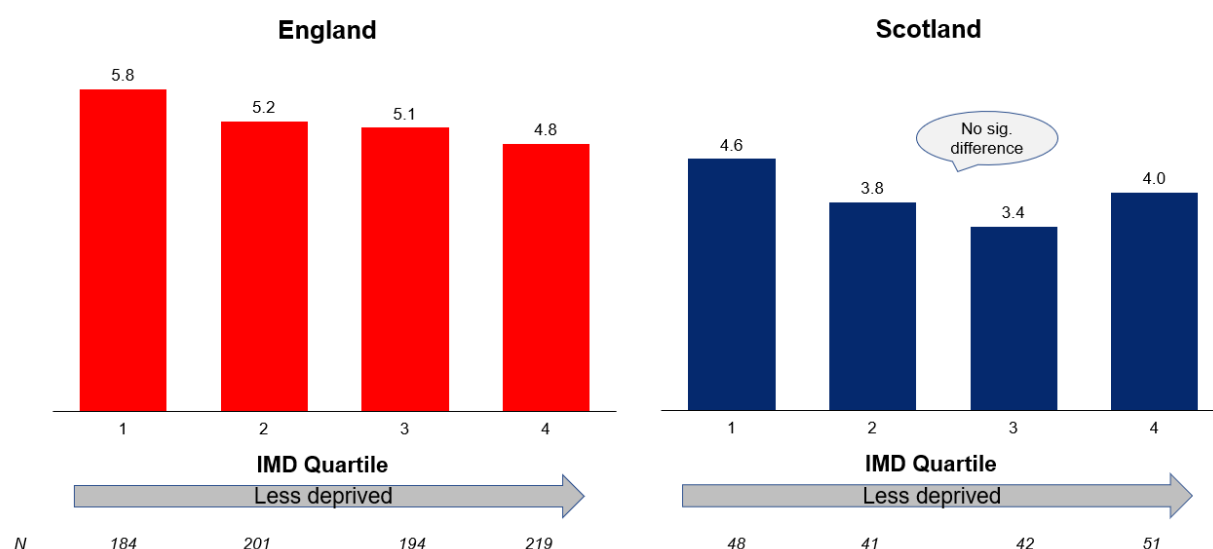


Figure 8.15: Reported Stress (Average out of 10) by Index of Multiple Deprivation Quartile



Far clearer is the finding that foreign and ethnic minority parents have worse experiences, certainly in England. In England, parents schooled outside the UK are around 1 point more stressed on average, and non-White parents are around 0.9 points more stressed. Whereas 75% of all respondents believe that they had enough choice, only 60% of ethnic minority parents and 58% of parents educated outside the UK were satisfied. The coefficients in the Scottish analyses suggest that foreign and ethnic minorities may have worse experiences there too, but there is no statistically significant relationship, possibly because the survey is underpowered to detect them.

These findings are in line with previous research indicating that foreign and minority parents have less knowledge of the system and less support from their social networks (Byrne and De Tona 2012). It may also be because of the additional concerns around discrimination that minority families face:

*“I’ve heard one school’s not very good when it comes to Black people”* (Chanel, Black mother, Ipswich)

*“I went in and started looking at the reviews of other parents. And the minority parents had put down that they felt that their child was being victimised for being minority, kind of thing. And then I thought to myself ‘no way’.”* (Khalida, South Asian mother, Camden)

*“He went to his induction, trial two days, there was few Asians, from first day they felt like they’ve got friends, that’s another reason [we chose the school]”* (Kumar, South Asian father, Scotstown)

The results in figure 8.12 and 8.13 also indicate that parents are more satisfied and less stressed when choosing for younger children, compared to choosing for an eldest or only child. Figures 8.16 and 8.17 illustrate these results. In England, parents choosing for the first time were 1 point more stressed than those choosing for younger children. Around 70% of those new to school choice felt they had enough choice, compared to over 80% for those with previous experience.

Figure 8.16: Reported Stress (Average out of 10) by Child Order

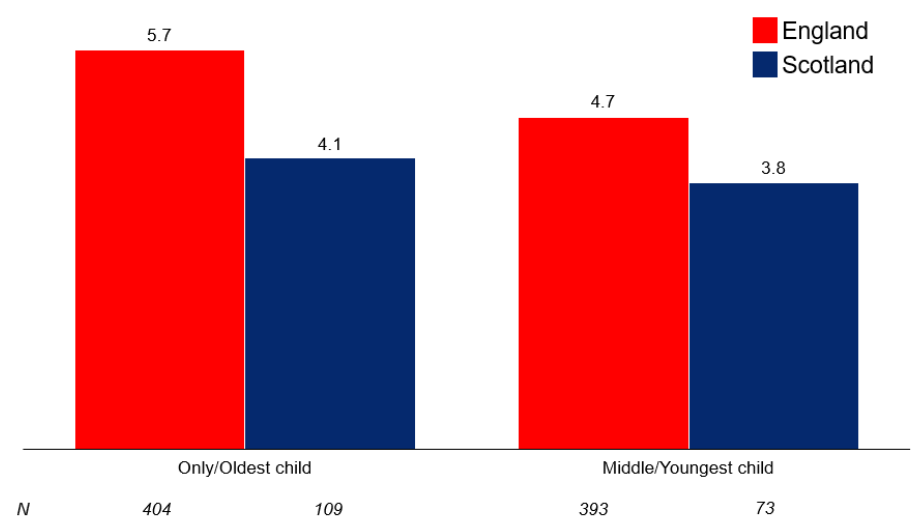
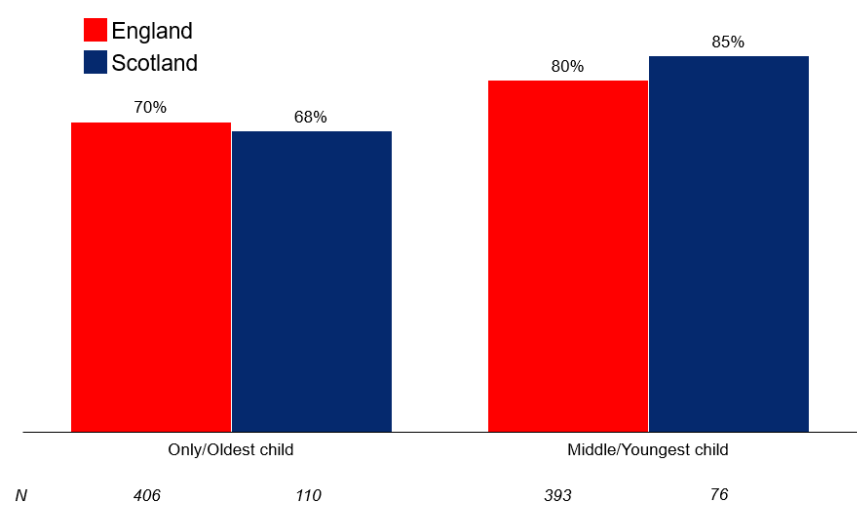


Figure 8.17: Proportion of parents that said they had enough choice by Child Order



This is understandable: the process of choosing a school is very different for younger children. For many, there may be a clear expectation that they will follow their older siblings to the same school. Even if that is not the case, parents will often have a better understanding of the system and the schools in the area from having been through the process before. Either way, choosing a school should be more straightforward the second, third or fourth time through.

## 8.6 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have examined how the various experiences of school choice I have described over the previous two chapters overlap. I have shown that positive experiences – finding the process interesting and enjoyable – go together for parents. I have also shown that negative experiences – finding choice stressful, anxiety-provoking, inconvenient, mentally burdensome and worrying about choosing wrong – also tend to go together. I have shown that parents are more likely to be satisfied with their level of choice if they have more positive and less negative experiences.

I have also examined how these experiences of choice vary across different types of parents. Figure 8.18 summarises the main findings.

*Figure 8.18: Summary of associations between parental characteristics and experiences of choice*

	<b>Factors associated with finding choice more stressful</b>	<b>Factors associated with finding choice more interesting</b>	<b>Factors associated with being less satisfied with choice</b>
<b>Approach</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Starting the process a year or two in advance</li> <li>Considering more schools</li> <li>Using more (especially hard) sources</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Starting the process a year in advance (Scotland)</li> <li>Considering more schools</li> <li>Using more sources</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Considering more schools (England)</li> </ul>
<b>Attitude</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Thinking choice is ‘very important’</li> <li>Maximising (Scotland)</li> <li>Being dissatisfied with catchment school</li> <li>Believing choice has higher stakes</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Thinking choice is ‘very important’</li> <li>Maximising (Scotland)</li> <li>Believing choice has higher stakes</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Being dissatisfied with catchment school (England)</li> </ul>
<b>Choice context</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>More options: urban, more preferences, more schools nearby (England)</li> <li>Lower efficacy of choice (England)</li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>More options: more preferences, more schools nearby (England)</li> <li>Lower efficacy of choice (England)</li> <li>More local children private</li> </ul>
<b>Household context</b>	(All England only) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>University educated</li> <li>More deprived IMD</li> <li>Foreign/Non-white</li> <li>Choosing for older child</li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>University educated (England)</li> <li>Foreign/Non-white (England)</li> <li>Choosing for older child</li> </ul>

The findings indicate that the process of school choice does compound at least some forms of social inequality. Certainly, ethnic minorities and parents educated abroad have worse experiences: they are more stressed and less likely to be satisfied with their level of choice.

Parents living in more deprived neighbourhoods are also more likely to be stressed. On the other hand, non-graduates find school choice less stressful than graduates.

These findings suggest that some of the differences between England and Scotland outlined in previous chapters are mirrored within those countries. Those chapters established that parents in England find school choice both more of a positive experience (interesting and enjoyable) and a negative experience (stressful, inconvenient and anxiety-provoking) than parents in Scotland. This chapter has shown that parents within England that look more like Scottish parents have directionally similar outcomes. Those that have fewer options, less uncertainty over their outcome, greater confidence in their catchment school, weaker belief in the value and consequence of school choice and who do less research on fewer schools are less stressed and more satisfied, just like the majority of Scottish parents. Conversely, those parents within Scotland that behave more like English parents, engaging more deeply and valuing choice more, tend to find it more interesting but also more stressful.

Combined with the findings of the previous two chapters, these results potentially provide some insight into the mechanisms by which school choice creates value or disvalue. Consistent with the notion that *efficacy* and *certainty* matter is the finding that parents in areas with a higher share of successful preferences and parents who are satisfied with their catchment school are less stressed and more satisfied with their level of choice. The fact that considering more schools and using more sources leads to greater stress supports the claim that the stress is caused by the burdens of choice, in terms of time and physical and mental energy. The link between the perceived importance of choice and stress suggests that believing choice to have higher stakes does indeed create pressure. Given the heavy overlap between these different factors, and the possibility of alternative explanations consistent with this data, I cannot claim to have demonstrated these are all causal relationships. At the very least, though, the findings are suggestive.

The findings of this chapter also help explain why differences between England and Scotland are not greater, by highlighting the fixed structural factors that limit the effect of policy. Talking of English parents behaving like Scots or Scottish parents behaving like the English only draws attention to the overlap between the two, in terms of household context, choice context, attitudes and approach. Living in a more rural location, and so having fewer schools accessible to them, restricts the number of options a family can possibly consider in a way that school choice policy is unlikely to significantly alter. However difficult choosing is for an older sibling, it will usually be easier for younger siblings. Though attitudes and approaches to choice do seem

to be responsive to differences in policy, they do not shift easily: for all the emphasis on school choice in England, a fifth of parents still only consider a single school, and over half consider no more than two.

These structural differences can help put the impact of policy, or at least the difference between experiences in England and Scotland, into perspective. Recall that Scottish parents are 1.2 points out of 10 less stressed on average than English parents (5.2 vs 4.0), and that English parents found school choice 0.8 points (6.1 vs 5.2) more interesting. We now have a number of benchmarks to compare these figures against. We now know that the difference between English and Scottish parents in terms of how interesting or stressful they found school choice is equivalent to the (not necessarily causal) effect of considering two extra schools or using two extra sources of information in England. We know that parents in the most deprived quartile of IMDs in the Scottish survey are less stressed on average than those in the least deprived quartile in the English survey. That Scottish parents choosing for their first or only child are less stressed than English parents that have already been through the process at least once. And that the gap between England and Scotland in terms of stress is equivalent to two quartiles of school density or a 20 percentage point difference in terms of share of first preferences accepted.

All the same, these abstracted numerical measures cannot fully capture and express the stress, uncertainty, frustration and enjoyment of choosing a school. To better understand what the experience of choosing a school is like, how significantly it affects people, we should combine them with qualitative descriptions of the process. The next chapter supplies that additional perspective in the form of detailed profiles of interview participants.



## 9. Interview Profiles

In chapters 6 and 7, I addressed my research questions directly, using both interview and survey data. Over the course of those chapters, I considered in turn each of the potential intrinsic benefits and costs of choice that I identified in my theoretical framework from chapter 3. In chapter 8, I examined how those costs and benefits vary between different types of family. Insofar as I drew on interview data in those chapters, it was by aligning themes to the empirical questions raised in the theoretical framework. A limitation of this thematic approach is that it strips data from the context of the particular interview, making it harder for the reader to see how different responses fit together and interact in particular cases. In losing the ability to consider data in such a holistic contextual fashion, we lose a major potential benefit of qualitative interviews.

To make up for this limitation of the way I have presented my findings so far, in this chapter I profile in greater detail seven families that I believe provided particularly revealing interviews. I have chosen to leave this to the final chapter so that these profiles can be read against the background of the more general findings already described. That allows us to put the interviews in their wider context, with an understanding of how idiosyncratic or reflective they are of the wider population, while deepening our understanding of those earlier established themes and findings.

Selecting participants to profile requires some judgement and discretion, and an unavoidable loss of information, given the infeasibility of discussing all 57 families in detail. In this chapter, I have decided to focus on two families that found choice straightforward, two families that found choice stressful and anxiety-provoking and two families that found choice disempowering. This approach reflects the most significant findings of the thesis so far: while school choice is easy and unproblematic for many (perhaps most) families, it has a significant negative effect on the subjective welfare or perceived control of many others. In each case, I have selected one family from England and one family from Scotland to highlight the commonalities and differences between the two countries. However, I have added a seventh profile, focusing on an English family whose problems are distinctively English, and, as such, help demonstrate the impact of the different approaches in each country.

Though these profiles may each be thought to reflect a different ‘segment’ of the population, these segments are crudely drawn. They are not mutually exclusive. Families that find choice stressful and anxiety-provoking may also find it disempowering. Indeed, they are more likely to

find it disempowering. Moreover, there is substantial heterogeneity within groups. As we have seen, there are myriad reasons to find school choice stressful: uncertainty, reconciling inconsistent information, pressure, regret, agonising dilemmas, time constraints and mental burden. I have not attempted to cover all of these in the profiles I have selected.

It is important to emphasise that these profiles are not numerically representative. As we saw in chapters 6 and 7, three-quarters of parents in England were satisfied with their perceived level of choice and not highly stressed or anxious. In Scotland, those figures are even higher, at least for stress and anxiety. Yet in this chapter, I put greater emphasis on negative experiences. First, simply because there is more of interest to say about them. Tolstoy's (2012, 1) aphorism that "All happy families resemble one another, each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way" may or may not be a general truth, but I certainly found it to apply to families choosing schools. If school choice was pleasant and painless, it went off in basically a similar way. If it was a tribulation, there are many potential reasons why. Second, and this chapter will hopefully convey this, because negative experiences were more intensely felt and vehemently expressed than positive ones. Good experiences were generally only mildly positive. Bad ones could be deeply troubling, to the point almost of trauma. Third, because identifying problems to solve, seeking to understand whether and why some people have unnecessarily unpleasant and difficult experiences of school choice, is likely to be of greater use and relevance to policymakers than dwelling on those already well served by existing policies. That shift in focus requires us, however, not to lose sight of those that are contented with the status quo – when we come to evaluate the system all things considered its existing benefits should not be absentmindedly tossed overboard.

The main objective of this chapter is to provide a clearer sense of what it is like to choose a school. First and foremost, it is trying to demonstrate the intensity or lack thereof with which people experience the intrinsic costs and benefits of school choice, an idea of their magnitude and importance. It is also intended to show how different themes that have been extracted from particular interviews in previous chapters may fit together, and also to demonstrate the tensions and inconsistencies that sometimes occur in participants' accounts. Moreover, this chapter also seeks to offer a glimpse into how the interview data was collected: the setting, structure and dynamics of the interviews.

## 9.1 Families That Found Choice Straightforward

### 9.11 Jackie & Megan (Dundee)

Jackie and Megan were typical of the families I spoke to in Dundee, and indeed most of the families I interviewed across Scotland. They had no objection to their catchment school, and so never considered an alternative. The interview is interesting because Jackie was one of the most engaged on the merits of the Scottish system, and particularly the benefit of continuity between primary and secondary school.

Jackie volunteered to participate in my research at a primary school parents' evening. I interviewed her along with her daughter Megan at a café in central Dundee in mid-February 2019. Jackie is an accountant, her husband is an engineer. Both are White Scottish and university educated. As well as Megan, they have an older son who was 14.

In both children's cases, it had been a foregone conclusion that they would go to [School A]. Not only was it the default allocated school, Jackie also believed it to be the best school in the city: "we know a few of the teachers there as well. There's not any trouble or anything at it, you never hear any stories about that". [School B] is also close to their house, but there was no consideration given to that or any other alternative: "[School A] is our natural – we are within that catchment area. Yeah, I didn't think about going elsewhere. The school's got a good reputation, my son's flourished in it". Jackie attended [School A] herself when she was a child, but claimed that this was not a factor in their decision.

While the family did little formal research in comparing schools, they did visit [School A], and the experience validated their decision. Interestingly, the school visit was described in similar terms to English parents, as an interesting and enjoyable experience:

*"we actually got to go into the school, got a tour of the school, and it wasn't only the teachers that were taking you around, it was the children that were taking you around as well, and they were giving you the story behind it, which was excellent, and then the head teacher gave you a spiel about tables and extra-curricular activities and they were obviously boasting about everything they possibly could, which is absolutely quite right."*

For Megan, secondary school has always been synonymous with [School A], and her main feeling was excitement about moving to a bigger school, with little thought given to alternative

possibilities. One benefit of this certainty that Megan seemed to appreciate was that [School A] had given her the opportunity to nominate three friends to be in her secondary school class, which gave her confidence that she would have at least some familiar classmates to ease the transition.

Though Jackie had accepted her catchment school, she still insisted that the ability to choose her daughter's school was important and valuable. She felt perfectly empowered and satisfied with her experience as it had played out: "I did have a choice. The choice that was there was accepted willingly". However, she was clear that if she had not approved of her zoned school she would have sought an alternative, and she feared in that case she might have been frustrated: "You have a choice not to send her to the catchment area. But after that, that's outwith your hands, you don't have a choice. You will be put where there's a space for her".

Though Jackie recognises drawbacks to the Scottish approach, she was aghast as I described the English system. She saw it as unfair that moving near a school does not necessarily secure a place there:

Jackie: *You could move, like, here [points]. Yeah, you could actually physically move into the catchment area, and you're not necessarily...*

Me: *Guaranteed anything, no.*

Jackie: *Right, well you've no choice. Where is the choice in that then?*

In particular, she saw the uncertainty of having to wait until National Offer Day for school allocations as intolerable:

*"if I was in England, and I didn't know...that must be horrific. To think that you don't know where your child is going to be taught for the next six years? And she's not going to get into the school that you want, and you're not guaranteed a place, and she may end up some place where her friends may not be. The standard of education is not good as the one - that must just - I wouldn't like that."*

On that basis, Jackie concluded that the Scottish system was preferable, combining the security of a sure place at the zoned school alongside the opportunity to apply elsewhere: "I think it's quite good what we have here, you get your catchment area, you could then apply to other schools, not guaranteed you're going to get them, but at least if you are in that catchment area you are guaranteed".

Jackie and Megan offer an example of a family in Scotland for whom school choice is a formality, sparing them the angst and worry of many of their English counterparts. They also demonstrate the value put on continuity from primary to secondary school. Jackie's views on the relative

merits of the English and Scottish systems were interesting, in that she claimed to feel adequately empowered by the Scottish system and had no attraction at all to the English system.

### *9.12 Kelly (Camden)*

Kelly offers an interesting point of comparison with Jackie and Megan. She had the most straightforward experience of choice of any of the people I spoke to in Camden, and an easier time of it than most of my Ipswich participants too. Yet choosing a school involved far more work for her, in terms of research and visits, than it did for Jackie or Megan. Moreover, she was troubled by an apparent sense of guilt that she had not done more.

Kelly first signalled her interest in participating in the research at a Meet the Parents event in September 2018. She was unavailable to be involved in the first round of interviews, but responded to my request for additional non-graduate participants in October 2019. We met in a spare office in her workplace.

Kelly is an office manager. Her husband is a physical trainer. Both are White English, from London. She has two daughters, 11 and 9 at the time of the interview. We discussed her eldest daughter, who had just started secondary school, having made the choice a year prior to the interview.

Kelly's first choice school was [School A], where she felt certain her daughter would get a place "because we are probably the nearest house to the school". Altogether, she applied to two schools, [School A and School B], and visited two, [School A and School C]. She did not apply to [School C] because she and her daughter found the open evening uninspiring. She repeatedly expressed regret at not having visited [School B]. She "probably would have gone for [School A] anyway, but I would have liked to have a better idea of what the alternatives are".

Kelly started considering secondary schools when her daughter was in year 5, the penultimate year of primary school, "but we didn't look at any schools at that time. And I really regretted that. I wish I'd started the process sooner". It was not until year 6 that the process began in earnest, visiting schools, attending Meet the Parents events, consulting league tables and Ofsted reports and speaking to parents at the schools. The family's decision was also strongly influenced by the advice of her brother, who works in education.

For Kelly, the demandingness of the process of evaluating schools had come as a surprise: “obviously you want to spend the time, but like I said to you, it's all in a really small couple of weeks. So it's two or three hours if you went to all of them and I think that's one of the reasons I didn't go to look at [School B] because I felt that the two was enough”. In her comments, there was a tension between the time and energy that she was willing to commit to choosing a school, and her desire to consider her options in greater depth. If Kelly had started looking at schools earlier, she suggested, she could have spread this commitment over a longer period, and lessened the pressure.

Despite having opted for her local school, the seeming default, Kelly was strongly committed to the idea of choice: “It's really important because I want her to do much better than me and my husband have done. I want her to go to university...it's not just like, ‘Oh, she's just going to go to the nearest school because it's convenient for me’”. In her daughter’s case, she was extremely satisfied with her perceived level of choice: “I think we’re lucky that we’ve got such a selection of schools in Camden, and they’re all near to me”. At the same time, she recognised that the system does not work so well for many others: “I can imagine, people don’t get their first choice, it must be awful”.

Kelly had a relatively positive experience of choice by the standards of my English participants. She applied to her nearest school, saving her the anxiety of uncertainty. She was confident in her decision, with all the information she gathered reinforcing her initial instincts. She only seriously considered two schools and only visited two. Yet she found the process of choosing considerably more onerous than Jackie and Megan in Dundee, who also opted for their local school. Though she does not believe it would have changed her decision, she feels a residual guilt that she did not explore alternative options in greater detail.

In choosing to compare Kelly with Jackie and Megan, I have not loaded the dice against England. Among all the English families that had a relatively straightforward choice of schools, I found some source of disquiet or slight worry, as in Kelly’s case. Though it was not always the thought that they should have considered more schools, it might have been a frustration at the amount of work involved, or niggling uncertainty or dissatisfaction with the information provided. By contrast, I could have selected any number of cases like Jackie’s and Megan’s in Scotland – families that barely thought about choosing a different secondary school, but felt satisfied and empowered all the same.

## 9.2 Families That Found Choice Stressful and Anxiety Provoking

### 9.21 Zofia & Zuzanna (Ipswich)

Zofia had perhaps the most extreme response to choosing a school of anybody I spoke to. Unlike most participants, she faced a genuine dilemma. She also struggled to make sense of the various sources of information at her disposal. Her story demonstrates that choice overload is not only a phenomenon of big cities, but provincial ones like Ipswich as well.

Zofia volunteered to participate in the study at a parent's information event at her daughter's primary school. In late October, a week before the application deadline, I interviewed her along with her daughter Zuzanna at their home, a small terraced house on a busy road. Zofia did most of the talking, and she had a lot to say – the interview seemed rather cathartic for her. Zuzanna, by contrast, was fairly shy and subdued, and most of her answers were curt. Zofia is a housewife, and her husband works in a poultry factory. They are originally from Poland, and it is five years since Zofia joined her husband in the UK, bringing Zuzanna and their younger son (now aged eight).

Even before I could complete my first question, it was clear that this had been a difficult and emotional process for Zofia:

*Me: So you're choosing a school now, presumably putting in the application form -*

*Zofia: Yeah, it's really stressful to be honest. Choosing the right school, it's horrible, to be honest.*

Zofia had been thinking about secondary schools for over a year by this point, prompted by her friends, who have a child in the year above Zuzanna. Zofia's initial response was “a kind of panic. I'm not ready, I'm not ready for the next step!”: anxiety about leaving the comfort and familiarity of primary school, the fact of her daughter growing up, and the pressure to choose the right school fusing together. In the intervening period, school choice had loomed ever larger and started to dominate her thoughts: “to be honest, last six weeks it's the main part of our lives. It's just open evenings, speaking about that in every moment almost”.

Zofia's husband had mostly left the decision to her and Zuzanna, and so she felt the greatest share of the burden. The pressure was quite significant because Zofia believed the choice of schools to be highly consequential for Zuzanna's future:

*“This decision for me, it’s on the same - almost the same - level like when we decided that we will be living in the UK.”*

*“the hardest thing is that that will be consequence not for me, it will be for my child. And I feel twice more responsibility for taking that decision because it’s her life And I could start doing something good or bad. My husband told me ‘don’t worry in every school they teach more or less the same and it’s depend on her whether she will be really wanting to learn something it doesn’t matter in which school’ and it was good, that really calmed me down for a few minutes.”*

This pressure was exacerbated by the fact that Zofia felt rushed in her decision. In her view (shared by many Ipswich parents), the process of school choice did not start properly until the end of the summer break in September, which left just two months to choose a school: “you know it’s not too much time and you know that you have to choose one”.

When I spoke to them, Zofia and Zuzanna had decided to put [School A] as their first-choice school, [School B] as second and [School C] third. Zofia had initially been recommended [School A] by a friend, and had been impressed by the warmth and friendliness of their open day. Zofia favoured [School B] on religious grounds, but had been somewhat put off by their open day, where teachers had tended to address her, ignoring Zuzanna. [School C], with old and outdated facilities, had made an even worse impression.

It had taken a long time and a lot of research to arrive at this ranking: Zofia used Ofsted reports, school websites, discussion with other parents and open days to inform the decision: “We spent in three different schools three hours at every school, it’s a lot of time”. Some of this activity, particularly the school visits, was enjoyable: “When we do something interesting in schools because they open some classroom, show some technology or design or some cooking, that was something nice that we can do together”.

However, Zofia’s overriding sentiment was confusion and disorientation, overwhelmed by the weight of evidence to appraise:

*“in some moment I was so so so struggled, so dizzy with so many information, too much information for me. It was different school, different options and I think ‘oh it’s too much I just need to close that, go on holiday and just make lottery when we came back and choose that school and it will be the end.”*

*“I think I was calmer in the spring when I had less information. Yeah, when I had less information because I thought ‘oh it’s quite easy: this is good, this is in the middle, this is not the best I think, it’s not bad but not the best’. I think it was easy but now I think it’s not working like that, it’s more complicated.”*



The task was particularly tricky because different sources of evidence conflicted with one another and Zofia found it difficult to know how far to trust them:

*“From the one side you have all the information from schools and Ofsted. From the other side you start to speak with other parents and you start to compare impressions and ideas about schools and you think ‘oh god it was easier before we started doing anything’.”*

*“it’s a lot of information and you know that some of that information they are a little bit more smooth than true. Statistic, that’s another way of lying.”*

*“every headteacher now it’s like a manager, they want to sell you as the best view of their schools”*

Unlike some other parents, who rapidly reached firm conclusions about which schools they liked and which ones they did not, Zofia was conflicted and uncertain throughout the process: “you think this one is nice, and this one is nice, and this one is nice, and that one is nice, and you still think ‘So what should I do? How I should feel? I should ask, or not?’”.

Zuzanna clearly felt involved in the process of choosing a school, and had visited all three options while remaining less perturbed than her mother:

Me: *And who’s decision is it, is it Zuzanna’s decision, is it your decision?*

Zuzanna: *Mine*

While Zofia agreed “it’s her decision because it’s she will be going to some school”, and did seem to take Zuzanna’s impressions and feelings into account, it was clear that Zofia also guided Zuzanna’s judgements to make sure that she came to an acceptable decision from Zofia’s perspective:

*“And you think in one moment you need to trust your child and speak like with a grown up about what do you think, how do you feel in that situation, and in the same time you need to put right things in your child’s head. I know it’s a manipulation, I know it’s horrible but being a parent is sometimes like a motivation you need to just put a right thing in the head of your child.”*

Overall, Zofia believed that the process of choosing a school had been good for her relationship with her daughter:

*“I think we are closer because we need to speak and we need more to trust each other.”*

*“We are more happier because we have to spend time together...it was good for me to understand that my child grow up.”*

Zofia remained concerned that she would choose the wrong school, though she seemed to be trying to tamp this concern down by reducing the stakes of the decision in her mind: “I’m really

worried. I don't know, it's the way of being good or wrong. Because even if we choose the best school and she could match not the best company and it could be wrong decision”.

Overall, Zofia was ambivalent about the value of choice. She said that being able to choose a school for Zuzanna is “really important because we want to feel that we can decide about her education”. On the other hand, she saw definite downsides to having to choose, especially compared to her native Poland, where most students attend their nearest school: “in some ways that was easier because we didn’t think about any choices, just everybody went in the same school”. It was clear that Zofia was attracted to the continuity of local secondary schools where most students know each other from primary, but she also felt that some students might benefit from a new start in new surroundings. She believed that in Poland schools are more rooted in their community, and so the process of secondary transition carries less risk and unfamiliarity. She declined to choose between the English and Polish system, concluding “they have a bright and dark side on every option”.

Zofia demonstrates how extremely anxious and difficult the process of choosing a school can be for parents. She shows that processing and evaluating conflicting sources of evidence can be overwhelming, even in a smaller educational market like Ipswich. Choosing a school was not quite so fraught for most other English parents I spoke to, but as we saw in chapter 7, these problems were hardly unique to Zofia.

### *9.22 Lisa & Angus (Edinburgh)*

While school choice was straightforward for a large majority of the Scottish families I interviewed, the emotions and experiences of the minority that made an active choice were often strikingly similar to those I found in English participants. School choice is not always free of stress and anxiety in Scotland, but more people are spared stress and anxiety by being able to default to their catchment school. Lisa and Angus illustrate this perfectly. They also highlight the fact that while most families making active choices in Scotland do so via a placing request, this is not the only way choice occurs.

I recruited Lisa at a parents’ evening at her son’s primary school, and met her again at her home, a grand Victorian terraced house, in early March. She invited me first to interview her son Angus in their large dining room, and then to speak to her alone. Lisa is a university lecturer and her husband is a doctor. Both are White Scottish. As well as Angus, they have two younger children:

a 9-year old son and a 4-year old daughter. They moved to their current area seven years ago, seeking a larger house to accommodate their growing family, but also aware it contained more reputable schools.

Under Edinburgh City Council's rules, Angus was zoned for two secondary schools: the Catholic [School A] and non-denominational [School B]. The family did not consider any others. Lisa is a practising Catholic, and has raised their children in the faith, even though her husband is not religious. Consequently, it had been important to her that her children attend a Catholic primary school, though this was a less significant consideration for secondary:

*"primary school is where they do all of their kind of sacramental things, kind of joining the church and everything, all those sorts of things happens in primary school. So once they get to secondary school, it's not really such a big deal."*

Lisa, her husband and Angus had all initially expected to choose [School B] on the basis of its strong exam performance and modern facilities. While the parents had been awestruck by their visit to [School B], Angus had responded less positively – according to Lisa, "Angus just walked in and just kind of went, drew back into himself". Over the course of December, the family's preference shifted towards [School A] because it was smaller, offered greater continuity with Angus' primary school and because more of his friends would be going there. As Lisa tells it, she and her husband made the ultimate decision, while taking Angus' feelings heavily into account. Angus, however, believes that his father favoured [School B] and his mother [School A], so he had the casting vote. Whatever the reality, he certainly enjoyed this sense of empowerment: Angus said he felt "grown up, my parents are making me feel independent as in, like, I have an opinion in this decision".

It was clear from both Lisa and Angus' accounts that the process of deciding between the two schools had been complex and fraught. According to Lisa, "I feel like it took up the whole of November and December. I feel like we were thinking about it all the time". As with many of the English parents, this involved a great deal of research on school websites, visits, looking through inspectorate reports. When I asked her whether she found this time consuming or inconvenient, Lisa was keen to stress that she did not resent the time invested in the process:

*"as much as it was in my head for quite a long time, it was never overwhelmingly consuming or anything. So I think it takes a long time. And you're, the process is in your head a lot, but it never felt like - it felt like something we had to spend time on, you know, you never felt like, 'Oh, you know, this has taken up too much in my life'. You know that this was it, only took however*

*long it was that it took, and it was so important that it was the right decision. So it was worth spending time on."*

However, Lisa did often find the diverse sources of information hard to parse, interpret and synthesise:

*"I find it quite difficult sometimes just to make sense of the numbers that we were being given and the ratings that we were being given. And the stats, I felt that some of it wasn't as clear as I would have liked it to be, not as up to date as you would like it to be. You were having to kind of piece together bits and pieces from all over."*

This led to a lot of reflection and debate, which both Lisa and Angus repeatedly described as 'stressful':

*Lisa: we did so many pros and cons lists it was unreal, and it just kept changing, and it was quite stressful.*

*Angus: Actually for three months we were really, really stuck between the two. Like my dad kept on giving me lectures in bed... basically, really depressing talks.*

*Angus: And my parents were saying, like, 'oh it's OK, you don't need to feel stressed, you don't need to', and that just made me more stressed.*

Both also described a feeling of relief when the process was over:

*Lisa: I think both of us were relieved that that was it done*

*Angus: It lasted for like a month and then we made the decision and it was all better*

The one pleasant aspect of choosing the school, according to Lisa, was the school visits:

*"it was enjoyable, going to the school with him, and seeing him in a different environment. And seeing him kind of trying to imagine how he might be when he was there and stuff. So that was really enjoyable."*

Both Lisa and Angus clearly felt that the choice of schools was a high stakes decision with important implications. For Lisa, the decision was complicated by the fact that the consequences were not only academic and professional, but she worried about the emotional impact on Angus as well:

*"it's a really big deal. Because it's, you know, we're looking at this and we're thinking about his future. It's not just what is he going to be when he's 11, or what is he going to be when he's 12. It's what is the school like, how supportive is it, how likely is it that he's going to get into the right sets to do the right exams to do you know, the next set of exams, then maybe go on and do college, or university or whatever."*

*“And then there was also the other part of it, which is we're both very aware of how formative high school is and, you know, being unhappy at high school is a disaster. It's a real disaster and you need, we needed to make sure that wherever it was, was somewhere - I remember standing in the kitchen having those conversations, and we just need to know that he's going to be somewhere that he feels happy, supported, that he's got friends that he doesn't feel lonely, you know. That he can find his own little group and, you know, kind of flourish and that.”*

The pressure was exacerbated by the fact that the decision would have ramifications for Angus' younger siblings as well, who would be likely to follow him to the same secondary school. This clearly preyed on Angus' mind: “I don't want to ruin their education either”.

Having settled on [School A], Lisa had few second thoughts: “I think about it occasionally. But I think about it more because I think we made the right decision. And it's quite nice to have made the right decision”. Angus, though, was less sure, and more troubled, continuing to question himself:

*“So basically, after we made this decision, for about a month, I'd say, I actually went through this thing. Like, I was still feeling really stressed. I didn't know if I'd made the right decision. It's actually just passed. I didn't know if I'd made the right decision. I didn't know if I was going to do well. And I kind of felt like I was still in the middle of things. Like, I still felt like the way I felt a couple months ago.”*

On the principle and policy of school choice, Angus was happy to have a decision to make: if he had just been allocated a school by the local authority or his parents, Angus said “It would have definitely made me feel uninvolved with my own education”. Lisa, on the other hand, shared the ambivalence of many of her English counterparts towards choice. She acknowledged her good fortune in having such desirable options, but also believed she would have been better off in some ways if there had been no decision to make.

*“we're so lucky that we could choose because lots of people don't have the option to choose. They just say, ‘well, this is where you live’ - that's I mean, when I grew up, it was ‘this is where you live, and that's the school’. So that's where you go, and you didn't think about it. So maybe it's the choice element that makes it harder.”*

Lisa: *We were saying I wish somebody had just said to us ‘well actually [School B] is not an option for you. You have to go to [School A]’, and we would have just gone ‘yeah that's fine’. But that's only because we thought it was a good option.*

Me: *But on the other hand, if someone had said you have to go to [School B]...*

Lisa: *We would have been like, ‘yeah that's fine’. If somebody said that's the only one, but that's because they were both good.*

The fact that Lisa would have been content to be allocated a place at the school she apparently rejected indicates that despite the amount of time and emotional energy that the family invested

in choosing between schools, Lisa puts little value on the ability to choose per se, independent of getting a place at a satisfactory school.

Lisa was adamant, though, that she preferred the Scottish system of secondary transfer to the English one, for two main reasons. First, she recoiled at the uncertainty of not having a secure place at a catchment school. Second, she emphasised her preference for maintaining a link between the local neighbourhood and its secondary school.

The story of Lisa and Angus shows that many of the experiences of English families in choosing schools – the time and effort spent on research and trying to reconcile contradictory information, the insecurity caused by uncertainty, the stress of the dilemma – are shared by Scottish families. In their case, it was the choice between two catchment schools that was the issue, but for others it was the process of making a placing request. Such experiences were not typical – as have seen, most Scottish families had a more straightforward time of it. Yet Lisa and Angus represent a significant minority.

### **9.3 Families That Found Choice Disempowering**

#### *9.31 Amy, Jack & Rhiannon (Ipswich)*

As I have already described, though much of the rhetoric around school choice in England promises control and empowerment, the reality in many cases is substantial dissatisfaction and cynicism. Amy, Jack and Rhiannon clearly demonstrate this frustration.

I met Amy at a primary school parents' information evening. I interviewed her along with Jack, her husband, and Rhiannon, their daughter, in the kitchen of their semi-detached house, the day before the application deadline. Amy and Jack are both university-educated and White English. Amy is a business analyst for an IT company, and Jack is a retail manager. They moved to the area when Rhiannon was a year old.

The family had long assumed that Rhiannon would attend the local secondary, [School D]. Yet towards the end of the summer holidays, as Rhiannon approached her final year of primary school, they began to be concerned by word of mouth reports of social problems such as bullying and drugs. They decided that they would seek an alternative, and only three were accessible on foot or public transport. [School A] was the clear favourite on the basis of its

Ofsted report and a positive open day experience, where the family were particularly impressed by the fact that children spoke for as long as their teachers. They had initially submitted the application form with [School C] as their second choice, as it was the nearest of the three. However, after visiting [School B], which Rhiannon much preferred on account of its size and feel, they decided to amend the form to rank [School B] second ahead of [School C].

The late change notwithstanding, it seems to have been an easy decision to make:

*Me: How worried are you about making the wrong decision? How confident are you?*

*Amy: Now I've seen the schools I'm not really [worried]. At first I was, but now I think seeing the schools has made a massive difference.*

Yet Amy and Jack found the process of choosing a school an unpleasant one, mainly because they were concerned about the efficacy of their choice – they doubted they would get a place at one of their preferred schools:

*Amy: Overall I would say the experience for me has been negative because there is always that stress there of 'what if they are all oversubscribed?' when you don't want to fall back on your catchment school. You just feel like you're taking a bit of a risk.*

This meant that the experience of choosing, paradoxically, felt disempowering:

*Jack: The whole thing about this is it doesn't matter what decision we make.*

*Amy: That is exactly, that's the point.*

*Jack: It doesn't matter what we've done here. This all could have been for nothing. That's the part that hurts the most is, we've done all this and the next thing we're going to get a letter sent through 'actually your child didn't get any of the schools, they're going to this school'. And that's the part of it is that you're supposed to be getting this freedom of choice, but have we really? And that's the tricky thing about it really is like 'you can choose one of these three'. 'OK, I want that one'. 'you can't have that one'.*

Amy and Jack's frustration at their impotence was exacerbated by the pressure they felt to use the choice effectively:

*Amy: Everywhere you go you're constantly being told this is such an important decision, you've got to make a sensible decision because it's going to affect the rest of your child's life. And I feel like 'yes that's true, I know a lot of people who have not got the school they've wanted'. So you kind of feel like 'make a sensible decision', that doesn't necessarily mean I'm going to get what I want.*

Moreover, Amy in particular found the process of researching schools rather time consuming and inconvenient:

*'For that two week period when we were looking at - doing all the looking at the schools and that, it was quite a big part really because I know it's only three evenings, but when you work full time then you've got to rush to an open evening after school and then we ended up spending about three*

*hours at each one so trying to fit it into a busy life. I did feel like it sort of took over our lives for a couple of weeks.”*

The experience had been more positive for Rhiannon. She felt she had been allowed to rank the schools for herself (though her parents had clearly shortlisted the three options): “I basically said I wanted this first, this second, this third. And I did go round the schools and decide for myself”. Moreover, she had enjoyed the school visits: “I liked seeing what the schools had to offer and I liked seeing all of the different facilities and how happy the students were and how the head teacher was like”. The only bad thing, from Rhiannon’s perspective, was the uncertainty of not knowing which of her friends would join her at the same secondary school, and who she would be parting ways with.

Though Amy and Jack clearly wanted to have school choice, it was apparent that they did not see any intrinsic value in it. Rather, choice for them was primarily about being able to escape [School D]:

*Amy: I think if it's a genuine choice than it is really important because you don't want to be just forced into your catchment school.*

*Amy: I think [it's] more about being able to avoid bad schools, because, to be honest, if I was happy for Rhiannon to go to my catchment school I wouldn't really care if I had a choice or not.*

Amy, Jack and Rhiannon’s experiences are representative of many of the families I spoke to in Ipswich and Camden (and some in Scotland who made placing requests). They found it relatively straightforward to choose a school, but worried that their choice was meaningless and were anxious because they did not know which school their child would end up at. As such, it is implausible to say they felt empowered by choice, and in fact, their description of the process reflects a perceived lack of control.

### *9.32 Flora (Scotstown)*

As we have seen in previous chapters, the disenchantment and scepticism I found among many English families regarding the effectiveness of choice was less common in Scottish participants. The exception, however, was among those families that made placing requests. Undoubtedly, making a placing request can be a comfortable and unproblematic process. For example, Hailey in Dundee made a placing request for her daughter to attend the same secondary school as most



of her primary school peers and was extremely confident it would be successful. However, in my interviews it was more common for placing requests to be fraught and frustrating processes. Flora's story highlights the desperation and impotence that Scottish families can feel if they dislike their catchment school and wish to attend an oversubscribed alternative.

Flora responded to an invitation to participate in the research circulated through her daughter's primary school. We met in a small office behind reception at the community centre where she works in June 2017. Flora is in her 40s, and White Scottish. She is a non-university-educated single mother with one daughter.

Flora's daughter was zoned for [School D]. However, she was adamantly against sending her daughter there. Her daughter had been bullied in primary school and wanted a fresh start. Flora was aware of [School D's] poor reputation and had a negative impression of the level of discipline in the school. In her view, "It just doesn't feel like that the best that there is at the moment".

Her first preference was [School A], a private school. While her daughter had passed the entrance exam, she did not get a bursary and Flora could not afford the fees. Instead, she made placing requests for [School B] and [School C] (not all local authorities permit multiple placing request per child, but Scotstown does). Both placing requests were initially unsuccessful. However, Flora's daughter was placed on waiting lists for both schools, and discovered in May that she had got a space at [School B].

Flora knew of [School A's] strong reputation, had been very impressed on her visit there, and felt underprepared to look for backups when it transpired she would not be able to send her daughter there: "I was getting all these letters [from the local authority] about going to see guidance teachers and year teachers and having a parents' visit to the school, and I just kept ignoring that". Flora spoke to other parents and consulted school websites and inspection reports before alighting on [Schools B and C] as her best options. She also considered two other state schools, but ultimately concluded the logistics of travelling to and from them would be impractical.

The process of school choice – research, understanding the procedures, making a decision - had clearly been hard on Flora:

*"I don't mean to sound, because I'm on my own, but it was very much just me that was doing all the legwork as well, you know at some points you thought 'if only somebody could come along and give me a bit of advice and tell me am I doing the right thing, am I doing the wrong thing, you know, I did find it a bit daunting."*

Flora saw secondary school choice as a decision with extremely high stakes for her daughter's future, which raised the pressure:

*"They kept saying [daughter's] the kind of child that would excel wherever you put her, so what school you put her to wouldn't make any difference, you know, and I thought yeah that's all very well, but primary school and secondary school, there's a big difference, you know, you're going from being the oldest in the school to being the youngest and you're in amongst teenagers, you know, and the temptations and things at secondary school are far bigger than you could ever imagine"*

As a result, Flora believed it was "very important" for parents to be able to choose a school for their child. She worried that [School D] would not provide her daughter with enough attention, although she harboured some doubts about whether she had chosen correctly: "I won't know until she actually starts there if [School B] was the right choice or if it wasn't, but at the moment my gut feeling is we've made the right choice"

Flora's overriding emotion was anger. She portrayed the local authority as a distant, impassive and insensitive bureaucracy. She was clearly infuriated by "These people that sit in their high seats behind desks" who "I sometimes think that they think it would be so much easier if everyone just stuck to their zones". At first, they made her feel powerless. The sense she got was that "You live in this area, this is your choice of secondary school, and that is pretty much where your child's going. It's not much of a choice is it?". That frustration made her determined to do all she can to exert what little power she felt she had:

*"if things don't go the way I want them to then I start to feel a bit uneasy and that's when the mother bear starts to come out in me."*

*"that's kind of where the angrier side of me starts coming out cos I was like 'no, I can't be forced to send my child to a school that I don't want her to go'."*

*"You wouldn't be happy if somebody came along and just said 'this is the only place that we can offer you', and that's not where you wanted to go."*

Being out of control was bad enough, but it was exacerbated by the uncertainty of having to wait for a decision: "Just the not knowing. It was a bit like wandering around in a dark room.". Overall, Flora concluded, "The whole thing was horrible, just horrible".

Flora's story shares several features with Amy, Jack and Rhiannon's – and with those of other families I spoke to that made placing requests. A fear of being trapped in their catchment schools, and a sense that the consequences would be terrible. The pressure of sifting through information to find a suitable alternative. The concern that ultimately their decision would not matter, and the belief that power ultimately rests with callous and indifferent authorities. In both cases, the freedom and autonomy school choice is meant to provide seems remote.

## 9.4 Contrasting England and Scotland

The profiles I have presented so far have tended to suggest the difference between England and Scotland is more a matter of degree than of kind. I have shown that choice can be simple and straightforward in England as well as Scotland, and that it can be painful, frustrating, disempowering, burdensome and pressurised in Scotland as well as England. However, I want to end this chapter by presenting a family whose experience seems quite distinctively English. Charlotte, Anil and Tina were perfectly content with their nearest school. If they were in Scotland, that would likely be the end of the story. However, the system encouraged them to ‘shop around’ and consider alternatives. They began to doubt their initial judgement and were torn between a couple of different schools, before ultimately opting for their local school as originally planned, and regretting that they had ever been offered choice in the first place. Under the Scottish system, they would almost certainly have been spared that rigmarole (Lisa and Angus’ story above is in certain respects similar, but that results from the peculiarities of Edinburgh’s system, offering two default schools). Yet I spoke to a few other English parents – for example, Aaliyah in Camden and Jane in Ipswich - that went through similar processes, reconsidering and questioning their initial preference for their catchment school.

### *9.41 Charlotte, Anil & Tina (Camden)*

I first met Charlotte at the local authority organised open day, showcasing all the secondary schools in the borough. She invited me to interview her at her home, a flat in a town house in North London, on November 1<sup>st</sup>, the day after the deadline for applications. The interview took place in her large kitchen-dining room. We spoke at the dining table, Charlotte’s husband Anil helped their 7-year-old son with schoolwork, while in the kitchen a nanny/maid prepared food. The conversation was primarily between me and Charlotte, but from time to time she would turn to Anil or he would interject. In the latter portion of the interview, Charlotte called over her daughter Tina, and I spoke to her with Charlotte present.

Charlotte is White English from London and works in banking. Anil was born in India, but moved to England as a child, and now works in retail. Both are university-educated. They had lived in the area since before their children were born.

Charlotte had long expected that Tina would attend their nearest school, [School A] believing it to have a good reputation: “we always assumed that would be our first choice. We went to see it, we really liked it, Tina really liked it”. However, they also went to an open day at [School B], their presumptive second choice, and were extremely impressed by what they saw there: “we were just one track about it and did not expect to like [School B] as much as we did. It was good for us because it meant that we had to really put the two side by side and compare them”. Although Charlotte did make use of all six options on the application form, it was clear that she did not give much consideration to schools beyond these top two, confident that Tina would be allocated one of them: “[School C] is third and to be honest the rest I almost had it like this [points randomly]”.

Deciding which school to put first, however, was extremely tricky: “for about three weeks we were in a real dilemma”, “they are very different and we like them for very different reasons”. [School A] was perceived by Charlotte to be more prestigious, with greater cachet and name recognition. It was seen as having a more traditional ethos, a greater focus on academics. By contrast, she felt [School B] to be better in terms of its facilities and the enthusiasm of its teachers. [School A] seemed to be a more cloistered environment, whereas Charlotte considered [School B] more diverse, but with the potential for greater social problems and bullying. Tina was also attracted to both – she was more impressed by [School B’s] open day, which was more interactive, but had more friends applying to [School A], and preferred the shorter journey to [School A].

The dilemma was clearly emotionally taxing: Charlotte described how “it really upset our equilibrium”:

*“it was really deep in my psyche upsetting me in that way. [Turns to Anil] And you felt the same, didn’t you? You were sort of conflicted about the two.”*

*“Once the decision was made, for me anyway, I was quite relieved, I have to say. One night I actually didn’t sleep.”*

*“I am glad it’s over, just because it was stressful and it’s done now.”*

The sense of relief at having made a decision indicates how difficult and draining the process had been. Tina was less articulate about the emotional impact, but it was clear that she too found it tough: “it’s like a type of confused, not sure which one to pick because I like both”. The uncertainty of parents and child reinforced one another, according to Charlotte: “[To Tina] we had lots of conversations about it, didn’t we? I got the sense that we were as confused as each

other, don't you think maybe at different times?'. The decision loomed large in the family's minds, particularly since so many friends and acquaintances were also going through the same process: "or a couple of weeks it was all any of us could talk about whenever we went to a kid's party and other parents were there that was the first thing we were all talking about".

The difficulty of the choice was exacerbated by problems the family had in finding and interpreting reliable information about the schools. At first, Anil expressed confidence: "you know, we were looking at numbers, which don't lie". Yet Charlotte immediately pointed out that such 'hard' sources have their limitations: "you mean the Ofsted report in the end. But that in itself is interesting because when I looked into the Ofsted of [School A] they actually haven't had a full Ofsted report in a long time". As a result, their assessment of the schools was shaped by rumour and word of mouth as well as formal sources:

*"the head teacher of that school, of [School A], has apparently been trying to leave for some time. So you get these little titbits of information from talking to other parents and it changes your perception of the school. If that headteacher from [School A] leaves, the whole school could change."*

In any case, Charlotte worried that she lacked the time and expertise to accurately assess the schools:

*"I realise I'm not an education expert. I end up thinking you guys know more about this than I do. I don't think I know enough about it. I mean you come away with quite a lot of literature. I have to confess I didn't read any of it...So everything that I've learnt I've picked up from parents and that's hearsay isn't it, other people's opinions. I probably should have been a bit more thorough in my research...it's just bandwidth in the end."*

At the same time, Charlotte did not seem unduly concerned about the possibility that they had chosen the wrong school for Tina:

*"now that that is our first choice I've got no regrets about it."*

*"given our options I'm not worried, I'm not worried."*

*"She's going to be fine because we've got these great options."*

*"I just feel it's a bit we couldn't really lose."*

Charlotte was clearly confident that both of her favoured schools were acceptable and that Tina would do well at either one. That raises the question of why the family expended so much energy and emotional angst trying to decide between them. Overall, Charlotte was ambivalent about the principle of school choice. She repeatedly emphasised how lucky she felt to have access to such good schools. When I asked her whether she thought it was important to have choice, her answer came back to the fact that "I really feel for people that live in places that have no decent

schools”. This suggests that her overriding concern was getting an acceptable school, rather than choice per se. When I asked her whether she found it empowering to be able to choose, she agreed that she did, though not with any great alacrity (she “supposed” it was):

*“There was something empowering about it I suppose. I suppose when you're making the decision, you're empowered with that decision and could have decided any number of other things you go and see stuff you make your decision. Right or wrong, you submit it and that's it, yeah, that's what I say. So I guess that is empowering.”*

However, Charlotte was clear that she would not have wanted any more choice, given how difficult it had been choosing between only two schools: “I think we could have had six great schools to choose from. I'm glad we didn't actually because that could be really confusing and, you know, where do you start?”

Ultimately, Charlotte and Tina opted for [School A]. I put it to Charlotte that under the Scottish system she would have been allocated a place there automatically, and likely would not even have considered [School B], sparing the stress and sleepless nights that ensued. She acknowledged she might have been better off that way: “I think again if we were in Scotland we'd be getting the letter saying you're going to [School A]. So we'd be happy with that.”

Charlotte and Tina represent a notable minority of my participants in facing such a strong dilemma. In most cases, families had fewer doubts about their preferences. Yet Charlotte and Tina's example shows how intense and emotionally draining it can be, having to make such a choice. What is particularly interesting about them is that the dilemma seems to be linked to the system around them – the fact that they were asked to choose, and that their peers were also choosing. Their confidence that their decision would be effective – that they would get their first choice – was shared by some, but certainly not most London families. More typical was Charlotte's difficulty in assessing the schools, given the limitations of her information sources, and the fact that her confidence in her judgement nonetheless did not seem to be much affected by these limitations.

## **9.5 Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have described in detail seven of the families I interviewed for this study. This should offer the reader a holistic picture of some of the different ways in which school choice is experienced, in a more ‘embodied’ form than the abstract analysis of the previous chapters. As I outlined in the introduction, I have tried to achieve three things in this chapter: i) to provide

a clearer idea of the intensity or magnitude of experiences around school choice; ii) to show how some of the themes discussed in previous chapters fit together in particular cases, sometimes in tension or conflict with one another; and iii) to offer some insight into the data collection process. The previous chapters showed that Scottish families are more likely to have easier and less painful experiences of choice. This chapter makes more concrete what it means for families to find choice more or less stressful, anxiety-provoking, disempowering or pressurised. That, in turn, should help us evaluate the extent and intensity of the intrinsic costs and benefits of choice. The images of Charlotte's sleepless nights, Zofia's dizzy confusion, Flora's rage, Angus' disquiet and Amy and Jack's frustration demonstrate how deeply felt the negative effects of choice can be. Conversely, though I have not focused particularly on families that had a more positive experience of choice, these profiles should help us better understand the desire for and promise of choice: the importance to Kelly of trying to secure a better life for her daughter, the closeness it helped foster between Zofia and Zuzanna.

It should be clear in this chapter that the interviews do not fit neatly or comfortably into the distinct categories I have placed them. Kelly felt some pressure and stress, despite having a relatively easy time of it. Flora did not just feel disempowered, she found it somewhat hard to choose. Regret (and its absence) featured in some interviews but not others. This demonstrates the complexity of people's accounts and experiences, and the cross-cutting nature of the themes I have been discussing. Sometimes, their responses can be surprising – for example, Zofia's unwillingness to enthusiastically endorse a system with less choice, for all her tribulations. Sometimes they contain tensions or contradictions – as in Charlotte's uncertainty about the value of choice. Sometimes, the additional context of previous responses demonstrates the significance of particular admissions – for example, Lisa's claim that she would have been better off had she just been allocated her second choice school is all the more powerful because of all the thought and effort that went into rejecting it.

These profiles also bring the reader closer to the data collection process: not just the background detail of where and when I spoke to participants, but also the way some responses tumbled out spontaneously, whereas others had to be coaxed and prodded through questioning. For example, they illustrate the contrasting levels of success I had with child participants: compare the talkativeness and articulacy of Angus to the quieter and more reserved Zuzanna.

With this chapter I conclude my presentation of my empirical findings. In the next, I move on to interpreting their meaning and establishing their implications.

## 10. Discussion and Conclusion

In this final chapter, I draw together the various strands of analysis and evidence I have presented so far and try to make sense of what they mean. I begin in section 10.1 by summarising and interpreting the main findings of the thesis in light of the original research questions, addressing a central question of interpretation: how far the differences I have found between England and Scotland can be causally attributed to policy differences between the two countries. In section 10.2, I relate my findings back to the academic literature, outlining the novel contributions of this thesis and suggesting possible avenues for future research. In section 10.3, I consider the policy implications of the findings, in terms of the attractiveness and design of school choice in England, Scotland and beyond.

### 10.1 Summary of Findings

#### *10.11 Recap of Aims, Theoretical Framework and Empirical Approach*

The extent to which governments should seek to give users choice over their public services remains controversial, both in academic and policy circles. We can draw a distinction between *instrumental* arguments that criticise or support choice policies in terms of their *consequences*, and *intrinsic* arguments relating to the costs and benefits that stem from the *mere fact of choice* or the *process of choosing*. This thesis starts from the observation that while both intrinsic and instrumental arguments feature prominently in theoretical debates, there is little empirical evidence on the intrinsic value or disvalue of choice in public services.

In chapter 3, I elucidated what we mean by intrinsic (dis)value – why precisely choice might have costs and benefits independent of its consequences, producing a novel theoretical framework that forms the basis of the thesis. While some normative accounts – for example, that choice and autonomy are inherently linked and fundamentally constitutive of one another – may be purely philosophical, I showed that many raise empirical questions and set myself to addressing those. The intrinsic (dis)value of choice depends on the relative value we place on subjective welfare, freedom and autonomy, and how we interpret these concepts. In the case of school choice, it depends on how we conceive of children, parents and their relationship – whether it is only the child’s interests that matter or whether parents may have legitimate welfare,



freedom or autonomy interests in their children, and whether children are sufficiently mature to bear autonomy. The intrinsic (dis)value of choice also depends on a number of empirical questions. According to desire theories of subjective welfare, the value of choice policies depends on whether and how strongly people want choice over a particular public service and whether it conflicts with other desires. According to affective conceptions of subjective welfare, it depends on whether people feel empowered by choice, disempowered by its absence and how far choice is experienced as enjoyable, burdensome, agonising, pressurised or regretful. According to different accounts of freedom or autonomy, it may depend on the perceived significance of the choice, adequacy of the options, choosers' confidence in their own competence to make judgements, the extent to which they feel greater control over their lives, and the impact of choice on their ability to live a more authentic life.

In this thesis, I have applied my general theoretical framework to secondary school choice policy in England and Scotland, exploring the implications of the contrasting approaches of the two countries. Policymakers have made sustained efforts to encourage choice in England, with all families required to go through a formal application process and permitted to list between three and six preferences. By contrast, Scottish policymakers have played down the role of formal choice in their education system and the default assumption remains that children will attend the school allocated to them by their local authority – albeit with 13% making a placing request to a non-catchment school.

I have attempted to answer the following research questions:

*RQ1: In what ways does the process of secondary school choice produce intrinsic value or disvalue in England and Scotland?*

*RQ2: Is there a difference between England and Scotland in terms of the types, extent or intensity of intrinsic value or disvalue experienced by families choosing a secondary school?*

I have addressed them by means of thematic analysis of qualitative interviews with parents and children from 57 families in five locations (Camden, Ipswich, Edinburgh, Dundee, 'Scotstown'), as well as quantitative analysis of an online survey of 987 parents (801 in England, 186 in Scotland).

*10.12 In What Ways Does the Process of Secondary School Choice Produce Intrinsic Value or Disvalue in England and Scotland?*

In terms of fulfilling desires, I have found that the overwhelming majority of families in both countries want some degree of perceived choice. 99% of English parents and 95% of Scottish parents say it is important to have a choice of schools. However, exploring their reasons for wanting choice, I conclude that most want choice primarily for instrumental reasons, typically as a means to getting into a 'better' school. At the same time, a sizeable minority - I estimate between a fifth and a third - want choice mainly for intrinsic reasons, to have some control over the process. Moreover, I have suggested that for most, the desire for choice is a defeasible consideration, one that they are willing to trade off against other things they value, such as reducing inequality, maintaining the link between local areas and their schools and avoiding over-specialisation of education. Thus, in terms of desire fulfilment, school choice creates weak positive intrinsic value.

Furthermore, most families feel that they have a genuine and adequate choice of secondary schools. 81% of parents in England and 60% of parents in Scotland say that they have at least a 'moderate amount' of choice. Three-quarters of parents in each country say that they have enough choice.

From an affective perspective, while those figures indicate most families have sufficient perceived choice to stave off dissatisfaction, I have found limited evidence that school choice is felt as positively empowering. The idea of empowerment rarely came up spontaneously in interviews, and was somewhat resisted by parents (although some children were more enthusiastic). Conversely, many of those dissatisfied with their choice expressed a sense of deep *disempowerment*, of cynicism, fatalism and despondency – exemplified by Amy, Jack, Rhiannon and Flora, profiled in chapter 9.

Concerningly, dissatisfaction with the level of available choice is more common among foreign and non-white parents. It is also, perhaps surprisingly, more common among university graduates (at least in England). Predictably, within England dissatisfaction is higher in areas where applications are less likely to be successful or where parents feel less favourably towards their catchment school. In some senses, dissatisfaction seems to rise with the level of choice: parents with more options (living in urban areas, allowed to express more preferences, with more nearby schools) and those that consider more schools are more likely to be dissatisfied.

I have shown that school choice is moderately pleasant for many families. In particular, school visits are often fun events for parents and children alike and some enjoy learning about local schools, the area and the education system. However, only around 15% of parents rate choice as highly enjoyable (8+ out of 10 for enjoyability) and in interviews enthusiasm is rather

qualified: choice is “quite”, “vaguely”, “a little bit” enjoyable. Parents are more willing to describe the process as ‘interesting’, with 31% of English parents and 23% of Scottish parents rating it highly interesting. Parents that are more motivated and engaged with the process of choice seem more likely to find it interesting: placing greater importance on choice, considering more schools, using more sources of information, starting the process earlier and seeking out the best possible school are all associated with higher ratings of interestingness (the last two factors only in Scotland).

At the same time, school choice can have a profoundly negative psychological impact. In interviews, parents regularly and spontaneously described how stressful it all was, how anxious they had been and how relieved they were once it was over. Around a quarter of English parents and around one in seven Scottish parents in the survey reported being highly stressed and anxious (8+ out of 10). Children were generally shielded from the greatest strains, but still occasionally expressed distress.

Perhaps the single greatest source of angst – one not anticipated in my theoretical framework – is uncertainty. Many families find not knowing where their child is going to end up deeply disturbing. The period between applications being submitted and offers being made is described as a kind of purgatory, within which rumour and catastrophic thinking can flourish. For children in particular, the lack of continuity and the doubt over which if any of their peers they will continue to see can be very destabilising.

Another source of stress is the difficulty of evaluating and synthesising the sometimes overwhelming and confusing array of sources of information – from contradictory word of mouth reports to hard-to-parse league tables and inspection reports. Around a third of English parents and a fifth of Scottish parents say that they found it difficult to choose a school “because different people and sources say different things”. This stress is exacerbated by the perceived pressure of school choice, in the belief that school choice will have significant ramifications for the child’s future.

Genuine dilemmas – in terms of difficult trade-offs – were surprisingly rare. If parents did feel adequately informed, they usually had clear preferences. They were typically confident in their judgements, too, with most parents expressing little regret. 76% of Scottish parents and 60% of English parents say that they are ‘not at all worried’ about choosing the wrong school. However, for those families that are unsure, the process can be extremely painful.

School choice can also be inconvenient: many parents start thinking about schools years in advance, feel the need to do substantial research and take time off work to visit schools. Some describe it as an all-consuming drain on mental energy, dominating their thoughts and conversation. Around a third rate it as a very big part their life (8+ out of 10).

There is substantial overlap in these negative psychological experiences. In the parent survey, reporting being more stressed, anxious, that choice was a bigger part of one's life, worrying about making the wrong choice and finding it hard to reconcile conflicting sources were all associated with one another. The survey also suggests that having a greater level of, and engagement with, choice is associated with finding choice more stressful. Parents in England with more options – living in urban areas, permitted to express more preferences, with more nearby schools – find choice more stressful, just as they were less satisfied. Parents are more stressed if they consider more schools, use more sources of information, start the process earlier, think choice is more important and consequential, are more dissatisfied with their catchment school and (in Scotland only) place greater emphasis on finding the 'best' school.

As with satisfaction, there are socio-economic differences in how stressful parents find choice. On this measure, too, foreign and non-white parents are worse off, reporting higher levels of stress. In England, parents living in more deprived areas are also more stressed on average. However, stress is positively associated with a different measure of social advantage: university graduates in England are more likely to report stress, just as they are more likely to be dissatisfied with their level of choice.

The contribution of school choice to freedom or autonomy depends on the conception of freedom or autonomy we favour, but also to some extent on how choosers characterise the choice. While most families say they want choice and generally feel they have adequate options, I do not believe that in most cases the choice is considered deeply significant in a way that suggests it substantially enhances freedom or autonomy. Some parents may see school choice as contributing to their life goal of being effective parents, but this view is not widespread and is socially contingent. School choice is rarely motivated by political convictions, and such convictions as there are generally relate to a preference for state over private education, rather than for any particular type of school within the state sector. Preferences for single-sex schooling are fairly weak, and I found little demand for single-sex schooling in areas that do not already have it. The notion that school choice helps people live in accordance with their character or plan of life is most plausible in the case of religious schooling, where some parents

and children do say it helps sustain their faith. However, this seems to apply only to a minority of the students that attend faith schools.

Thus, secondary school choice in England and Scotland seems to make only a modest contribution to many of the conceptions of freedom and autonomy outlined in chapter 3: freedom judged by the agent, autonomy as narrative control, autonomy as authenticity and autonomy as agential authority. At the same time, it does more plausibly contribute to autonomy as self-government: parents tend to have a great deal of self-confidence in their judgements on schools, and so preventing them from expressing these preferences may be seen as a demeaning or disrespectful infringement of autonomy.

#### *10.13 Is There a Difference Between England and Scotland in Terms of the Types, Extent or Intensity of Intrinsic Value or Disvalue Experienced by Families Choosing a Secondary School?*

I have demonstrated that the process of secondary transition is very different between England and Scotland. School choice tends to be a rather more involved process in England: English families consider more schools and do more research in greater depth. On average, English parents consider 2.6 secondary schools; Scottish parents 1.7. Scottish families will typically accept their catchment school, and at most give cursory consideration to an alternative – only 13% end up making a placing request. By contrast, English parents are expected to apply to at least three schools, are considerably more likely to visit them (80% of English parents do so, compared to 51% in Scotland) and to use inspection reports (57% vs 21% in Scotland). The upshot is that school choice involves greater time, effort and mental energy for families in England than in Scotland.

For all these differences, I found little reason to think that English families are more satisfied, freer or autonomous. Desire for school choice does appear to be slightly stronger in England than in Scotland: though almost everybody says choice is important, 82% of English parents say it is *very* important, compared to 58% of Scottish parents. However, in the survey, I found no difference in terms of how likely parents were to think this desire had been fulfilled. In fact, in interviews, English families were somewhat more likely to express a sense of frustration and disempowerment.

The major contrast is in the emotional experience of school choice. In both interviews and survey, English families were more likely to report finding school choice stressful and anxiety-

provoking. They have to deal with greater amounts of conflicting information, sowing greater doubt and confusion. They feel greater pressure and are more likely to believe that their choice of school will have severe ramifications. They are more likely to experience agonising dilemmas, even if these are relatively infrequent. They suffer more from the uncertainty of not knowing which school they will be allocated, and of having to live with the possibility it will be one that they do not want at all.

At the same time, English families do seem to be better off in some ways. The process of researching schools is enjoyable for some people. They are more likely to experience vibrant, exciting school open days, and to feel the pleasure of learning about local schools and the education system.

For all the differences, there is substantial overlap in experiences of school choice between England and Scotland. Those Scottish families that make placing requests look and behave much like English families (as I have presented it). The objective burden that they face is somewhat lighter: they consider fewer schools on average and do less research than their English counterparts (though more than the typical Scot). However, they report finding school choice as inconvenient, stressful, anxiety-provoking, disempowering and interesting as families in England.

Conversely, there are plenty of English families that look and behave like Scots, for whom choice is relatively simple. 21% only consider a single school. 43% only use no more than two sources of information (the mean in Scotland). Around half of parents in each country rate the process as medium stress (3-7 out of 10). The difference lies in the additional 16% of Scottish parents that find it low stress (37% vs 22% in England) and the additional 9% of parents in England that find it high stress (24% vs 15%).

It is not straightforward to interpret the gap between England and Scotland, and between families that find school choice more or less enjoyable, stressful or empowering. Yet in order to evaluate the policies and to prioritise different ways of reforming them, it is important to have a sense (roughly speaking) of how much value or disvalue is at stake. We can produce certain quantitative measures from the survey. Though we should be cautious in interpreting 11-point scales as cardinal, I have shown that, compared with Scottish parents, English parents find the school choice process 30% (1.2 points out of 10) more stressful, 32% (1.3 points) more anxious, 31% (1.1 points) more time consuming and inconvenient, 15% (0.8 points) more interesting and 12% (0.5 points) more enjoyable.

To put these numbers in perspective, in chapter 8 I calculated several benchmarks against which we can compare the difference between living in England and living in Scotland. We know that choosing a school is easier and less complicated if the child has an older sibling that has already started secondary school. Yet parents in Scotland choosing for their first child are less stressed than parents in England choosing for a middle or younger sibling. Parents living in the most deprived quartile in Scotland are less stressed on average than those in the least deprived quartile in England. The difference in stress between England and Scotland is equivalent to the difference between areas two quartiles of school density apart or with a 20-percentage point gap in the share of families getting their first preferences. The difference in terms of both stress and interest is equivalent to considering two extra schools or using two additional sources of information.

What all of this shows is that the magnitude of the difference in experience between England and Scotland is fairly large, relative to the sorts of differences we see between different sorts of families. But these numbers still feel fairly intangible. They do not by themselves provide much of an idea of how seriously to take these effects. For that, we need to turn to the qualitative descriptions of school choice I have presented. If we want demonstration that the stress or anxiety involved in school choice is significant, we should think of Charlotte suffering sleepless nights. If we want proof that school choice can be disruptive, look at Angela, delaying her return to work so that she can make time for it. If we wish to see the inconvenience and logistical challenges of school choice, we can read Sandra, Amy or Brigitte's descriptions of the frantic rush it creates in their lives. To understand the pressure involved, consider Zofia's claim that she considered school choice comparably consequential to migrating to the UK. To see the impact of uncertainty, imagine Daphne, repeatedly phoning the local authority, desperate for an answer.

What these accounts should make clear is that choosing a school can produce substantial intrinsic disvalue. They suggest that the psychological impact is not trivial and should be given serious consideration in evaluating school choice policies. By contrast, the positive intrinsic value produced by school choice seems less significant. Certainly, some families find elements of school choice a positive experience, particularly looking around schools and learning about them. But from the interviews, the pleasure they get from it seems fairly modest – as we saw in chapter 7, some of the parents resisted the word 'enjoyable', seeing it as 'over the top', and preferred the more understated term 'interesting'. As I have already suggested, school choices do not typically seem to relate to significant matters of freedom or autonomy. School choice does fulfil the widespread desire for choice, but as I have said, in many cases this desire is not

intrinsic or especially deeply held. School choice does seem to matter for empowerment, but even in this case, it is mainly negative – people feel more strongly disempowered if they feel they lack choice than positively in charge of their destiny. In any case, I found no evidence to suggest that Scottish families felt less empowered for having less formal choice – to the contrary, interviews suggested disempowerment was higher among the English.

#### *10.14 Limitations*

The phenomena I am concerned with in this thesis – perceptions, emotions, attitudes and beliefs – are not easy to capture empirically, and so the limitations of my methods (discussed in more detail in chapter 5) may affect the validity of my findings. I have worked under the assumption that the best approach is to ask people directly. Yet people are not always reliable reporters of their mental states – they may have faulty memories, may be influenced by question wording, social desirability bias, or could be affected by their state of mind at the time of the interview or survey.

Over the course of an interview, where more data is collected, and the same questions are addressed from different angles, some of these issues can be mitigated, though certainly not eliminated. Moreover, the process of conducting and analysing interviews can never be done entirely transparently, creating the possibility of ‘researcher effects’. In the survey, by contrast, it is harder to know what respondents mean by their answers. 11-point scales, like the ones I have been using, raise a number of interpretive difficulties around cardinality and interpersonal comparison.

The other concern regarding the validity of the results stems from the samples used. I believe the number of interview participants and survey respondents in this study is large enough to draw meaningful conclusions. However, in both cases, there may be biases and omissions in terms of the background of the participants. The decision to recruit interview participants only from a handful of case study areas necessarily limits the generalisability of findings, given the very different and very specific conditions that obtain in local educational markets (geography, types of school, local culture and politics). I did not, for example, interview anybody living in the North of England, an area with selective schools, or a rural location. As I noted in the methods section, the decision to focus on urban areas in my interviews may exaggerate the difference between England and Scotland. Furthermore, it is undeniable that parents that are



more educated and engaged with their children's education were more likely to agree to participate. The purpose of the survey was to compensate for these limitations. However, it, too, has its biases – though participants were invited from a nationally representative sampling frame, they had to opt in to participating (albeit without knowing the subject matter of the survey, which should reduce self-selection bias). We do not have all the information we would need to compare the survey sample against the population of interest (parents of late primary/early secondary school age children). While it does appear to broadly reflect national demographics, ethnic minorities are clearly under-represented and Scottish families making placing requests are over-represented.

#### *10.15 Are the Differences Between England and Scotland Causally Attributable to School Choice Policy?*

These limitations may create uncertainty around some of the findings in the thesis, and certainly imply that we should treat numerical estimates from the survey as imprecise. However, I do not believe this undermines the basic claim that there are substantial differences in the experience of secondary school choice between England and Scotland. The key question for policy is the extent to which those differences reflect the causal impact of the differences in school choice policy between the two countries. That depends on how plausible it is that the differences in experience are attributable to other, non-policy, differences between England and Scotland.

England and Scotland have strong linguistic, cultural, political, economic and personal ties to one another. Though education (along with religious and legal institutions) has been one of the main areas of divergence throughout history (Humes and Bryce 2013), few of these longstanding differences – for example, in qualifications system or national curriculum – affect the comparability of experiences of school choice. The relative diversity of schools in England – academies, free schools, selective, religious and specialist schools – *is* likely to be a relevant difference, resulting in a wider range of options for English families. However, as we have seen, this diversity can be considered part of, rather than separate to, the broader choice and competition phenomenon. In order for choice to be effective, policymakers in England have sought to provide more different types of school to choose between.

There are differences in the availability and accessibility of school places between England and Scotland. 6% of state secondary schools in Scotland are at full capacity (Scottish Government 2020), compared to 17% in England (Department for Education 2020a). To some extent, this

too might reflect policy: the encouragement of formal school choice in England may lead to more applications to ‘popular’ schools, pushing them over capacity. On the other hand, it could reflect differences in geography, which certainly cannot be attributed to policy. Scotland is far less densely populated than England, and likely as a result, it has more schools relative to the number of children it educates: there are 1.23 state secondary schools per 1,000 pupils in Scotland (Scottish Government n.d.), but 1.04 in England (Department for Education 2019c). At the same time, the relative dispersal of the Scottish population also means that families tend to have fewer accessible schools. In my survey sample (which is not perfectly representative of the general population, but which can provide indicative figures), the average Scottish respondent had 4.9 schools within 5km, compared to 10.2 in England. Thus, families in Scotland are likely to have fewer proximate schools to choose between, but the schools nearby are more likely to have available spaces.

For all their cultural similarities, many believe that social and political attitudes differ between Scotland and England, with Scotland often regarded as more egalitarian and social democratic. If this image is correct, we might expect people in Scotland to be more resistant to marketisation and individualism, and consequently to have less appetite for formal school choice. In fact, the British Social Attitudes survey suggests that political outlooks are very similar between England and Scotland, with Scots only slightly to the left of the English (Curtice 2013). That fits with the findings of my survey, which showed that most parents in Scotland do in fact want to have a degree of choice over secondary schools, and that they were only slightly less likely to think it is important than their counterparts in England (findings consistent with previous similar surveys (Exley 2012)).

At the same time, there may be more subtle cultural differences between England and Scotland that affect experiences of school choice. Policymakers in Scotland are widely perceived as more committed to comprehensive education, deferential to the teaching profession and more confident in the managerial capacities of local authorities than policymakers in England (Cope and P’Anson 2009; Exley 2007, 123; Raffe et al. 1999, 17; West 2015). It could be that this is reflective of deep-seated Scottish values and beliefs that result in Scottish families being less inclined to actively use their choice and more inclined to trust in the system. Equally, it could be that causality works in the other direction – Scottish public attitudes towards schools, teachers and local authorities may be conditioned by government policy. Similarly, English policymakers have rejected excessive trust as naïve, promoting choice and competition as a bulwark against the possibility that some public servants may be self-interested “knaves” (Le

Grand 2010). Receiving such signals, it would be unsurprising if English families started from a position of greater scepticism towards their local schools and educational authorities.

Regardless of the rhetoric, Scottish secondary schools do appear to be somewhat more equal and less segregated than schools in England. It is common to measure inequality and segregation by calculating an Index of Dissimilarity for schools within a particular geographic area, such as a local authority.<sup>26</sup> This represents the proportion of students that would have to move schools in order for the proportion of low income or low achieving students to be exactly equal across each school in the local authority. Across English local authorities, the weighted average index of dissimilarity is 26% for free school meals and 24% for exam attainment. In Scotland, it is 19% for both free school meals and exam attainment. It should be noted that these comparisons are rather rough-and-ready, since free school meal eligibility and exam systems vary between England and Scotland. Moreover, national averages obscure substantial differences within countries. The most segregated Scottish local authorities, Aberdeen and Edinburgh, would make the top fifth of English local authorities by segregation. Even so, it does appear to be the case that English schools are more polarised in terms of their intakes. To some extent, that may be the consequence of school choice policies. Indeed, there is evidence to suggest that school choice exacerbates existing residential segregation (Allen 2007). However, insofar as it reflects underlying social and geographical differences, it may mean that school choice feels more necessary and consequential for English families, facing a greater risk of ending up with an ‘undesirable’ or lower performing school.

Thus, there may be differences in the diversity of schools, availability of places, underlying cultural and political attitudes and levels of inter-school segregation that may confound efforts to identify the causal impact of school choice policy by comparing England and Scotland. I have suggested that in some cases (for example, differences in political culture), these differences between the two countries may be modest. In others, the differences (school diversity in particular) may not be independent of school choice policy. However, these underlying differences cannot be disregarded entirely and may explain part of the difference between England and Scotland, alongside school choice policy.

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<sup>26</sup> To calculate socioeconomic segregation within a local authority, for each school within that local authority, I subtracted the school’s share of local authority students on free school meals from its share of local authority students not on free school meals (Gov.uk n.d.; Scottish Government 2018). The index of dissimilarity is given by summing the absolute value of these numbers for each school in the local authority and dividing by two. For exam performance, I repeated the same process, calculating each school’s share of students achieving the English Baccalaureate in England (Gov.uk 2017) or at least five Higher passes in Scotland (Denholm 2019). See Allen (2007) for more detail on index of dissimilarity calculations.

Nevertheless, I am confident that policy accounts for at least some, and likely a significant portion, of the differences I have found between England and Scotland, for two reasons. First, when I got interview participants to reflect explicitly on the impact of policy, their responses suggested it greatly affects their experience. The Scottish parents I interviewed were more likely to be contented with their system, which some spontaneously and unfavourably contrasted with systems placing greater emphasis on formal choice, particularly England. Indeed, quite a few were visibly alarmed when I described the English system: consider Jackie's description of it as "horrific" or Lisa's preference for Scotland. By contrast, parents in England were more likely to cast an envious eye towards Scotland and the more straightforward experience of choice North of the border. For example, James, described the Scottish system as making "so much more sense" than the "bonkers" English system, and Charlotte admitted she would have been spared much stress under the Scottish system.

Second, over the course of this thesis, I have identified some of the mechanisms by which school choice policy affects people's experiences of choice, and these mechanisms are highly likely to be influenced by policy. In the interviews, families cited uncertainty as one of the biggest sources of disempowerment, stress and anxiety around the school choice process. Moreover, in the survey, parents facing greater uncertainty – Scottish parents making placing requests, English parents in areas with lower application success rates – are more stressed and anxious. The greater uncertainty felt by families in England is directly attributable to policy: the fact that they, unlike Scottish families, do not have a guaranteed place at any school.

Another mechanism through which choice creates intrinsic value and disvalue is through the demands of research. Both interviews and survey findings suggest processing large amounts of information from conflicting sources can be difficult, and a source of stress and anxiety. At the same time, they also suggest researching schools can be enjoyable and interesting. School choice policy in England is geared towards facilitating and encouraging more research: by publicising league tables, by holding open events and more broadly in the general rhetoric around the process. Thus, insofar as these policies succeed in encouraging greater depth of research, they likely contribute to stress, anxiety and enjoyment.

## 10.2 Contribution to Knowledge and Implications for Future Research

These findings contribute to a number of different academic debates and bodies of literature. First and foremost, this study is the most direct and sustained attempt to date to address the question of whether choice in public services has intrinsic value or disvalue. Several researchers have considered the question in theory, but few have sought to answer it empirically. While opinion surveys have investigated whether people want choice in public services (Le Grand 2009, 48–51; van Dalen and Henkens 2018), these have rarely probed whether such choice is desired for intrinsic reasons. Barnett et al (2008) consider attitudes to choice in healthcare in more depth, and Jilke et al (2016) have explored whether choice overload discourages people from engaging in choice of energy providers in the US. However, given the significance of the question to policy, and the array of different sectors and countries that have seen an expansion of choice, the existing literature is surprisingly thin. The findings of this thesis suggest that experiences of choice are likely to vary substantially, depending on the service and country in question, and that future researchers should attend to these particularities to build a broader picture of the phenomena.

Those researchers could take the theoretical framework developed in chapter 3 as their starting point. The framework represents a particularly significant contribution to the literature. As we have seen, the possibility that choice in public services might have intrinsic costs or benefits is widely recognised. However, there has been little in-depth or systematic discussion of how we might identify these costs and benefits in practice. In this thesis, I have built on Dowding and John's (2009) analysis to develop a more conceptually clear and thoroughgoing account of when and why public service choice might have intrinsic (dis)value. In the process, I have drawn on the philosophical literature, not just specific to school choice, but also analyses of well-being, freedom, autonomy and the normative status of parents and children, to identify the relationship between different normative positions and the empirical questions that they raise. The theoretical elements of this thesis can therefore be seen as addressing the 'normative deficit' that some scholars have identified in social policy: a failure in the discipline to engage explicitly with philosophical questions of value, and the fact that these values are contested (Watts, Calder, and Fitzpatrick 2019).

This thesis also contributes to the voluminous international literature on school choice. However, as we have seen, surprisingly little of that literature addresses the question of whether parents and children are intrinsically better or worse off for having a choice of schools. While

previous studies have touched upon intrinsic costs, none before has studied them as systematically as I have here. There is even less on the intrinsic benefits of choice: future studies should continue to explore the enjoyability of school choice and its contribution to freedom and autonomy. In chapter 4 we saw there has been some debate about the extent to which people want choice, and whether this desire is intrinsic (Exley 2014). This study contributes to that debate by focusing specifically on families that get to choose a school (whereas previous surveys have polled the general public). It has also combined quantitative and qualitative methods to identify a substantial minority of families that do seem to value choice intrinsically, even as the majority seek choice primarily for instrumental reasons.

Given the limitations of this study, there is ample scope for replication with different methods or in different contexts to test the reliability of the findings. There is no perfect instrument or data source for understanding the attitudes and feelings generated by school choice, so it would be worthwhile to see whether using different interview or survey questions, or perhaps analysing 'found data' from sources such as social media, forums or internet searches, produce similar results to mine. It would also be interesting to see whether the findings apply to primary as well as secondary school, or to explore similar questions in different locations (for example, rural towns and villages). Given the likely impact of British culture and institutions on my findings, future research could explore the intrinsic value and disvalue of school choice in other countries. It would be interesting to examine the experiences of families in countries where choice is relatively circumscribed (for example, Greece or South Korea), where it is more facilitated and encouraged (Chile, Belgium) or where policies have changed substantially in recent years (Sweden, New Zealand) (Musset 2012; Pearce and Gordon 2005; Sahlgren 2013).

I recognise that in this research I have learned more about parents than about students. There have almost certainly been costs to trying to address both at the same time: I have tended to prioritise parents over children in recruitment, and to allow parents to talk in greater depth rather than focus my attention on drawing out quieter or less articulate children. This latter is also likely a reflection of my own lack of experience with child participants. Other studies could build on mine by focusing more (perhaps exclusive) attention on the intrinsic value and disvalue of school choice to children.

It would also be interesting to explore the how school choice affects families over a longer time period. Does any sense of disempowerment fester and grow stronger as the child progresses through the school, or do families reconcile themselves to their circumstances? How do they feel about the process looking back months and years later? Does the fact of having chosen a

school affect parents' and students' level of engagement with their education at the school (a potential source of indirect intrinsic value that has not been covered in this thesis)? These are the sorts of questions that a study focusing on families with older children, or perhaps following families through the school choice process for a few years beyond it could address.

Beyond the question of intrinsic (dis)value, this thesis has also contributed to our understanding of the process of school choice in England and Scotland. Incredibly, it is the first in-depth analysis of school choice in Scotland in over 35 years. It serves as a reminder that school choice certainly does occur there: I have found that 87% of Scottish parents feel they have at least some choice. There is a definite need for more research about how school choice operates in Scotland: who makes placing requests; why they make them; how they affect inequality, segregation and educational outcomes.

We know far more already about school choice in England, but my thesis contributes to that literature, too. For example, though it is well established that people exercise school choice by moving house (Gibbons, Machin, and Silva 2013), there is surprisingly little data on how prevalent it is, who does it and why. I have found that there is certain amount of 'fuzziness' around such decisions for most families: although only a minority of parents were motivated to move primarily for schools, around half considered schools when deciding where to live. With data on school applications recently being made available to researchers, there is much analysis in progress of application *behaviour* (Burgess, Greaves, and Vignoles 2019; Hunt 2018). My findings here complement those projects with information on *subjective perceptions* of school choice. For example, Burgess et al (2019) find that on average, families in England apply to 2.4 secondary schools. My survey suggests that families do not typically consider many more: the average number of schools considered is 2.6. I have also presented data on different forms of research parents in England (and Scotland) carry out, which previous studies have covered. However, my data is more recent than many of those (Coldron et al. 2008; Miriam David, West, and Ribbens 1994; Gewirtz, Ball, and Bowe 1995), and unlike the Sutton Trust's surveys (Francis and Hutchings 2013; Montacute and Cullinane 2018) is specific to parents currently or recently choosing schools. My findings that non-white and non-British parents tend to have more negative experiences of school choice is consistent with a smaller literature focusing on minority groups (Byrne and De Tona 2012; Trevena, McGhee, and Heath 2016; Weekes-Bernard 2007).

I have not in this thesis attempted to evaluate the instrumental value or disvalue of school choice. However, from my conceptual definition of instrumental (dis)value in chapter 3, and my discussion of existing evidence on it in chapter 2, it should be clear that researchers have hitherto

considered a relatively narrow set of outcomes. Future studies should investigate the impact of school choice on sources of instrumental value beyond attainment and segregation, such as child wellbeing, satisfaction and fit with their school and personal and social development.

This thesis also contributes to our understanding of ‘choice overload’, or the ‘paradox of choice’. Until now, this has been studied mainly by social psychologists, who have found that the phenomenon only occurs in particular contexts under particular conditions (Chernev, Böckenholt, and Goodman 2015; Scheibehenne, Greifeneder, and Todd 2010). I have shown that choice does indeed seem to bring psychological costs for some people in a new domain – choosing schools (and perhaps public services more generally). Moreover, my findings shed some light on the mechanisms by which choice can reduce subjective welfare. Perhaps more than the agonising dilemmas, cognitive burden and painful regret that dominate standard accounts of the paradox of choice, my findings suggest it is uncertainty that is the most psychologically painful element of secondary school choice in the UK. My interviews have shown that for many families, school applications feel like a gamble, involving an interminable wait for the outcome, to be filled with catastrophic thinking. This idea of risk clearly does not apply so strongly to the sorts of choices initial studies explored, the sorts of choices still taken as paradigmatic illustrations of choice overload – consumer choices between types of jam or chocolate (Iyengar and Lepper 2000). However, many types of highly significant choice do have a similar dynamic to school choice, where the chooser faces uncertainty and rejection. For example, more recent studies have explored the psychological impact of choosing jobs (Iyengar, Wells, and Schwartz 2006) or romantic partners (D’Angelo and Toma 2017). Thus, future research into choice overload/the paradox of choice should give greater prominence to risk and uncertainty among the potential costs of choice.

In linking ideas from social psychology to public policy, this thesis makes a contribution to the developing field of behavioural public policy. Behavioural public policy seeks to apply the findings of behavioural sciences to policy design and evaluation. Rather than assuming people are the rational utility maximisers of standard economic theory, behavioural approaches begin from an understanding of people’s systematic deviations from textbook models of rationality (Oliver 2015).

Crude economic models imply that more choice is always better. It is better to have a choice between A and B than just to be allocated A, because if B is preferable to A the chooser gets an option they prefer, and if A is preferable to B they are no worse off. One of the foundational building blocks of behavioural economics is Herbert Simon’s insight that because of limited



cognitive capacity, there are costs to engaging with choice and in such circumstances rationality is 'bounded' (Oliver 2013, 4). This thesis has extended that insight, applying ideas from social psychology to public policy, by elucidating the costs involved with engaging in school choice. In the process, it has provided empirical support to the claims made in behavioural public policy forums that choice in public services may bring greater costs than benefits to the choosers (Bevan and Fasolo 2013; Schwartz and Cheek 2017).

### **10.3 Policy Implications**

#### *10.31 Comparing School Choice Policy in Scotland and England in Terms of Intrinsic (Dis)value*

I believe the findings I have presented here show that, on many of the most plausible theories of intrinsic value and disvalue, Scottish school choice policy is better than the approach taken in England. In terms of satisfying the desire for choice, the level of formal choice given to Scots – providing the option to make a placing request on the assumption that most families will not – seems to be adequate. Scottish families are no less likely to say they had enough choice, and in fact are less likely to express frustration or fatalism. There are several ways in which the English system seems to set families up for disappointment. By emphasising the need for choice, it encourages mistrust and scepticism towards catchment schools, channelling a greater number of applications towards the most popular schools. This leads to greater uncertainty as people wait on the outcome of their applications, and lower success rates (exacerbated by greater segregation and inequality between schools, and fewer available school places – which may be independent of school choice policy). These lower success rates reduce the perceived efficacy of choice. Even worse, this system is accompanied by stronger rhetoric about the effectiveness of choice, which simply breeds greater dissatisfaction given the gap between the promised ideal and the reality of the system.

In terms of the affective consequences of choice, not only do English families feel less empowered, they also feel more stressed, anxious, pressurised, regretful, inconvenienced and overwhelmed by the process. At the same time, they are more likely to find the process enjoyable and interesting. However, I believe the evidence I have collected here shows that the negative emotional consequences far outweigh the positive. In the survey, the gap between parents in Scotland and England is greater in terms of negative consequences: English parents find school

choice 30% (1.2 points) more stressful, but 15% (0.8 points) more enjoyable. In interviews, participants recognised pleasant aspects of the choice process, but tended to play it down – seeing the word ‘enjoyable’, for example, as over the top. By contrast, participants were far more emphatic about the negative consequences of choice, bringing them up more spontaneously and describing them as more consequential: disrupting lives, sleep and mental balance.

This evidence may have limited purchase with those that simply equate choice with freedom or autonomy. They may insist that choosing a school has intrinsic value, whether or not it is subjectively valued by the chooser or enhances their subjective wellbeing. Even so, this raises the question of how significant such intrinsic value is. Some accounts may flesh this out in terms of independent objective values (Such as exercising agency). However, if the value of school choice depends on its contribution to self-perceived autonomy, I believe my evidence shows that its intrinsic value is marginal. Given the level of confidence people have about their judgements over school, it is theoretically conceivable that they might find being denied the ability to choose as a paternalistic infringement of their right to self-government. Yet in practice, few parents feel so constrained – and in fact, those that do are more likely to be in England. It is possible that the small number of religious families that see faith schooling as necessary to sustaining their beliefs may be better off in England – but only if they have access to the right denomination of school.

I have not in this thesis addressed the possibility of indirect intrinsic value from school choice – for example, generating greater engagement and stronger connection between parents, children and their school. As discussed in 10.2, that may be a fruitful avenue for future research.

### *10.32 Comparing School Choice Policy in Scotland and England All Things Considered*

The intrinsic costs of school choice in England might be worth bearing if they bring substantial instrumental benefits. Imposing stress, anxiety, inconvenience and pressure on families for a few months at the end of primary school could be seen as a necessary cost for ensuring that children learn more or thrive better when they get to secondary school. I cannot consider this trade-off with any certainty. In this thesis, I have not reviewed the evidence on the instrumental costs and benefits of school choice in detail. In any case, the evidence that we have relates to a relatively narrow set of outcomes (attainment and segregation). We cannot say whether school choice improves or worsens any of the wider set of outcomes to which we may attribute

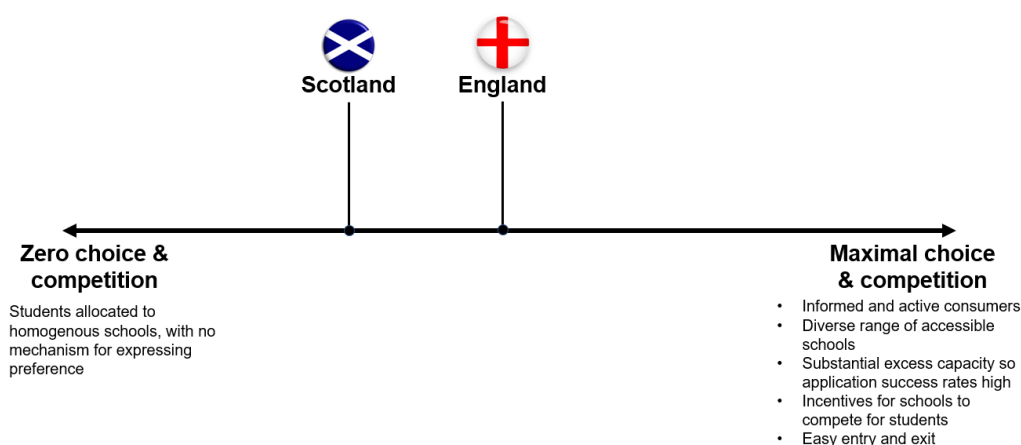
instrumental value: happier children, schools better matched to their students' characters or the improvement of non-academic personal and social capacities, to list just a few. Even if we did have all this information, there would remain a controversial normative question of how to value each side of the trade-off, if it does indeed obtain.

Such evidence as we do have, described in chapter 2, suggests that the instrumental benefits of school choice (in terms of exam results, at least) are modest and uncertain, and particularly weak in the English context (Allen and Burgess 2010; Sahlgren 2013). It also suggests school choice in England and elsewhere has brought instrumental costs, by increasing segregation (R. Harris 2010). Based on what we currently know, then, the English approach to school choice has brought substantial intrinsic and instrumental costs and at best only small intrinsic and instrumental benefits. It is possible that future research will uncover further substantial instrumental benefits that outweigh the large intrinsic costs I have described in this thesis. Until then, though, the indications are that Scottish school choice policy is preferable to English school choice policy, all things considered.

### *10.33 Implications for the Desirability of School Choice More Generally*

The tentative conclusion that the Scottish approach to school choice has been better than the English does not discredit school choice policies more generally, nor does it imply that any and all efforts to increase school choice are misguided. Scotland and England occupy spaces somewhere along a wider spectrum, running from zero to maximal formal and substantive school choice (Musset 2012). Comparing them does not necessarily tell us about the desirability of moving to other points on the spectrum.

### 10.1: The choice and competition spectrum



*Note: positioning of Scotland and England is illustrative only*

The evidence I have presented here suggests that Scotland's success has been predicated on the fact that most families feel they have an adequate amount of choice because they have the option to make a placing request. A system closer to the zero choice pole, allocating students to schools without any mechanism for expressing alternative preferences, may well generate substantial frustration, disempowerment and dissatisfaction. That is why it would be worthwhile for future research to explore that possibility in systems with less choice than Scotland, such as Greece's or South Korea's (Musset 2012; Smithers and Robinson 2010).

The relative modesty of the intrinsic benefit I found from school choice may also be a contingent feature of the systems in England and Scotland. It is conceivable that greater diversity of schools, better tailored to the characters and value of students and their families, could play a greater role in helping them live authentically – schools based not just on religion or sex, but perhaps philosophical, political or cultural outlooks, different dispositions, different interests. I found faith schools to be the most plausible instance of school choice helping families to live authentically (although that may depend on how we conceive of the appropriate relationship between parental and child beliefs). In England, this may be especially relevant to minority religious groups, particularly Muslims, among whom previous research has found a strong desire for greater access to Islamic schools (Denessen, Driessena, and Slegers 2005; Weekes-Bernard 2007). It may also be a more significant issue in other countries – for example, in the US, where religious observance is greater and state schools are constitutionally bound to be secular (Gutmann 1980). Of course, in such contexts, providing faith schools may produce

greater social segregation, implying a trade-off between promoting one kind of intrinsic value and avoiding instrumental costs.

The demonstrated instrumental benefits of England's current position on the choice and competition spectrum seem to be modest. However, some argue that this is the result of too little choice and competition, rather than too much (Sahlgren 2013; Waslander, Pater, and van der Weide 2010). On this view, the reason the quasi-market has failed to produce better results is because choice is too constrained, with popular schools oversubscribed; market forces are too weak, with entry and exit restricted and little incentive for schools to expand; and choosers insufficiently informed and engaged. It is beyond the scope of this thesis to judge whether such faith in the potential of the quasi-market is well placed. However, as I describe in the following section, my findings suggest that certain measures intended to increase the instrumental benefits of school choice and competition may simultaneously increase its intrinsic costs.

#### *10.34 Implications for Existing Policy Proposals*

Before turning to the policy implications arising directly from the findings of this thesis, I consider how my findings may alter the attractiveness of a range of recent proposals put forward by others. In general, there are three types of reforms to school choice and competition in England that are commonly suggested. The first are measures to reshape the 'supply side' of schools: increasing school autonomy, making it easier for new schools to open and old ones to close and opening up to a more diverse range of providers, such as private sector or community groups (Allen and Burgess 2010; Sahlgren 2013). To the extent that these changes would increase the number of school places, particularly at the most popular schools, they would reduce frustration among families. However, these supply-side reforms could conceivably have negative side effects if new entrants 'market' themselves more aggressively, confusing parents and increasing the perceived pressure around school choice.

The second type of reform are measures to improve the fairness of admissions. To a large extent, these are motivated by a desire to reduce the level of socio-economic segregation within the school system, and in particular to improve socially disadvantaged students' access to the highest attaining schools (Burgess, Greaves, and Vignoles 2020; Van den Brande, Hillary, and Cullinane 2019). Since better-off families tend to live apart from disadvantaged families, and close to desirable schools, those seeking to integrate schools often wish to weaken the link

between where students live and the schools they attend (Allen 2007; R. Harris 2010). Thus proposed policies include giving priority to applications from low income households and allocating at least a proportion of places at the most sought-after schools by lottery, rather than privileging those living near a school (Allen 2013; Burgess 2016; Coldron et al. 2008; Van den Brande, Hillary, and Cullinane 2019; West 2006).

My findings suggest that such reforms have the potential to create substantial intrinsic disvalue. The randomness of a lottery, in particular, seems likely to exacerbate the uncertainty and anxiety of the school choice process. Recognising these concerns, as well as the benefits (convenience, community, exercise, independence) of students attending a school near their home, Allen (2013) and Burgess (2016) both suggest that the majority of places should be allocated according to catchment areas. However, there may be ways to provide the certainty of guaranteed school places without accepting the segregation that comes with simply allocating students to their nearest school. It has been suggested that admissions authorities could ‘gerrymander’ catchment areas to ensure schools are relatively balanced in terms of the deprivation of their intakes (Allen 2013; Coldron et al. 2008, 193–95). Bjerre-Nielsen & Gandil (2020) find evidence that municipalities in Denmark do indeed manipulate school zones in this way. However, they show that this tactic only works if underlying segregation is not too high: students shifted from a school with a highly advantaged intake to a highly disadvantaged intake avoided their newly allocated schools to such a degree as to eliminate any fall in segregation.

The third type of reform are measures to influence families’ behaviour when choosing schools. Sometimes, the objective is ensuring choices are adequately ‘informed’ (Montacute and Cullinane 2018; Musset 2012, 38–40). The reforms may also aim to achieve wider and deeper ‘engagement’ with the process of choosing (Allen and Burgess 2010; Montacute and Cullinane 2018). For example, an OECD report suggests that “The design of school choice programmes should focus more on getting larger proportions of families to choose, rather than simply catering to the preferences of active choosers” (Musset 2012, 40). Sahlgren (2013, 134) argues for school choice to be “mandatory”, by which he means families should have no default school. Another intended outcome is encouraging more ‘ambitious’ choices, which typically means applications to academically higher performing schools (Allen, Burgess, and McKenna 2014; Leroux 2016).

Insofar as these measures reassure families, and help them feel less confused and overwhelmed by the decision, they should reduce the intrinsic costs of choice. Choice advisers, for example, seem to fall into this category. Redesigning information sources, such as league tables, may help,

although it may simply add to confusion. However, we have seen in the course of this thesis that greater engagement does seem to come at a cost: greater demands on families' time and cognitive resources, and likely greater stress and anxiety. Eliminating defaults would substantially increase the insecurity involved in school choice, which could be very damaging.

Recently, Burgess et al (2019) have called for all English local authorities to increase the number of school preferences they allow families to express to six, the maximum currently offered. They suggest that at present some families may be incentivised to 'play it safe', because if they listed their genuine top three or four preferences they would risk not getting any of them. This is a plausible argument, and it seems likely that in dense urban areas it is decisive. However, this change could bring costs. I have shown that parents in local authorities soliciting more preferences are more stressed and less likely to believe they have adequate choice. Though this does not prove a causal link, it is possible that increasing the number of preferences on the application form could i) 'anchor' parents on a higher number of schools as normative, bringing greater research costs, and ii) seed greater doubt as to whether they are likely to get one of their preferred schools.

Fundamentally, there is a tension between policies that seek to encourage engagement with school choice, and those that seek to provide a safety net for those who cannot or do not want to engage deeply. It is possible to pursue both, but the lesser the penalty for disengagement, the weaker the incentive to engage. The findings of this thesis suggest we should accommodate those who wish not to engage, and discourage the worst impulses of those prone to exhaust and distress themselves over choice. In that spirit, Sunstein (2015) argues for greater use of 'smart defaults': measures that ensure the automatic outcome is optimal if no choice is made. What Sunstein has in mind are precisely engineered algorithms, adept at predicting the ideal option for a person without them needing to make choice. If such a system were achievable and workable, it would be a great improvement on allocating schools by residence or on the basis of imperfectly 'gerrymandered' catchments. However, no such algorithm exists as yet, and such ambitious plans may prove to be chimerical.

### *10.35 Direct Policy Implications*

Overall, this thesis might be read as a vindication of the status quo on school choice in Scotland. To a significant extent, it is. All the same, I have identified certain issues that may be relevant

to Scottish policymakers. It should be clear by now that the transition from primary to secondary school can be a tricky one, and that most families value anything that can be done to smooth the process. Scottish schools and authorities may wish to learn from one another and spread best practice in terms of creating the most comfortable possible journey for students (Jindal-Snape et al. 2019).

I have also shown that while the process currently seems to work well for most Scottish families, it is much harder on families that make placing requests. To some extent, this may be unavoidable: my findings suggest that to actively opt-in to choosing a school is usually to invite a certain amount of stress and pressure onto oneself. However, the Scottish government and local authorities should consider ways in which they might lighten these burdens. For example, it may be possible to improve communication with families regarding the status of their placing request, or to speed up processing times.

There is substantial consternation around Scotland's education system at present, following disappointing recent performances in international assessments and a perception of relative decline compared to England (BBC News 2019; Paterson 2019). There is little reason to attribute this to the Scottish approach to school choice, and increasing choice and competition does not appear to be on the political agenda for now (Cope and P'Anson 2009; West, Barham, and Hind 2011), but it is possible that policymakers may return to it as a way to improve standards in the future. The Scottish Conservative party have endorsed a government-funded voucher scheme to encourage school choice in the past (Davidson 2013), and think tanks have made similar proposals (Crafts 2004; Sandor 2015; Thomson, Mawdsley, and Payne 2009). This may be a legitimate strategy – as I noted in the previous section, many people maintain that well designed choice and competition policies can improve outcomes. However, the limited success of choice reforms in England suggests that it will only work to substantially raise standards if Scotland 'leapfrogs' England to a higher level of formal choice and competition. Simply mimicking English institutions is liable to make things worse. Moreover, given the limited evidence of quasi-markets improving outcomes, it is a risky move: highly likely to bring intrinsic costs in exchange for uncertain instrumental gains.

The implications of this thesis for English policymakers are more complicated. Even if they agree that the Scottish approach would have been preferable, and that they would have been better off not embarking down the path of school choice, it does not follow that they should reverse course. Having created such high expectations around school choice, it may be that families resent anything that seems like choice being 'taken away' from them. As Lupton (2011,



322) puts it, “now that the choice genie is out of the bottle, it may be difficult to stuff back in”. Such a move would not, however, be unprecedented. In the early 1990s, New Zealand was perceived as one of the countries that had most fully embraced school choice and competition, and had abolished catchment areas for most schools. However, a change of government in 2000 led to a rhetorical shift away from marketisation, and the reintroduction of zoning (Pearce and Gordon 2005; Thrupp 2001).

In all likelihood, though, the task for English policymakers will be mitigating the intrinsic costs of choice. Three of the main aspects of the current school choice process that disempower families and reduce their subjective wellbeing are its lack of perceived efficacy, its uncertainty and the amount of complex and conflicting information to process. Each may be amenable to policy reform without reducing perceived choice.

To increase the efficacy of school choice, policymakers need to reduce the number of unsuccessful applications. The simplest way to do this, though it would likely be expensive, would be to create more school places, particularly at the most popular schools. It may be possible, through changes to school funding, to increase the incentives for oversubscribed schools to expand (Sahlgren 2013). In 2013, Allen (2013) called for an increase in spare capacity across the entire estate of English secondary schools, from 5-10% to 20%. In recent years, it has risen to 16% (Department for Education 2020a). However, a population ‘bulge’ is expected to increase the number of secondary school students by around 15% in the coming years (Department for Education 2019b). More investment is therefore needed to avoid rising pressure on the system and an increase in families’ frustration and disenchantment.

One obvious way to reduce the uncertainty associated with school choice, as in Scotland, would be to reduce the length of time it takes to process applications – the four month period of ‘purgatory’ from submission to offers. Again, this may well be logistically challenging and demanding in terms of administrative and financial resources, but given the anguish many families endure in the breach (see section 7.7), any reduction in the wait time would bring meaningful benefits.

Another way to reduce uncertainty would be to explicitly guarantee children a place in at least one secondary school, most likely their catchment school. For example, in the school district of Charlotte-Mecklenburg, North Carolina, students have a sure place at a ‘home’ school, but may also state preferences for other schools in the district and have free transport to schools within their quadrant (Waslander, Pater, and van der Weide 2010, 70). Much of the catastrophic thinking amidst the uncertainty of school choice in England results from a feeling that there is

no ‘safety net’ (section 7.7). In my interviews, the spectre of failing to get a place at any of their chosen schools loomed large in many people’s imaginations. In at least some cases, it may be possible to assuage these feelings of insecurity by clearly communicating that there is a backstop. Of course, this is unlikely to be much comfort to those families that vehemently object to their catchment school. However, it may ease the burden for others. Allen (2013, 33) argues that 80% of the places at every standard non-faith school should be reserved for students within an assigned catchment area on similar grounds: “This system would give every family some degree of certainty that they will get a place at their local school; everyone would also have a chance to roll the dice to attend a school of choice”. Burgess (2016) makes a similar proposal.

A major reason why families dislike the uncertainty of school choice is because it limits the opportunity they (particularly the student) have to familiarise themselves with their new school. In areas with a high level of formal choice, students are doubly disadvantaged. First, because they discover much later which school they will be attending: most Scottish children have years to prepare; most English children six months. Second, because there is typically less continuity between their primary and secondary schools: most Scottish students will attend the secondary school their primary was a feeder for alongside most of their primary classmates, whereas English students see fewer familiar faces. English schools and local authorities should therefore recognise they have some ‘catching up’ to do, and could invest greater effort and resources in easing the transition for their students: for example, increasing the number of ‘taster days’ and social events or improving information sharing with primary schools (Evangelou et al. 2008).

Policymakers might also wish to take steps to ease the informational complexity families face when choosing schools, although this is less straightforward to address. There is likely potential for improvement in the user-friendliness of formal information sources, such as league tables. For example, in a US study Glazerman et al (2020) find that parent satisfaction rises when a school comparison website displays charts rather than just numbers, and emphasises the reviews of other parents. However, such measures are likely to have limited effect for the reason that such formal sources of information play only a small role in most families’ research, relative to school visits and word of mouth. Adding more information, or even just tweaking existing sources, risks contributing to the cacophony rather than cutting through it.

Bringing back choice advisers is a more promising policy response. The official evaluation of the programme in England found it successfully reassured anxious parents, guided them through the system and help them interpret the various sources of information (Stiell et al. 2008). Interviews with choice advisers themselves suggest they did see themselves as

empowering parents – albeit that their ability to do so was limited by structural constraints on choice faced by many families (Exley 2013). Again, such a measure would likely be expensive and resource intensive. Moreover, it would benefit only those families that actively ask for assistance, which many are unlikely to do. The Sutton Trust have suggested using community groups, consumer agencies or businesses to support and inform school choice, which may bring similar benefits (Montacute and Cullinane 2018). However, if these groups are seen as insufficiently independent and trustworthy, they may add doubt and uncertainty, rather than removing it.

## **10.4 Conclusion**

In the debate over choice in public services, until now we have had precious little evidence over the intrinsic (dis)value of choice – whether people are better or worse off as a result of the process of choosing or mere fact of choice. This thesis has started to address that gap, at least in relation to secondary school choice in Scotland and England. It has shown that the overwhelming majority of families do want a choice of schools, but this desire is adequately met by Scotland's system of allocating default schools and requiring families to 'opt in' to choosing an alternative. It has shown that greater formal choice does not seem to lead to greater perceived empowerment or subjective welfare. To the contrary, families in England, for all the support and encouragement they receive to make a choice, are more likely to be cynical and fatalistic. Moreover, they find school choice far more inconvenient, time consuming, stressful and anxiety-provoking. This pattern is mirrored within England and Scotland, with those families in each country that consider more schools and engage more deeply with choice having more negative experiences. Concerningly, parents that may already face disadvantage – non-white and foreign-educated parents – are more likely to find the process stressful and unsatisfactory.

It should be clear that the burdens of school choice can be substantial, reflected in disrupted life plans, sleepless nights and dizzy confusion. These costs should not be dismissed lightly, but should be given full weight when evaluating and refining school choice policies. Policymakers should look to reduce frustrated preferences, informational complexity and - most importantly - uncertainty. That may mean improving procedures for applications and secondary transition. It may mean investing in school places and support for families. Most radically, for countries like England that have embraced choice so strongly, it may mean a fundamental reorientation

of policy. Instead of seeking to encourage wider and deeper engagement with choice, this reorientation would prioritise improving default options so more people can feel free not to choose.

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## Appendices

### Appendix A: Previous Studies on the Process of School Choice in England and Scotland

Study	Fieldwork Dates	Location	Participants	Method	Research Question
Adler et al (1989) Willms & Echols (1992) Willms (1997)	1984	3 Scottish Local Authorities	619 parents	Quantitative survey	Why do some parents make placing request? How do they differ from other parents?
Thomas & Dennison (1991)	1990	Northern England	72 children, 12 parents	Qualitative questionnaire	Do parents or children choose? What factors influence choice?
Woods (1992)	1990-2	Not given	15 parents; 262 teaching staff	Qualitative interviews	Do parents feel they have a choice and that the system is responsive?
David et al (1994)		London	70 parents; 134 children	Mixed methods: interviews and survey	What is the relationship between gender and school choice?
Bowe et al (1994) Gewirtz et al (1995) Ball et al (1995) Reay & Ball (1997) Ball & Gewirtz (1997)	1991-4	London	137 parents	Qualitative interviews	How does school choice interact with social class?

Ball & Vincent (1998) Reay & Ball (1998)					
Bagley (1996) Woods et al (1998) Bagley et al (2001)	1993-6	3 English Local Authorities	Surveyed 6,000 parents; interviewed 124	Mixed methods: interviews and survey	What sources of information to parents use and what factors affect choice?
Hammond & Dennison (1995)		Not given	Surveyed 755 families, interviewed 14 families	Mixed methods: interviews and survey	How far do families take advantage of choice in less populated areas? What factors affect choice?
Coldron & Boulton (1996)	1994	Northern England	28 parents whose children had completed education	Qualitative interviews	How do parents view school choice in retrospect?
West et al (1998)	1994-5	London	Parents of 111 children that had recently started primary school and 120 children choosing secondary schools	Mixed methods: interviews and survey	How do parents choosing state and private schools differ in their approaches to choice?
Reay (1996)		London	33 parents	Qualitative interviews	How can we better understand choice within the context of geography, class, power and resources?
Boulton & Coldron (1996)		Not given	Parents	Qualitative interviews	How far have parents absorbed the rhetoric of school choice?
Gorard (1997b; 1998)	1995-6	South Wales	1,267 people from 794 families (parents and children), 5% interviewed	Mixed methods: quantitative survey and interviews	How do families choose schools?



Carroll & Walford (1997)		Midlands	32 parents	Qualitative interviews	Are there differences in the extent to which parents engage with choice?
Coldron & Boulton (1999)	1998	Not given	1 parent	Qualitative interviews	How are emotions and meaning generated through educational choices?
Reay & Lucey (2000; 2003) Lucey & Reay (2000; 2002a; 2002b) Reay (2007)	1998-9	London	454 children	Qualitative interviews and focus groups	How do children see the process of choice?
Flatley et al (2001)	2000	England	2,916 parents of children about to start years 6-8	Quantitative survey	What issues do parents face in choosing a school? What information do they need? How can parents satisfaction be improved?
Coldron (2003)		England	Surveyed 1,011 appeals panel members and 317 appellants; interviewed 15 admission officers, 17 panel members and 21 parents that appealed	Mixed methods: survey and interviews	
Warrington (2005)		London (inner city)	Headteacher + 20 carers of high-performing final year	Qualitative interviews	How far does geographical inequality constrain

			students at a high deprivation primary school		the agency of families choosing schools?
Byrne (2006)		London (Clapham and Camberwell)	35 white middle class parents of school age children	Qualitative interviews	How is racial identity constructed through school choice?
Heath (2007; 2009)	2004-05	East England, North England	204 children, 34 teachers	Qualitative focus groups	How do students and teachers experience school choice?
Raveaud & van Zanten (2007) Oria et al (2007)	2004-05	London (Hackney), Paris	28 middle class parents in London	Qualitative interviews	How do approaches to school choice vary between England and France?
Coldron et al (2008)	2006-07	England	2,215 parents	Quantitative survey	Official evaluation of school admissions
Curtice & Heath (2009) Patrikios & Curtice (2014)	2007	UK	2,002 members of the general public	Quantitative survey	Do people favour choice and diversity in public services?
Weekes-Bernard (2007)		Inner London, North, East England	Ethnic minority parents: interviewed 59, surveyed 118	Mixed methods: interviews, focus group and online survey	How does choice affect ethnic minority schooling?
Reay et al (2007) Crozier et al (2008) Williams et al (2008)		London, South West England, North East England	125 white middle class parents	Qualitative interviews	How do middle class parents manage the ethical dilemmas involved in choice?
Stiell et al (2008)	2007-08	15 English local authorities	75 parents seeking choice advice; 45 choice advisers, managers and admissions officers	Qualitative interviews	Official evaluation of choice advice service

Byrne & De Tona (2012; 2014)	2009-10	Greater Manchester	54 parents (25 ethnic minority)	Qualitative interviews	How does race and multiculturalism influence choice?
Exley (2012; 2014)	2010	UK	1,870 members of the general public	Quantitative survey	Does the public support parental school choice?
Exley (2013)	2010-11	England	14 choice advisers in 10 local authorities	Qualitative interviews	How do choice advisers see their role, in terms of enhancing parental agency?
Butler & Hamnett (2010; 2012) Hamnett et al (2013)		East London	100 parents	Qualitative interviews	How do different social groups choose schools?
Wilkins (2010; 2011)		London (Camden)	11 mothers	Qualitative interviews	How do parents balance emotion and rational consumerism in choice?
Trevena et al (2016)	2009-12	Glasgow, Perth & Kinross, Angus, Southampton, Dorset	25 Polish parents of children applying for primary/secondary school	Qualitative interviews	How do Polish parents experience the process of school choice?
Frances & Hutchings (2013)	2012	England	1173 parents of children aged 5-16	Online survey	What strategies do parents use to aid their children's educational outcomes?
Bajwa-Patel & Devecchi (2014)		South East England local authority	65 parents of children with special educational needs aged 4/5 or 12/13	Survey	How do parents of children with special educational needs choose schools?

Benson et al (2015)		London, Paris	120 parents of school age children in London	Qualitative interviews	How do school choice strategies compare between England and France?
Hill & Lai (2016)		South West England	30 parents of school age children	Qualitative interviews	How is class reflected in parental narratives of school choice?
Wespieser et al (2015)	2014-15	England	1005 parents of children aged 5-18	Online survey	How do parents feel about school choice?
Montacute & Cullinane (2018)	2018	England	1017 parents of children aged 5-16	Online survey	What strategies do parents use to aid their children's educational outcomes?

## Appendix B: Detailed Participant Characteristics

### Camden

Parent Pseudonym	Child pseudonym	Child gender/order	Mother				Father				How Recruited
			Profession	Non-British	Non-white	University graduate	Profession	Non-British	Non-white	University graduate	
Ruth	Eli	Boy, youngest	Academic			✓	Homemaker			✓	Local authority open event
Franco		Boy, oldest	Charity			✓	Lawyer	✓		✓	
Ioanna		Girl, oldest	Academic	✓		✓	Academic	✓	✓	✓	
Katy (interviewed with Ioanna)		Girl, only	Statistician		✓	✓	Banker	?	?	?	
Francesca & Graeme	Chiara	Girl, only	Student	✓		✓	Architect			✓	
Dimitrios		Girl, only	Creative arts	✓		✓	Creative arts	✓		✓	
Charlotte & Anil	Tina	Girl, oldest	Banker			✓	Retail	✓	✓	✓	Meet the Parents: School A
Haile	Tedros	Boy, oldest	Event manager	✓	✓	✓	Student	✓	✓	✓	
Michael	Melissa	Girl, oldest	Actuary			✓	Legal			✓	
Kelly		Girl, oldest	Office manager				Fitness instructor				MTP: School B
Aaliyah	Aisha	Girl, oldest	Human resources	✓	✓	✓	Publisher			✓	
Yvonne		Girl, only	Recruitment consultant			✓	Fitness instructor			✓	MTP: School C
Angela		Girl, oldest	Homemaker		✓	✓	Management consultant			✓	
Khalida		Girl, oldest	Administrator		✓		Retail		✓		MTP: School D
Brigitte	Ellie	Girl, youngest	Charity	✓		✓	Lawyer		✓	✓	MTP: School E
James	Scarlett	Girl, only	Teacher			✓	Lawyer			✓	MTP: School F
Samantha	William	Boy, oldest	Editor			✓	Charity			✓	Snowball
Marion		Girl, youngest	Personal assistant				N/A				
Heather		Boy, youngest	Charity				Refuse collector				

## Ipswich

Parent Pseudonym	Child pseudonym	Child gender/order	Mother				Father				How Recruited
			Profession	Non-British	Non-white	University graduate	Profession	Non-British	Non-white	University graduate	
Jill & Harry (interviewed separately)	Donny	Boy, youngest	Teacher			✓	Construction			✓	School G
Linda	Martin	Boy, middle	Student				Dispatcher				
Marie		Boy, oldest	Teacher		✓	✓	Teacher			✓	
Chanel	Keisha	Girl, oldest	Healthcare assistant		✓		?	✓	✓		
Zofia	Zuzanna	Girl, oldest	Homemaker				Factory worker				School H
Jane		Boy, youngest	Teacher			✓	Teacher			✓	
Sandra	Dominic	Boy, youngest	Civil servant				Insurer				
Amy & Jack	Rhiannon	Girl, only	IT			✓	Retail manager			✓	

## Edinburgh

Parent Pseudonym	Child pseudonym	Child gender/order	Placing Request	Mother				Father				How Recruited
				Profession	Non-British	Non-white	University graduate	Profession	Non-British	Non-white	University graduate	
Joe		Girl, oldest		Doctor			✓	University administrator			✓	School I
Beverley	Nicky	Girl, oldest		Banker			✓	Council worker			✓	
Lizzie	Ruaridh	Boy, only	✓	Freelance, multiple jobs				N/A				
Lisa	Angus	Boy, oldest		Academic			✓	Doctor			✓	
Daniela & Pawel		Boy, oldest	✓	Teacher	✓		✓	Academic	✓		✓	
Frank	Stephen	Boy, youngest		Banker			✓	Banker			✓	
Alistair		Girl, only		Accountant			✓	Civil servant			✓	
Andrea	Lauren	Girl, youngest		Lawyer			✓	Teacher			✓	
Cheryl	Thomas	Boy, oldest		Pensions			✓	Planning			✓	Snowball

## Dundee

Parent Pseudonym	Child pseudonym	Child gender/order	Placing Request	Mother				Father				How Recruited
				Profession	Non-British	Non-white	University graduate	Profession	Non-British	Non-white	University graduate	
Jim		Girl, middle		Teaching assistant			✓	Life coach			✓	School K
Zoe & Nathan		Boy, oldest		Nurse			✓	Bus driver			✓	
Hailey	Kirsty		✓	Retail				Mechanic			✓	
Jackie	Megan	Girl, youngest		Accountant			✓	Engineer			✓	
Adele		Girl, middle		Care worker				N/A				
Theresa		Boy, youngest		Hairdresser				Hairdresser			✓	
Wendy		Boy, oldest		Student				Banker			✓	
Andy		Boy, oldest		N/A				Taxi driver				Social media
Victoria		Boy, youngest		Council worker			✓	Oil & gas				
Sarah		Girl, oldest		Secretary				N/A				



## Scotstown

Parent Pseudonym	Child pseudonym	Child gender/order	Placing Request	Mother				Father				How Recruited
				Profession	Non-British	Non-white	University graduate	Profession	Non-British	Non-white	University graduate	
Abbie		Girl, oldest	✓	Hairdresser				Operations manager				School L
Ingrid		Boy, oldest		Homemaker			✓	Engineer			✓	
Stephanie & Fred		Girl, youngest		IT consultant			✓	Self-employed			✓	School M
Flora		Girl, only	✓	Council worker				N/A				
Daphne		Boy, youngest	✓	Teaching assistant				Delivery driver				
Iona		Boy, only		Human resources			✓	Project manager			✓	Snowball
Prema & Kumar		Boy, oldest		Retail assistant	✓	✓	✓	Engineer	✓	✓	✓	
Lalitha		Boy, oldest		Academic	✓	✓	✓	Academic	✓	✓	✓	Social media
Shona		Boy, middle		Events				Workshop supervisor				
Tracy		Boy, oldest		Receptionist				Council worker				
Jenny		Girl, oldest		Human resources			✓	Account manager			✓	

## Appendix C: Topic Guides

### *Parents*

1. Demographic details
  - Family structure (including siblings)
  - Occupations
  - Time in area
2. Can you describe the process of moving to secondary school so far? In particular, I'm keen to hear how you felt throughout and how you've found the process.
  - When did you first start thinking about it?
  - When did the council/school first make contact?
  - What other sources of information did you consult? Did you look at prospectuses, visit schools, speak to friends/relatives, involve children?
  - Did you put in a placing request? [Scotland only]
  - What did you personally have to do?
3. How big a part of your life has the decision to choose a school been in recent months?
  - How does it compare to other life events, such as moving house or changing job?
4. To what extent do you feel you had a meaningful choice over which secondary school your child will attend?
  - How many options did you realistically have?
  - Which ones did you consider?
  - Were certain schools obvious / ruled out?
5. Why did you choose to make a placing request / not make a placing request? [Scotland only]
6. Why did you choose the school you did? What were you looking for from your school, and how did it measure up against those criteria?
7. How different do you think the schools in your area are?
  - What are the main ways in which they differ?
8. Do you feel that you had enough choice? What were the main limitations on your choice?
9. Overall, would you say that your experience was positive or negative? Why?

10. Can you look at the words on these cards and tell me how far each of them describe your experience of choosing a school so far? It would be really helpful if you could expand on your answers with details, anecdotes, anything that they bring to mind
- Anxious
  - Boring
  - Difficult
  - Pressurised
  - Stressful
  - Time Consuming
  - Empowering
  - Enjoyable
  - Exciting
  - [BLANK CARD FOR PARTICIPANTS TO FILL IN]
11. How involved was your child in the process? How do you think they found it?
12. Who else was involved in choosing the school (partners, relatives)?
13. How worried would you say you were/are about making the wrong decision? Why?
14. How equipped or capable did you feel to make the choice?
15. How important is it to you to be able to choose which school your child attends?
- Why/how?
  - Where does this rank among the other big decisions you have made in your life?
  - Is it more important to you to be able to choose the best possible school or to avoid schools you would prefer your child not to attend?
16. In other countries, the government does more to encourage choice, by requiring parents to make a choice / make multiple choices / more free transport / getting schools to compete for places [as applicable]. How would you feel about introducing such policies here?
17. In other countries, parents have very little choice and children are expected to attend their neighbourhood school. How would you feel about such a system?
18. How far is your school choice about passing on particular values or skills to your children?
- Religion
  - Valuing certain subjects
  - Types of learning

19. Would you have preferred to have greater variety in the type of schools in your area, so there was more choice, or do you think it's better for all schools to provide basically the same kind of education?
- Religion
  - Educational style
  - Subject specialisation
20. Is there anything else we haven't covered that you think it would be useful for me to know?

## *Children*

1. Can you describe how you've found the move to secondary school so far? In particular, I'd like to know about how you and your family have chosen a school.
  - When did you first start thinking about it?
  - How did you find out about different schools? Did you look at their brochures/leaflets? Did you visit any? Did you speak to friends or relatives?
2. Do you think you were involved much in the decision over which school to go to?
  - When did you start discussing it with your family? Who brought it up, and who was involved?

[Note throughout: references to 'parents' may have to be substituted for other family members/friends etc if they are more involved]

- Did you suggest any schools to your parents? Did they suggest any to you?
  - Did you visit any schools?
  - Did you do any research yourself eg visiting websites, looking at brochures?
  - Did you have a preferred school(s)? Was this the same as your parents?
  - Who do you think had the final say?
3. [if appropriate] Why did you choose the school you did?
  4. Have you yourself spent a lot of time thinking about which school to go to?
    - How does it compare to other decisions you've had to make? (eg which clubs or social activities to join, how to spend your pocket money)
  5. Did you feel you had the necessary skills to make the choice?
  6. Are you happy with the options you had?
    - What do you think makes for a good school? What were you looking for when you were choosing a school?
    - Do you think the schools you looked at have these qualities?
  7. How different do you think the schools in your area are?
    - What are the main ways in which they differ?
  8. Do you feel that you had enough choice? What were the main limitations on your choice?
  9. Can you look at the words on these cards and tell me how well they describe the way choosing a school has made you feel? Can you explain why that is?

- Anxious
- Bored
- Confused
- Under pressure
- Stressed
- In charge
- Enjoying yourself
- Excited
- Grown up
- [BLANK CARD FOR PARTICIPANTS TO FILL IN]

10. How do you think your parents have found the process of choosing a school?
11. Has choosing a school had any impact on your relationship with other people – like friends or relatives?
12. How worried would you say you were/are about making the wrong decision? Why?
13. Do you think it's important for you to have a say over which school you go to?
  - Why/how?
  - Where does it rank compared to other big decisions you have made?
14. In some other countries, children are expected to go to their local school and don't get much say about which school they go to. How would you feel if we had a system like that in England?  
 OR In some countries, children aren't expected to go to their local school, but everybody chooses from a set of options. How would you feel if we had a system like that in Scotland?
15. Is there anything else we haven't covered that you think it would be useful for me to know?

## *Parents & Children Together*

1. Demographic details
  - Family structure (including siblings)
  - Occupations
  - Time in area
2. Can you describe the process of moving to secondary school so far? In particular, I'm keen to hear how you felt throughout and how you've found the process.
  - When did you first start thinking about it?
  - When did the council/school first make contact?
  - What other sources of information did you consult? Did you look at prospectuses, visit schools, speak to friends/relatives, involve children?
  - Did you put in a placing request? [Scotland only]
  - What did you personally have to do?
3. How involves was the child in the decision over the school?
  - When did you start discussing it with your family? Who brought it up, and who was involved?

[Note throughout: references to 'parents' may have to substituted for other family members/friends etc if they are more involved]

- Did you suggest any schools to your parents? Did they suggest any to you?
  - Did you visit any schools?
  - Did you do any research yourself eg visiting websites, looking at brochures?
  - Did you have a preferred school(s)? Was this the same as your parents?
  - Who do you think had the final say?
4. How big a part of your life has the decision to choose a school been in recent months?
    - How does it compare to other life events, such as moving house or changing job?
    - How does it compare to other decisions you've had to make? (eg which clubs or social activities to join, how to spend your pocket money)
  5. To what extent do you feel you had a meaningful choice over which secondary school you will attend?
    - How many options did you realistically have?
    - Which ones did you consider?
    - Were certain schools obvious / ruled out?
  6. Why did you choose the school you did? What were you looking for from your school, and how did it measure up against those criteria?
  7. Are you happy with the options you had?

- What do you think makes for a good school? What were you looking for when you were choosing a school?
  - Do you think the schools you looked at have these qualities?
8. How different do you think the schools in your area are?
    - What are the main ways in which they differ?
  9. Overall, would you say that your experience was positive or negative? Why?
  10. Can you look at the words on these cards and tell me how far each of them describe your experience of choosing a school so far? It would be really helpful if you could expand on your answers with details, anecdotes, anything that they bring to mind
  11. Has choosing a school had any impact on your relationship with other people – like friends or relatives?
  12. How worried would you say you were/are about making the wrong decision? Why?
  13. Did you feel equipped and capable to make the decision?
  14. How important is it to you to be able to choose which school you/your child attends?
    - Why/how?
    - Where does this rank among the other big decisions you have made in your life?
    - Is it more important to you to be able to choose the best possible school or to avoid schools you would prefer your child not to attend?
  15. In other countries, the government does more to encourage choice, by requiring parents to make a choice / make multiple choices / more free transport / getting schools to compete for places [as applicable]. How would you feel about introducing such policies here?
  16. In other countries, parents have very little choice and children are expected to attend their neighbourhood school. How would you feel about such a system?
  17. How far is your school choice about passing on particular values or skills to your children?
    - Religion
    - Valuing certain subjects
    - Types of learning
  18. Would you have preferred to have greater variety in the type of schools in your area, so there was more choice, or do you think it's better for all schools to provide basically the same kind of education?
    - Religion



- Educational style
- Subject specialisation

19. Is there anything else we haven't covered that you think it would be useful for me to know?

## Appendix D: Research Ethics Reviews

### *Interviews*

This form should be completed for every research project that involves human participants or the use of information relating to directly identifiable individuals.

#### **PART I - CHECKLIST**

The Checklist is designed to identify the nature of any ethical issues raised by the research.

This checklist must be completed before potential participants are approached to take part in any research.

#### **1. Name of Researcher: Aveek Bhattacharya**

Status (mark with an 'X' as appropriate)	Undergraduate student		Masters student	
	Research degree student	X	Staff	
Email	a.bhattacharya2@lse.ac.uk	Telephone number	07946016709	
Department	Social Policy			

#### **2. Student Details if applicable. Name:**

Degree programme:	PhD in Social Policy		
Supervisor's name:	Tania Burchardt	Supervisor's email:	<a href="mailto:t.burchardt@lse.ac.uk">t.burchardt@lse.ac.uk</a>
Supervisor's department:			

#### **3. Title of the proposal and brief abstract**

**i) Title:** The intrinsic (dis)value of secondary school choice in Scotland and England

#### **ii) Abstract**

*(approx. 150-200 words. Your abstract should outline in non-technical language the purpose of the research and the methods that will be used.)*

Advocates for greater school choice sometimes claim that the ability to choose is valued for its own sake, independent of the outcomes it produces. For example, it may enhance families' sense of freedom or empowerment. Conversely, some opponents of school choice have argued that choices can be a bad thing, because it causes undue stress and anxiety.

This study seeks to test these theories through face-to-face qualitative interviews with parents and children in four cities – two in Scotland, two in England - to understand how their experiences of the transition to secondary school are influenced by the different levels of choice in each country. Whereas in England all parents are formally required to rank at least three schools in order of preference, in Scotland

the vast majority of children (around 85%) attend the default school allocated for them by the local authority.

Participants will be recruited through schools and organisations linked to schools (such as parent teacher associations). These interviews will investigate positive and negative aspects of choice, and the value parents and children put on it, to understand whether choice produces the benefits or costs suggested by its proponents and detractors.

#### 4. Funding

Is it proposed that the research will be funded? Yes

If so by whom? The research will be supported by funds from my ESRC PhD scholarship

#### 5. Where the research will be conducted

In what country/ies will the research take place? UK (England and Scotland)

If the research will be conducted abroad please refer to the [LSE Fieldwork and off-site activities guidance](#) and contact the [Health and Safety](#) team to obtain your travel insurance certificate. If the destination is considered to be moderate or high risk you will need to complete the [Travel Outline and Risk Assessment form](#).

#### 6. Data Management Plans

Please confirm whether you have completed a Data Management Plan and submitted to [Datalibrary@lse.ac.uk](mailto:Datalibrary@lse.ac.uk) ? (see Note 1) Yes

	<i>Please mark an X in the appropriate right-hand column/box</i>	Yes	No	Not certain
<b>7. Research that <i>may</i> need to be reviewed by an external (non-LSE) Ethics Committee</b>				
i	Will the study require Health Research Authority approval? ( <a href="#">See Note 2</a> )		X	
ii	Does the study involve participants lacking capacity to give informed consent? ( <a href="#">See Note 3</a> )		X	
iii	Is there any other reason why the study may need to be reviewed by another external (non-LSE) Ethics Committee?  If yes, please give details here		X	
<p><b>If your research will be reviewed by an external (non-LSE) ethics committee, go to <a href="#">Part II, C</a> (there is no need to complete the rest of the Checklist)</b></p>				

	<i>Please mark an X in the appropriate right-hand column/box</i>	Yes	No	Not certain
<b>8. Consent</b>				
i	Does the study involve children or other participants who are potentially or in any way vulnerable or who may have any difficulty giving meaningful consent to their participation or the use of their information? ( <a href="#">See Note 4</a> )	X		
ii	Are subjects to be involved in the study without their knowledge and consent (e.g. through internet-mediated research, or via covert observation of people in public places)?		X	
iii	Will the study require the co-operation of a gatekeeper for initial access to the groups or individuals to be recruited? (Answer 'yes' to this question only if the involvement of a gatekeeper in your study might raise issues of whether participants' involvement is truly voluntary or of whether the gatekeeper might influence potential participants in some other way.)	X		
<b>9. Research Design / Methodology</b>				
i	Does the research methodology involve the use of deception? ( <a href="#">See Note 5</a> )		X	
ii	Are there any significant concerns regarding the design of the research project? For example: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>where research intrudes into the private sphere or delves into some deeply personal experience;</li> <li>where the study is concerned with deviance or social control;</li> <li>where the study impinges on the vested interests of powerful persons or the exercise of coercion or domination; or</li> <li>where the research deals with things that are sacred to those being studied that they do not wish profaned.</li> </ul>		X	
iii	If the proposed research relates to the provision of social or human services is it feasible and/or appropriate that service users or service user representatives should be in some way involved in or consulted upon the development of the project?		X	
<b>10. Financial Incentives</b>				
i	Are there payments to researchers/participants that may have an impact on the objectivity of the research?		X	
ii	Will financial inducements (other than reasonable expenses and compensation for time) be offered to participants?		X	
<b>11. Research Subjects</b>				
i	Could the study induce unacceptable psychological stress or anxiety or cause harm or negative consequences beyond the risks encountered in normal life?  Will the study involve prolonged or repetitive testing?		X	

	<i>Please mark an X in the appropriate right-hand column/box</i>	Yes	No	Not certain
ii	Will the study involve discussion of sensitive topics? For example (but not limited to): sexual activity, illegal behaviour, experience of violence or abuse, drug use, etc.). (Please refer to the Research Ethics Policy, § 13).		X	
iii	Are drugs, placebos or other substances to be administered to the study participants or will the study involve invasive, intrusive or potentially harmful procedures of any kind?		X	
<b>12. Confidentiality</b>				
i	Will research involve the sharing of data or confidential information beyond the initial consent given?		X	
ii	Is there ambiguity about whether the information/data you are collecting is considered to be public?		X	
iii	Will the research involve administrative or secure data that requires permission from the appropriate authorities before use?		X	
iv	Will the research involve the use of visual/vocal methods that potentially pose an issue regarding confidentiality and anonymity?		X	
<b>13. Legal requirements</b>				
	The Data Protection Act 1998 will apply to any data-processing activities entailed by this research. Is there any cause for uncertainty as to whether the research will fully comply with the requirements of the Act? ( <a href="#">See Note 6</a> )		X	
<b>14. Dissemination</b>				
	Are there any particular groups who are likely to be harmed by dissemination of the results of this project?		X	
<b>15. Risk to researchers</b>				
	Do you have any doubts or concerns regarding your (or your colleagues) physical or psychological wellbeing during the research period?		X	
<b>16. Sensitive research materials</b>				
	Will the research involve accessing security-sensitive material, such as material related to terrorism or to violent extremism of any kind, including, but not limited to, Islamist extremism and far-right extremism. ( <a href="#">See Note 7</a> )		X	

**Please continue to Part II**

PART II: Self certification and/or next steps

Please note that there are certain circumstances where Self-certification of ethics review is not appropriate. Please refer to §13 of the [Research Ethics Policy and Procedures](#)

**A** If, after careful consideration, you have answered **No** to all the questions, you do not need to complete the questionnaire in Part III, unless you are subject to some external requirement that requires you to seek formal approval from the School's Research Ethics Committee. You can select **A** in the **Self-Certification Section** below, sign as appropriate and submit the form to your Head of Department, Research Centre Director, or their administrations as appropriate. Occasional audits of such forms may be undertaken by the School. Students who self-certify their research proposals must do so in consultation with their supervisors.

**B** If you have answered **Yes** or **Not certain** to any of the questions in sections 8-16 of the checklist you will need to consider more fully how you plan to deal with the ethical issues raised by your research. Answering the relevant questions in the Questionnaire in Part III below may assist you. Alternatively, your own department or institute may have alternative forms or procedures to assist you. If having done so you are wholly assured that adequate safeguards in relation to the ethical issues raised can and will be put in place, you may select **B** in the Self-certification Section below, sign as appropriate and submit the form to your Head of Department, Research Centre Director, or their administrations as appropriate. Occasional audits of such forms may be undertaken by the School.

**C** If you have answered Yes in section 7 that your research will be subject to an external ethics committee, please select **C** below and send the Checklist (questions 1-7) to [research.ethics@lse.ac.uk](mailto:research.ethics@lse.ac.uk). You should submit your research for ethics approval to the appropriate body. Once approval is granted please send a copy of the letter of approval to [research.ethics@lse.ac.uk](mailto:research.ethics@lse.ac.uk).

**D** If you are **unable to self-certify** your proposed research you should complete the questionnaire in Part III below and the '**Refer to Research Ethics Committee Section**' at the end of the form.

## SELF-CERTIFICATION

*Select A, B or C (delete as appropriate):*

I have read and understood the LSE Research Ethics Policy and the questions contained in the Checklist above and confirm:

~~A that no significant ethical issues are raised by the research, or~~

~~B that adequate safeguards in relation to such issues can and will be put in place, or~~

**C that the research will be subject to an external ethics review**

**Please complete the box below and sign the relevant section**

**Summary of any ethical issues identified and safeguards to be taken (expand box as necessary):**

There are a number of ethical issues involved with this research, but safeguards can be taken to mitigate them.

Initial approaches will be made to parents, through schools or affiliated organisations such as parent teacher associations. Only if parents respond to this initial invitation will they be asked whether their children might be willing to participate in the study. Thus no children will be considered for participation without their parents' knowledge.

Interviews will take place in a location of the parents' choosing, so as to minimise any inconvenience (and so maximise the likelihood of participation), and also to try and ensure that participants are comfortable and at ease. In some cases, this may be their homes. Conducting the interview in a private location like this carries certain (minor) risks – not only to my safety but also my reputation, given the potential for allegations of misconduct without witnesses. These risks will be mitigated by informing my partner of my schedule each day and checking in before and after each interview. Most interviews are expected to be recorded, and so this should provide evidence of what occurred in an interview with time stamps, if needed. To assuage any concerns parents may have about me interviewing their children, they will be given the option of being present while their child is interviewed. I will also apply for the Government's Disclosure and Barring Service clearance, which is a standard requirement of working with children.

Informed written consent will be a precondition of participation. Information sheets (attached) will inform participants of the purpose of the study and the possible (minor) risks that they face if they agree to participate. This information will be provided in simplified form for child participants (online readability tests confirm the language of the information sheet is comprehensible to average 10-12 year olds). In the case of children, written consent will be required of both child and parent. Every effort will be made to ensure that the children understand what they are agreeing to, and that their consent is not due to outside pressure – for example, from their parents. In the information sheets, it will be emphasised that I am independent from the school authorities and am unable to influence their applications, or offer any advice on them. It will also be stressed that those unwilling to participate will not harm their applications in any way.

Prior to commencing the interview, participants will be asked if they consent to having the interview recorded (having already been informed that they may refuse in the information sheet). If they agree, recordings will be transferred temporarily to a password protected USB stick. Recordings and transcripts will be anonymised and stored securely on the university server in line with an agreed data management plan.

To ensure confidentiality, participants' names will be anonymised in writing up the research, as will the names of schools, areas or other potentially sensitive identifiers. However, the names of the cities in which the research is conducted will not be disguised, as these provide relevant context to the study and the cities are large enough that revealing them should not compromise participants' anonymity.

It is possible that interviews may touch upon matters considered personal or private, and so there is a possibility of participants feeling uncomfortable during the interview. However, the interview questionnaire is designed to be as unobtrusive as possible, and it will be made clear to participants that they are free to refuse to answer any questions, and to withdraw at any point, without penalty.

In the information sheets left with participants after the interviews, they will be given contact details for myself and my supervisor in case they wish to raise any queries or problems. If recruited through a school, they will also be advised that they can raise issues to the school.

All participants will be provided with a summary of the research, and those whose cases are discussed in depth in the final thesis will be sent relevant sections in advance to check that these do not misrepresent them.

<p><i>Staff:</i> I hereby confirm that I have undertaken training and/or have had significant experience in research ethics in the course of my career and/or have sought and obtained expert advice in connection with the ethical aspects of the proposed research:</p> <p><i>Students:</i> I hereby confirm that I have undertaken training in research ethics in the course of my studies and/or that I have consulted and been advised by my supervisor or other expert with regard the ethical implications of my proposed research.</p>			
Staff signature:		Date:	
Student signature:		Date:	
Supervisor signature:		Date:	
<p>By signing here the supervisor confirms that the student has been advised in relation to any ethical issues raised by her/his research; these have to the best of the supervisor's understanding been adequately addressed in the research design; and the student has been made aware of her/his responsibilities for the ethical conduct of her/his research.</p>			

### Part III – QUESTIONNAIRE

The questionnaire enables you to explain how the ethical issues relating to your research will be addressed. If you are intending to submit your proposal to the Research Ethics Committee it needs to be completed in full.

#### **17. Research aims**

*Please provide brief (no more than 500 words) details in non-technical language of the research aims, the scientific background of the research and the methods that will be used. This summary should contain sufficient information to acquaint the Committee with the principal features of the proposal. A copy of the full proposal should nonetheless be attached to this document in case it is required for further information.*

Advocates for greater school choice sometimes claim that the ability to choose is valued for its own sake, independent of the outcomes it produces. For example, it may enhance families' sense of freedom or empowerment. Conversely, some opponents of school choice have argued that choice can be a bad thing, because it causes undue stress and anxiety.

This study seeks to test these theories through face-to-face qualitative interviews with parents and children in four cities – two in Scotland, two in England - to understand how their experiences of the transition to secondary school are influenced by the different levels of choice in each country. Whereas in England all parents are formally required to rank at least three schools in order of preference, in Scotland the vast majority of children (around 85%) attend the default school allocated for them by the local authority



Participants will be recruited through schools and organisations linked to schools (such as parent teacher associations). These interviews will investigate whether and why parents and children want to have school choice, and the positive and negative aspects of making a choice. This way, we can better understand whether choice in practice produces the benefits or costs suggested by its proponents and detractors, and therefore understand whether the policy lives up to its promise or brings negative side effects.

While this is the first such study to directly address this question, previous qualitative studies have looked to understand the process of school choice – typically interviewing parents, though a few have also interviewed children.

## 18. Informed consent

i	Will potential participants be asked to give informed consent in writing and will they be asked to confirm that they have received and read the information about the study? If not, why not?  <i>Please attach your proposed information sheet/consent form</i>
	All participants will be required to provide informed written consent. In the case of children, both the participants and their parent(s) will be asked to provide written consent
ii	If the research takes place within an online community, explain how informed consent will be obtained? What arrangements are in place for ensuring that participants do not include vulnerable groups or children?
	NA
iii	How has the study been discussed or are there plans to discuss the study with those likely to be involved, including potential participants or those who may represent their views?
	NA
iv	Has information (written and oral) about the study been prepared in an appropriate form and language for potential participants? At what point in the study will this information be offered? (see Annex A of the <a href="#">Research Ethics Policy</a> for links to guidance on informed consent).
	Yes – this information will be provided along with the invitation to participate, and then again prior to the interview when written consent is sought.
v	Will potential participants be clearly informed that no adverse consequences will follow a decision not to participate or to withdraw during the study?

	Yes, and it will be made clear that they are at liberty to refuse to answer any particular question or to withdraw from the study at any point.
vi	What provision has been made to respond to queries and problems raised by participants during the course of the study?
	Participants will be provided with contact details both for myself and for my supervisor, and advised to contact one of us if they wish to raise any queries or problems. If recruited through a school, they will also be advised that they may raise any concerns with the school.
<b>19. Research design and methodology</b>	
i	Where relevant, how does the research methodology justify the use of deception?
	NA
ii	If the proposed research involves the deception of persons in vulnerable groups, can the information sought be obtained by other means?
	NA
iii	How will data be collected and analysed during the project?
	Data will be collected through qualitative interviews, and analysed thematically
iv	How have the ethical and legal dimensions of the process of collecting, analyzing and storing the data been addressed?
	As described above, participants will be asked for informed consent, and advised that they may withdraw or refuse to answer any question at any point. Interview recordings and transcripts will be stored securely on the university server in anonymised form, in accordance with an agreed data management plan. Participants' names will be anonymised in any reporting of the research
v	What concerns have been taken into account with regard to the preparation and design of the research project? If agencies, communities or individuals are to be directly affected by the research (e.g. participants, service users, vulnerable communities or relations), what means have you devised to ensure that any harm or distress is minimized and/or that the research is sensitive to the particular needs and perspectives of those so affected?

	NA
<b>20. Ethical questions arising from the provision of incentives</b>	
i	Are any incentives being offered to participants? If so, please provide details
	NA
<b>21. Research participants</b>	
i	Who do you identify as the participants in the project? Are other people who are not participants likely to be directly impacted by the project?
	The participants are children and parents going through the process of choosing a school
ii	What are the specific risks to research participants or third parties?
	The primary risk is that the interviews may touch upon matters that are emotionally fraught or felt to be private.
iii	If the research involves pain, stress, physical or emotional risk, please detail the steps taken to minimize such effects.
	The questionnaire has been designed to be as unobtrusive as possible, and it will be made clear to participants that they may withdraw at any stage.
<b>22. Confidentiality</b>	
	What arrangements have been made to preserve confidentiality for the participants or those potentially affected, and compliance with data protection law?
	As described above, interview recordings and transcripts will be stored securely on the university server in anonymised form, in accordance with an agreed data management plan. Participants' names will be anonymised in any reporting of the research. The names of schools, areas or other potentially sensitive identifiers will also be disguised. However, the names of the cities in which the research is conducted will not be disguised, as these provide relevant context to the study and the cities are large enough that revealing them should not compromise participants' anonymity.

<b>23. Dissemination</b>	
	Will the results of the study be offered to those participants or other affected parties who wish to receive them? If so, what steps have been taken to minimize any discomfort or misrepresentation that may result at the dissemination stage.
	Participants will be sent a summary of the findings. While most of the analysis will be at a general level, and not focused on individual cases, the thesis may include more detailed profiles of certain participants. In such cases, the profile sections will be sent to participants for their agreement that they have not been misrepresented.
<b>24. Risk to researchers</b>	
	Are there any risks to researchers? If so, please provide details.
	Participants will be invited to choose a convenient location for the interviews. In some cases, this may be their homes. Conducting the interview in a private location like this carries certain (minor) risks – not only to my safety but also my reputation, given the potential for allegations of misconduct without witnesses. These risks will be mitigated through regular check ins with my partner to inform them before and after interviews and also by recording interviews to provide evidence of proceedings.

<b>REFER TO RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE</b>		
Approval is required by the Research Ethics Committee on one or more of the following grounds (please mark with an 'X' in the appropriate place in the right-hand column):		
a.	<p>Significant ethical issues are raised by the research, including research characterised by one or more of the following features:</p> <p>(i) Research involving deception of participants, or which is conducted without their full and informed consent at the time the study is carried out or when the data is gathered, or which involves the use of confidential information.</p> <p>(ii) Research involving more than minimal risk of harm to participants, such as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ research involving vulnerable groups</li> <li>○ research involving personally intrusive or ethically sensitive topics</li> <li>○ research involving groups where permission of a gatekeeper is normally required for initial access to members</li> <li>○ research which would induce unacceptable psychological stress, anxiety or humiliation or cause more than minimal pain</li> </ul>	
b.	The researcher wants to seek the advice of the Research Ethics Committee	X

	Given the ethical issues involved with interviewing children in this project, I would like to seek the advice of the REC for reassurance that there are no major ethical considerations that I have missed in my preparation, and no important safeguards that are missing.	
c.	External obligations (for instance, funder requirements, data access requirements) require it	
d.	Research undertaken by a student or member of staff who has not received appropriate training or has insufficient experience in research ethics and has been unable to access appropriate advice or support.	

## *Survey*

This form should be completed for every research project that involves human participants or the use of information relating to directly identifiable individuals.

### **PART I – CHECKLIST**

The Checklist is designed to identify the nature of any ethical issues raised by the research.

This checklist must be completed before potential participants are approached to take part in any research.

#### **1. Name of Researcher: Aveek Bhattacharya**

Status (mark with an 'X' as appropriate)	Undergraduate student		Masters student	
	Research degree student	X	Staff	
Email	a.bhattacharya2@lse.ac.uk	Telephone number	07946016709	
Department	Social Policy			

#### **2. Student Details if applicable**

Degree programme:	PhD Social Policy		
Supervisor's name:	Tania Burchardt	Supervisor's email:	<a href="mailto:t.burchardt@lse.ac.uk">t.burchardt@lse.ac.uk</a>
Supervisor's department:	Social Policy		

#### **3. Title of the proposal and brief abstract**

**i) Title:** The intrinsic (dis)value of secondary school choice in Scotland and England

##### **ii) Abstract**

(approx.150-200 words. Your abstract should outline in non-technical language **the purpose of the research** and the **methods** that will be used.)

Advocates for greater school choice sometimes claim that the ability to choose is valued for its own sake, independent of the outcomes it produces. For example, it may enhance families' sense of freedom or empowerment. Conversely, some opponents of school choice have argued that choices can be a bad thing, because it causes undue stress and anxiety.

This PhD seeks to test these theories using qualitative and quantitative data from parents that are going through the process of choosing a secondary school. I have already generated and analysed qualitative data from face-to-face interviews in four cities England and Scotland, for which ethics approval was sought

and granted last summer. However, I would like to supplement this with quantitative data from an online survey, to test the generalisability of some of the emerging hypotheses from my interviews to a larger, more representative sample across a wider range of locations. This ethics review pertains to the online survey only.

Based on initial findings from my interviews, I have developed an online questionnaire, which asks parents about the process and experience of choosing a school. The ultimate objective is to understand the value parents place on school choice, the positive and negative aspects of choice, and how (if at all) these vary between England and Scotland.

This questionnaire will be distributed by the market research company Panelbase to parents of children aged 10-13 that are already signed up to be part of Panelbase's online panel. They will be informed that the data is being collected for a PhD project at LSE, and that their data will be retained for research purposes only.

#### 4. Funding

Is it proposed that the research will be funded? Yes

If so by whom? The research will be supported by funds from my ESRC PhD scholarship, possibly supplemented by funds from STICERD/CASE if survey costs exceed the balance of my grant. I currently have enough ESRC funding for a 5 minute survey. If average responses are longer than this, I have a guarantee of extra funding sufficient for a 10 minute survey from STICERD/CASE.

#### 5. Where the research will be conducted

In what country/ies will the research take place? ([See Note 1](#))

The research will take place online, with parents from Scotland and England invited to participate

#### 6. Data Management Plans

Please confirm whether you have completed a Data Management Plan and submitted to [Datalibrary@lse.ac.uk](mailto:Datalibrary@lse.ac.uk)? ([See Note 2](#)) Yes

	<i>Please mark an X in the appropriate right-hand column/box</i>	Yes	No	Not certain
<b>7. Research that <i>may</i> need to be reviewed by an external (non-LSE) Ethics Committee</b>				
i	Will the study require Health Research Authority approval? ( <a href="#">See Note 3</a> )		X	
ii	Does the study involve participants lacking capacity to give informed consent? ( <a href="#">See Note 4</a> )		X	
iii	Is there any other reason why the study may need to be reviewed by another external (non-LSE) Ethics Committee?  If yes, please give details here:		X	

	<i>Please mark an X in the appropriate right-hand column/box</i>	Yes	No	Not certain
<p><b>If your research will be reviewed by an external (non-LSE) ethics committee,</b> you may not need to complete the rest of this LSE review form – please email <a href="mailto:research.ethics@lse.ac.uk">research.ethics@lse.ac.uk</a> for guidance.</p>				
<p><b>8. Consent</b> (<a href="#">See Note 5</a>)</p>				
i	Does the study involve children or other participants who are potentially or in any way vulnerable or who may have any difficulty giving meaningful consent to their participation or the use of their information? ( <a href="#">See Note 6</a> )		X	
ii	Are subjects to be involved in the study without their knowledge and consent (e.g. through internet-mediated research, or via covert observation of people in public places)?		X	
iii	Will the study require the co-operation of a gatekeeper for initial access to the groups or individuals to be recruited? ( <i>Answer 'yes' to this question only if the involvement of a gatekeeper in your study might raise issues of whether participants' involvement is truly voluntary or of whether the gatekeeper might influence potential participants in some other way.</i> )		X	
<p><b>9. Research Design / Methodology</b></p>				
i	Does the research methodology involve the use of deception? ( <a href="#">See Note 7</a> )		X	
ii	Are there any significant concerns regarding the design of the research project? For example: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• where research intrudes into the private sphere or delves into some deeply personal experience;</li> <li>• where the study is concerned with deviance or social control;</li> <li>• where the study impinges on the vested interests of powerful persons or the exercise of coercion or domination; or</li> <li>• where the research deals with things that are sacred to those being studied that they do not wish profaned.</li> </ul>		X	
iii	Does the proposed research relate to the provision of social or human services?		X	
<p><b>10. Financial Incentives</b></p>				
	Will financial inducements (other than reasonable expenses and compensation for time) be offered to participants that might have an impact on the objectivity of the research?		X	
<p><b>11. Research Subjects</b></p>				
i	Could the study induce unacceptable psychological stress or anxiety or cause harm or negative consequences beyond the risks encountered in normal life?		X	



	<i>Please mark an X in the appropriate right-hand column/box</i>	Yes	No	Not certain
ii	Will the study involve discussion of sensitive topics? For example (but not limited to): sexual activity, illegal behaviour, experience of violence or abuse, drug use, etc.). (Please refer to the Research Ethics Policy, § 13).		X	
iii	Are drugs, placebos or other substances to be administered to study participants or will the study involve invasive, intrusive or potentially harmful procedures of any kind?		X	
<b>12. Confidentiality</b>				
i	Will research involve the sharing of data or confidential information beyond the initial consent given?		X	
ii	Is there ambiguity about whether the information/data you are collecting is considered to be public?		X	
iii	Will the research involve administrative or secure data that requires permission from the appropriate authorities before use?		X	
iv	Will the research involve the use of visual/vocal methods that potentially pose an issue regarding confidentiality and anonymity?		X	
<b>13. Legal requirements</b>				
	Is there any reason why the research will NOT comply with the requirements of current data protection legislation? ( <a href="#">See Note 8</a> )		X	
<b>14. Dissemination</b>				
	Are there any particular groups who are likely to be harmed by dissemination of the results of this project? Or is there any potential for misuse of the findings?		X	
<b>15. Risk to researchers</b>				
	Does your research pose any risks to your physical or psychological wellbeing, or that of others working with you?		X	
<b>16. Sensitive research materials</b>				
	Will the research involve accessing security-sensitive material, such as material related to terrorism or violent extremism of any kind? ( <a href="#">See Note 9</a> )		X	

## Appendix E: Coding Frames

### England

Theme	Code	Description	Example (and source)
Desire for Choice	Desire choice	Expressions of the desire for choice	<i>"It's essential. It's very important to have the possibility to choose."</i> (Franco)
	Abjure choice	Rejection of principle of choice	<i>"In a weird way I kind of wish I had no decision because then it would be so much easier"</i> (Eli)
	Value diversity	View that schools should be more diverse	<i>"The more diversity, the more options that are available, the more chance that you have of each individual child hitting on something that's really going to work for them"</i> (Harry)
	Reject diversity	View that schools should be more standardised	<i>"In an ideal world I just want a small comprehensive that cares about my child and that's going to give a well-rounded curriculum"</i> (Jill)
	Anti-compulsion	Against being required to attend a particular school	<i>"I think people should have a choice and be able to decide where to send their children to. It shouldn't be decided for them"</i> (Brigitte)
	Prefer neighbourhood schools	Expressions of preference for neighbourhood schools	<i>"I just wanted her to go to a school that's 15 minutes within the local community"</i> (Aaliyah)
	Maximising	Comments that suggest a maximising approach	<i>"You always really feel you ought to be choosing the very best possible thing"</i> (James)
	Satisficing	Comments that suggest a satisficing approach	<i>"I think it's more about finding a good enough school"</i> (Ruth)
	Scottish system	Comparison with Scottish/alternative systems	<i>"It would be a hell of a lot less time consuming. It would make it easier"</i> (Angela)
Enjoyability	Exciting	References to process being exciting	<i>"I think that, honestly it's quite exciting"</i> (Tedros)
	Enjoyable	References to process being enjoyable	<i>"quite enjoy the process of visiting schools but I don't enjoy the process of choosing"</i> (Ruth)
	Interesting	References to process being interesting	<i>"Vaguely enjoyable, you know it's a piece of research really"</i> (Samantha)

	Boring	References to the process being boring	<i>"Mostly boring he doesn't want to be there doing it"</i> (Harry)
<b>Freedom/Control</b>	Empowering	Discussion of whether choice is empowering	<i>"It's not empowering for me or for the family"</i> (Franco)
	Satisfied with choice	Descriptions of feeling satisfied with choice	<i>"I think we were quite lucky to be in a position where we've got really good two options"</i> (Charlotte)
	Frustrated preference	Describe (fear of) not getting what they want	<i>"First choice I want her to go to it's out of my hand whether she gets the other two or even if we don't get none - I think that's what worries me most if we don't get any of them"</i> (Chanel)
	No real choice	View that choice doesn't genuinely exist	<i>"it's a big one but then again the fact that your choice is limited or it's ultimately not your decision"</i> (Dimitrios)
	LA decides	View that local authority holds power	<i>"it's stressful because of the limited choice because of someone else decided for me but as I say we're ready to fight for it"</i> (Brigitte)
	Child empowered	Mentions of the child having control/influence	<i>"I think it's been my decision"</i> (Donny)
	Child gives opinion	Mentions of the child being consulted	<i>"we involved them in discussions"</i> (Jane)
	Child overruled	Parents say they decide over child's wishes	<i>"I think it's too early for children to decide and to be honest it's more or less of the parents need to decide about the child"</i> (Zofia)
	Child influenced	Mentions of the child being 'guided' in their opinion	<i>"ultimately it's his life, his decision but presumably as adults we have a bit of experience in the world and a bit of knowledge of what can go wrong in the consequences so we have some influence in that decision making process"</i> (Harry)
<b>Difficulty</b>	Dilemma	Description of genuine dilemma/equipoise	<i>"I kept on changing my choice for which school I wanted to go to at the end"</i> (Donny)
	No Dilemma	Description of no genuine dilemma/equipoise	<i>"[School A] was the clear favourite which made it easier as well"</i> (Jill)

	Uncertainty	Description of burden of uncertainty	<i>"it was very stressful because we didn't know which school he would go and which school you would go"</i> (Brigitte)
	Difficult to parse information	Descriptions of difficulty interpreting information	<i>"I think the difficulty is you don't get equitable information between all the schools"</i> (Sandra)
	Inconsistent word of mouth	References to difficulty of reconciling conflicting views of schools	<i>"A lot of gossip. Everybody has opinions, often opposite and differing opinions so that's quite a hard field to navigate"</i> (Ruth)
	Arguments	References to arguments within the family	<i>"It is stressful And we argue about it."</i> (Brigitte)
	Coordination problem	Descriptions of difficulties coordinating with other families	<i>"That's the thing with most of her friends not wanting to go to [School A] either. You're all applying for different schools aren't you, so it's always a bit uncertain"</i> (Amy)
<b>Opportunity cost</b>	Inconvenience	Descriptions of inconvenience of process	<i>"It's quite difficult to organise a lot of things given that we have to walk and take the bus everywhere"</i> (Marie)
	Mental energy	Description of process demanding substantial mental energy	<i>"For the last couple of months I've been doing a lot of thinking about it and I periodically dipped in over the past couple of years but it gets very intense at this point"</i> (Ruth)
	Lack of mental energy	View that process has not been overly demanding	<i>"Not too much, probably because I've been there done that got the t-shirt. Getting less precious about it"</i> (Sandra)
	Relief	Expression of relief that choice process is over	<i>"I definitely was happy when it was all over"</i> (Ioanna)
	Time consuming	Descriptions of time commitment	<i>"I mean we've now got 2 hours sometimes it's 3 hours from the mornings I mean he has to miss class to be there when we have to go to the morning openings"</i> (Haile)
	Not time consuming	View that time commitment is not problematic	<i>"Well it has to really doesn't it? because you're making that choice for your child so wouldn't say it's time consuming"</i> (Chanel)
	Start early	Descriptions of starting the choice process early in the child's life	<i>"We started thinking about year 4"</i> (Aaliyah)

<b>Pressure/Burden</b>	Anxious/Stress	Expressions of anxiety and/or stress	<i>"Stressful, it's quite frantic"</i> (Katy)
	Not Anxious	Downplaying stress/anxiety	<i>"I found the process really not stressful at all."</i> (Aaliyah)
	High stakes	Choice described as consequential	<i>"This decision for me it's on the same - almost the same - level like when we decided that we will be living in the UK"</i> (Zofia)
	School's Limited Influence	Expressions of the view that school has a relatively small effect on outcomes	<i>"What is important is to succeed in these schools basically depends on the child and also the parents that's the way I see it"</i> (Haile)
	Guilt	Feeling of having failed/let down children	<i>"It's really hard because I'm surrounded by people who have literally done crazy things just to be able to get in to the outstanding schools and you think 'shit, am I failing my child?'"</i> (Yvonne)
	Time pressure	Description of feeling rushed	<i>"They should maybe a look at doing that in year 5 rather than a year 6"</i> (Angela)
	Parental competition	Description of feeling in competition with other families	<i>"My initial idea was to be relaxed about it but I was forced into a quite a competitive process"</i> (Ioanna)
	Pressure from parents	Description of feeling pressure from other parents over choice	<i>"it's artificial but there's a lot of social pressure to reach as far as you can"</i> (Graeme)
<b>Regret</b>	Worried about wrong choice	Expressions of concerns about choosing incorrectly	<i>"I mean there's been talk about it for 2 years but you just want to make the right decision the best decision"</i> (Yvonne)
	Not worried about wrong choice	Confidence that choice is correct	<i>"I am sure that we've made the right choice in both cases"</i> (Jane)
	Not final	View that choice can be reversed	<i>"There's always another alternative so the worst case outcome isn't a complete and utter disaster because there is choice"</i> (Sandra)
<b>Confidence in judgement</b>	Self-confidence	Expressions of self-confidence in ability to judge school	<i>"ultimately you know your child best and someone's child's experience is not going to be your child's experience"</i> (Aaliyah)

	Quality changes	Description of perceived school quality being unstable	<i>"That was one of the reasons why I wanted to repeatedly go to open days because I'm very aware that schools change."</i> (Ruth)
	Visit doubt	Scepticism about usefulness of school visits	<i>"it's public relations really"</i> (Francesca)
	Ofsted doubt	Scepticism about usefulness of Ofsted reports	<i>"You kind of don't know, one year it could be the school could be good by Ofsted and another year could be not good"</i> (Chanel)
	League table doubt	Scepticism about the usefulness of league tables	<i>"It doesn't read easily. I'm pretty well educated and I don't know always what it means"</i> (Samantha)
<b>Significance</b>	Desire religion	Expression of preference for religious school	<i>"I think I made a good choice because there is still that base of that's what we do at home pray every morning and that sort of thing"</i> (Linda)
	Secular religious values	Preference for faith schools for non-religious reasons	<i>"It's a lovely school and it happens to be a faith school"</i> (Marie)
	Experiences diversity	Schools viewed as different	<i>"Being able to choose a school I think it's quite important because as I say the schools are quite different"</i> (Dimitrios)
	Don't experience diversity	Schools viewed as essentially similar	<i>"How different are they? Mid-range as it were. Much of a muchness all very similar"</i> (Harry)

### *Scotland*

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Code</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Example (and source)</b>
<b>Desire for Choice</b>	Want choice	Expressions of the desire for choice	<i>"I think that's really important, yeah"</i> (Adele)
	Don't care about choice	Indifference/ rejection of choice	<i>"The whole concept is a false choice. All schools should be good"</i> (Nathan)
	Satisfied with catchment	Expressions of contentment with catchment school	<i>"I didn't think about going elsewhere. The school's got a good reputation my son's flourished in it."</i> (Jackie)
	Checked catchment	Referencing to 'vetting' catchment school	<i>"I went to [School A] and I know it's a good school, and there have been improvements since then"</i> (Wendy)

	Value neighbourhood link	Favourability to neighbourhood schools	<i>"But obviously we want the girls to be independent I really push for that so it's literally a five minute walk from the house so they can get themselves back and forth from school"</i> (Jim)
	Choice practically limited	References to choice policies being seen as impractical	<i>"on a more social scale, that it would be very difficult to implement"</i> (Jim)
	Satisficing	Comments that suggest a satisficing approach	<i>"the boys would be OK to go to either of them"</i> (Victoria)
	Desire to escape	Choice desired to avoid catchment school	<i>"if I lived in an area where I wasn't happy with the local secondary, then it would be more of an issue"</i> (Andrea)
	Choice for practical reasons	Expressions of view that choice should be limited only to those who require it for practical reasons	<i>"There was a little girl who lives in the street who is going to [School A], and I think they've had to request that, but she stays with her dad a couple of nights a week. And, and he's round about that area. She still has to apply because her main address is here. So yeah, I do think you should have a choice."</i> (Adele)
	Prefer England	Preference for English system	<i>"I'd like to think then think that the English way would allow me to do my research and get into a better school"</i> (Beverley)
	Prefer Scotland	Preference for Scottish system	<i>"I think that would that would put the pressure on a little bit more the way they do it in England, absolutely"</i> (Hailey)
	England & Scotland same	No perceived difference between English and Scottish approaches	<i>"But does it actually make any difference at the end because if the selection process is heavily skewed towards the distance from the school then it's the same thing"</i> (Pawel)
<b>Enjoyability</b>	Exciting	References to process being exciting	<i>"Exciting to an extent, definitely"</i> (Andy)
	Enjoyable	References to process being enjoyable	<i>"it is enjoyable seeing what is available"</i> (Lizzie)
<b>Freedom/Control</b>	Empowered	Description of choice as empowering	<i>"I suppose you can look upon it that way. I've got a choice to send my child wherever I want to go"</i> (Victoria)
	Not empowering	'Empowering' not applicable	<i>"I just don't feel like there's very much to be in charge of"</i> (Lauren)

	Meaningful choice	Description of having effective choice	<i>"I assume that it's a choice and hopefully we'll get that"</i> (Hailey)
	No meaningful choice	Description of lacking effective choice	<i>"it feels like throwing a bunch of Skittles in the air and hope you get the one you like"</i> (Lizzie)
	Bureaucracy decides	View that local authority holds power	<i>"You live in this area, this is your choice of secondary school, and that is pretty much where your child's going. It's not much of a choice is it?"</i> (Flora)
	Council obstructs	Local authority seen as making choice harder	<i>"They don't make you aware that you've got a choice"</i> (Jim)
	Child chose	Description of child influencing/deciding on school	<i>"And my daughter primarily we'd ask if she wanted to go and she did"</i> (Alistair)
	Parent influenced	Mentions of the child being 'guided' in their opinion	<i>"the most important thing for me is that he's going to be happy and he is where he wants to be but I did try and Influence him just go have a look at this"</i> (Lizzie)
	Decided together	Mention of children and parents deciding together	<i>"Maybe a mix of both. Because I think without me intentionally knowing I might have convinced my mum to do it"</i> (Ruairidh)
<b>Difficulty</b>	Dilemma	Description of genuine dilemma/equipoise	<i>"I really feel like a traitor, it's been quite a difficult choice"</i> (Tracy)
	Easy to choose	Description of choice as straightforward	<i>"We're just kind of easy peasy in Scotstown cos it's so geographically, like 'if you live here, well you go there'"</i> (Jenny)
	Assumed catchment	Presumption towards catchment school	<i>"It was not really thought because it was always over the years assumed she would go to [School A]"</i> (Alistair)
	Anxious	Expressions of anxiety	<i>"feels like he felt a bit anxious actually, he hadn't been decided"</i> (Lisa)
	Not Anxious	Downplaying anxiety	<i>"I tend not to be a worrier"</i> (Hailey)
	Stressful	Expressions of stress	<i>"I was still feeling really stressed. I didn't know if I'd made the right decision."</i> (Angus)



	Value certainty	Expressions of appreciation for certainty	<i>"For me, I would find that quite stressful and worrying, am I going to be able to get my child in the school I've requested?"</i> (Victoria)
	Value continuity	Expressions of appreciation for continuity	<i>"It becomes it becomes the same school with a different name"</i> (Alistair)
	Relief	Expression of relief that choice process is over	<i>"It lasted like a month and then we made the decision and it was all better"</i> (Angus)
	Difficult to interpret information	Descriptions of difficulty interpreting information	<i>"there's not available good quality facts"</i> (Pawel)
	League table scepticism	Scepticism about the usefulness of league tables	<i>"I personally don't buy into the league tables because you can manipulate to get a score"</i> (Alistair)
	Time consuming	Descriptions of time commitment	<i>"They're asking you go up there at nights and things like for certain things. So you could say time consuming"</i> (Andy)
	Not time consuming	View that time commitment is not problematic	<i>"it's been proportionate"</i> (Joe)
	On mind	Claim that choice involved substantial mental energy	<i>"I've been having it in the back of my mind"</i> (Ruaridh)
	Not on mind	Claim that choice did not take much mental energy	<i>"It's not something we ever really worried too much about"</i> (Frank)
	Long process	Description of the process lasting a long time	<i>"I mainly started thinking about it round about I would say mid primary 6"</i> (Ruaridh)
	Research	Description of the amount of research involved	<i>"I did look at lots of articles online about different schools"</i> (Beverley)
	Not boring	References to the process not being boring	<i>"It didn't take very long"</i> (Hailey)
<b>Pressure/Burden</b>	Pressured	Description of the pressure of choosing	<i>"What happens if they get there and it's not a good school? You're the one that hurt your</i>

			<i>child's future. It's a big decision to put on people"</i> (Sarah)
	Not Pressured	Expressions of the view that choice is not pressurised	<i>"you can't go really wrong, you might get slightly better in one of them"</i> (Daniela)
<b>Regret</b>	Regret	Expressions of regret / concern about choosing wrong	<i>"I feel anxious about, like, when I do this school, the other one I might be, like, 'the other one's so much better'"</i> (Nicky)
<b>Self-government</b>	Confident judgement	Expressions of confidence in judgement	<i>"I'm probably about 80% confident I got it right"</i> (Sarah)
	Feel qualified	Expressions of confidence that choices are adequately informed	<i>"I can choose the best one"</i> (Pawel)
	Feel unqualified	View that choice is not adequately informed	<i>"I never feel like I should be making these grown up decisions"</i> (Beverley)
<b>Significance</b>	Religious	Desire for religious school	<i>"The kids were brought up Catholic so it's been important certainly to my wife that if we could we could get them into Catholic high school"</i> (Frank)
	Not religious	School not chosen on religious grounds	<i>"I was a bit apprehensive at first because I'm not Catholic at all"</i> (Zoe)
	Religious values	Religious school preferred for non-faith reasons	<i>"it was a conscious decision because of the values that a Catholic school has, and that's the sort of moral values that I want in children"</i> (Jim)
	Schools similar	Schools seen as basically similar	<i>"I dinnae think there'll be much of a difference between [School A] and say [School B] or [School C]. Maybe I'm wrong, but I wouldn't think so."</i> (Andy)
	Specialisation	Desire for more specialised schools	<i>"I think it's a great idea. You know, I think, you know, no child is the same"</i> (Frank)
	Anti-specialisation	Opposition to school specialisation	<i>"You don't want to pigeonhole them in first year"</i> (Jackie)

## Appendix F: Online Survey Questionnaire

You are being invited to participate in a research study by Aveek Bhattacharya, a PhD student at the London School of Economics.

The purpose of this study is to understand how secondary school choice varies in different parts of the country.

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary and you can withdraw at any time. You are free to skip any question.

We believe there are no known risks associated with this research study. However, as with any online related activity the risk of a breach is always possible. To the best of our ability your answers in this study will remain confidential and will be used for research purposes only.

The survey typically takes about 5-8 minutes to complete.

1. Before we start, a bit of information about where you live. Which region do you live in?
  - Scotland
  - North East
  - North West
  - Yorkshire & Humberside
  - West Midlands
  - East Midlands
  - Wales
  - East England
  - London
  - South East
  - South West
  - Northern Ireland

[If only Wales/Northern Ireland end survey]

2. Please provide the first part of your post code (eg AB10, NW2). This will allow us to identify the area you live in, but not your street or address. Feel free to leave this blank if you are uncomfortable providing this information.

We are going to ask you some questions about choosing a secondary school for your child.

If you have a child in year 6 (England) or primary 7 (Scotland), we would like you to think about them when answering.

If you do not have a child starting secondary school next summer, we would like you to think about the last of your children to start secondary – they will probably be in year 7-8 (England) or secondary 1-2 (Scotland) now.

3. When did/will your child start secondary school?

- Autumn 2017
- Autumn 2018
- Autumn 2019
- Autumn 2020
- Other (Please specify)

4. Did you consider state or private school for your child?

- Only considered state school(s)
- Only considered private school(s)
- Considered both, but ended up going with state school
- Considered both, but ended up going with private school

[If only private end survey]

[Show Q5 only to those who responded 'Scotland' to Q1 & not 'Autumn 2020' to Q3]

5. Did you make a placing request for your child to attend a school that isn't your catchment school?

- No
- Yes, and it was successful
- Yes, and it was unsuccessful

[Show Q6 only to those who responded 'Scotland' to Q1 & 'Autumn 2020' to Q3]

6. Are you going to make a placing request for your child to attend a school that isn't your catchment school?

- No
- Maybe
- Yes

7. Is your child...

- An only child
- Your oldest child
- Middle child
- Youngest child

8. How important is to you to have a choice over which secondary school your child attends?
- Very important
  - Somewhat important
  - Not important

[If very/somewhat go to Q9; if not go to Q10]

9. Why do you feel it is important to have a choice of secondary schools?  
Please rank in order of importance, where 1 is most important and 5 is least important.

You do not need to rank answers that do not apply.

- So I feel like I have some control over the process
- So my child can go to the best possible school
- So I don't just have to send my child to the catchment school
- Because I know better than anybody else what is right for my child
- So I can find a school with the right culture and ethos for my child

10. How much choice do you think you had over your child's secondary school?

- A great deal
- A moderate amount
- A little
- None at all

11. How satisfied are you with the amount of choice you had?

- I had too little choice
- I had enough choice
- I had too much choice

12. When did you first start thinking about which secondary school your child would attend?

- Year 6/Primary 7
- Year 5/Primary 6
- Year 4/Primary 5
- Earlier in primary school
- Before they started primary school

13. Was your decision to live in your current neighbourhood influenced by the schools in the area?

- Not at all
- Yes, schools were a consideration
- Yes, schools were the main reason for moving

14. How many secondary schools did you consider for your child?

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5-6
- 7-10
- 11+

15. Which of the following have you ever used to find out about a possible school for your child? Tick all that apply

- School visits/open days
- Ofsted/inspection reports
- Spoke to parents at the school
- School prospectuses
- League tables/attainment data
- Local authority website/adviser
- Other education websites
- Other sources
- None

16. While you were choosing a secondary school, how big a part of your life was the decision?

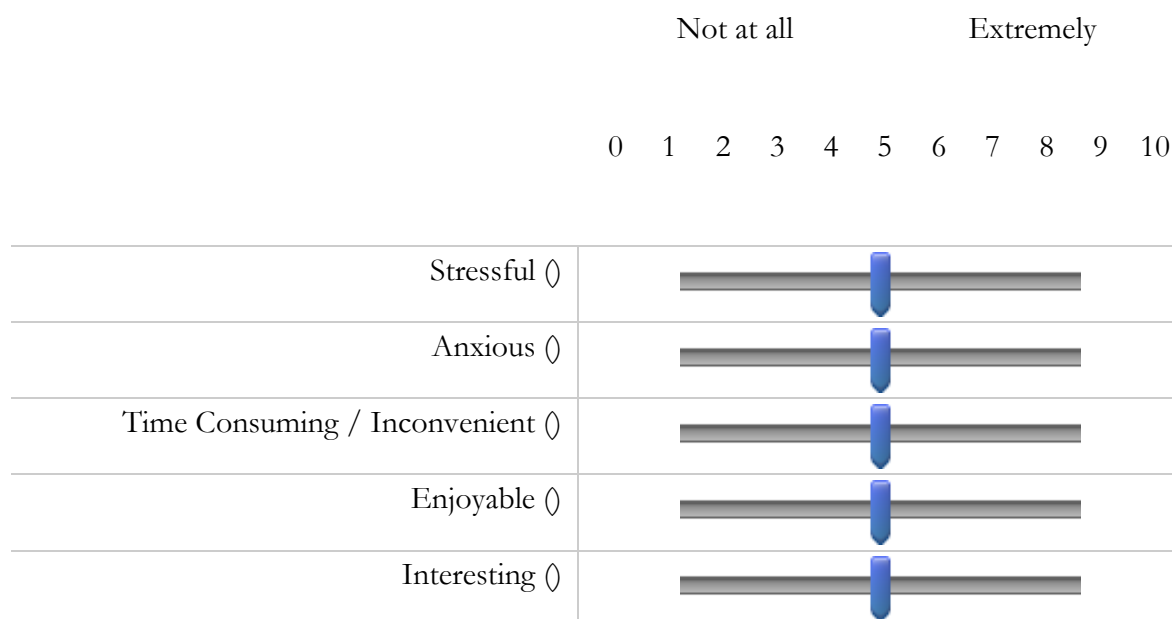
I didn't choose/  
think about it at all

It was the main thing  
on my mind

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10



17. To what extent did you find the process of choosing a secondary school...



18. How worried are you that you have chosen the wrong secondary school?

- Very worried
- Quite worried
- Not at all worried

19. To what extent do you agree with the following statements?

	Strongly agree (1)	Agree (2)	Neither agree nor disagree (3)	Disagree (4)	Strongly disagree (5)
I would be happy for my child to attend the nearest/catchment secondary school	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I believe the school I have chosen for my child is the best school in the area	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I found it difficult to choose a school for my child because different	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

people and sources say different things					
My choice of school will have a significant impact on my child's success and/or happiness	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
If I knew my child would get into a reasonably good school anyway, I wouldn't care about having a choice	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

20. Is there anything else you would like to add to your answers?

21. Finally, it would be helpful to get a few details about yourself.

What is the highest educational qualification that you have achieved to date?

- University degree or equivalent
- Higher educational qualification below degree level
- A-Levels / Highers or equivalent
- ONC / National Level BTEC or equivalent
- O Level / GCSE / Standard Grade or equivalent
- Other
- No formal qualifications

22. To which of the following ethnic groups do you consider you belong?

- White
- Mixed
- Asian
- Black
- Chinese
- Other
- I'd rather not say

23. Where did you yourself go to school?

- England
- Scotland
- Elsewhere in the UK
- Elsewhere in Europe
- Outside Europe



## Appendix G: Data Tables for Figures in Chapter 6

*Standard errors in brackets*

*Figure 6.1: “How important is it to you to have a choice over which secondary school your child attends?”*

	England	Scotland (weighted)	Scotland (unweighted)
Not at all important	0.50% (0.25%)	6.21% (1.94%)	6.16% (1.92%)
Somewhat important	17.52% (1.35%)	37.31% (3.81%)	36.97% (3.78%)
Very important	81.98% (1.36%)	56.47% (3.88%)	56.87% (3.85%)
Valid responses	799	182	182
Did not respond	2	2	2

*Figure 6.2: “Why do you feel it is important to have a choice of secondary schools?”*

	England		Scotland (weighted)		Scotland (unweighted)	
	% Ranking Number 1	% Ranking Top 3	% Ranking Number 1	% Ranking Top 3	% Ranking Number 1	% Ranking Top 3
So my child can go to the best possible school	55.71% (1.76%)	87.95% (1.15%)	54.67% (3.97%)	83.93% (2.94%)	58.5% (3.72%)	84.66% (2.72%)
So I can find a school with the right culture and ethos for my child	14.05% (1.23%)	56.09% (1.76%)	12.13% (2.59%)	58.39% (3.94%)	11.93% (2.44%)	61.36% (3.67%)
So I feel like I have control over the process	13.43% (1.21%)	46.42% (1.77%)	10.85% (2.56%)	49.73% (3.97%)	9.09% (2.17%)	46.59% (3.76%)
Because I know better than anybody else what is right for my child	11.17% (1.12%)	54.45% (1.76%)	12.87% (2.71%)	54.3% (3.96%)	11.93% (2.44%)	55.68% (3.75%)
So I don't just have to send my child to the catchment school	6.65% (0.88%)	46.93% (1.77%)	6.66% (2.01%)	41.45% (3.92%)	6.25% (1.83%)	40.34% (3.70%)
Valid responses	797		175		175	

*Figure 6.3: “If I knew my child would get into a reasonably good school anyway, I wouldn't care about having a choice”*

	England	Scotland (weighted)	Scotland (unweighted)
Strongly Agree	11.13% (1.11%)	15.53% (2.84%)	14.52% (2.58%)
Agree	30.75% (1.63%)	38.69% (3.77%)	37.63% (3.55%)
Neither agree nor disagree	33.37% (1.67%)	34.56% (3.68%)	33.87% (3.47%)

Disagree	17.63% (1.35%)	7.5% (1.9%)	9.14% (2.11%)
Strongly disagree	7.12% (0.91%)	3.72% (1.34%)	4.84% (1.57%)
Valid responses	800	186	186
Did not respond	1	0	0

Figure 6.4: “To what extent did you find the process of choosing a school enjoyable?”

Rating out of 10	England	Scotland (weighted)	Scotland (unweighted)
0	5.02% (0.77%)	10.61% (2.42%)	10.38% (2.26%)
1	7.15% (0.91%)	12.05% (2.58%)	10.93% (2.31%)
2	9.54% (1.04%)	5.07% (1.53%)	7.1% (1.9%)
3	10.29% (1.08%)	8.53% (2.2%)	8.2% (2.03%)
4	9.91% (1.06%)	11.83% (2.56%)	10.93% (2.31%)
5	18.70% (1.38%)	19.44% (3.09%)	19.13% (2.91%)
6	12.92% (1.19%)	12.1% (2.57%)	11.48% (2.36%)
7	10.41% (1.08%)	7.82% (2.09%)	7.65% (1.97%)
8	8.03% (0.96%)	5.84% (1.78%)	6.56% (1.83%)
9	5.02% (0.77%)	3.97% (1.46%)	4.37% (1.51%)
10	3.01% (0.61%)	2.75% (1.21%)	3.28% (1.32%)
High (8-10)	16.06% (1.30%)	12.55% (2.5%)	14.21% (2.58%)
Medium (3-7)	62.23% (1.72%)	59.73% (3.8%)	57.38% (3.66%)
Low (0-2)	21.71% (1.46%)	27.72% (3.47%)	28.42% (3.34%)
Mean	4.80 (0.09)	4.30 (0.21)	4.36 (0.20)
Valid responses	797	183	183
Did not respond	4	3	3

Figure 6.5: “To what extent did you find the process of choosing a school interesting?”

Rating out of 10	England	Scotland (weighted)	Scotland (unweighted)
0	3% (0.6%)	7.53% (2.12%)	6.49% (1.81%)
1	3.63% (0.66%)	6.8% (2.01%)	5.95% (1.74%)
2	4.13% (0.7%)	4% (1.67%)	4.86% (1.58%)
3	4.01% (0.69%)	5.38% (1.75%)	5.41% (1.66%)
4	6.63% (0.88%)	7.53% (2.05%)	7.57% (1.95%)
5	16.52% (1.31%)	17.11% (2.92%)	17.3% (2.78%)
6	14.52% (1.25%)	15.24% (2.8%)	14.59% (2.6%)
7	16.77% (1.32%)	12.06% (2.5%)	12.4% (2.43%)
8	15.39% (1.28%)	15.02% (2.79%)	14% (2.56%)
9	8.26% (0.97%)	4.49% (1.5%)	5.41% (1.66%)
10	7.13% (0.91%)	3.95% (1.32%)	5.95% (1.74%)

High (8-10)	30.79% (1.63%)	23.47% (3.22%)	25.4% (3.2%)
Medium (3-7)	58.45% (1.74%)	57.31% (3.83%)	57.3% (3.64%)
Low (0-2)	10.76% (1.1%)	19.23% (3.12%)	17.3% (2.78%)
Mean	6.07 (0.09)	5.24 (0.21)	5.44 (0.20)
Valid responses	799	185	185
Did not respond	2	1	1

Figure 6.6: “To what extent did you find the process of choosing a school interesting?” – Scotland only (unweighted)

Rating out of 10	Placing Request	No Placing Request
0	2.17% (2.15%)	8.87% (2.55%)
1	2.17% (2.15%)	8.06% (2.45%)
2	4.35% (3.01%)	4.8% (1.93%)
3	6.52% (3.64%)	5.6% (2.07%)
4	8.7% (4.16%)	8% (2.45%)
5	19.57% (5.85%)	17.7% (3.43%)
6	10.87% (4.59%)	16.13% (3.3%)
7	13.04% (4.97%)	11.2% (2.84%)
8	6.52% (3.64%)	14.52% (3.17%)
9	8.7% (4.16%)	2.4% (1.38%)
10	17.39% (5.59%)	2.42% (1.38%)
High (8-10)	32.61% (6.92%)	19.35% (3.55%)
Medium (3-7)	58.7% (7.26%)	58.87% (4.42%)
Low (0-2)	8.7% (4.16%)	21.77% (3.71%)
Mean	6.24 (0.39)	4.94 (0.24)
Valid responses	46	124
Did not respond	0	1

Figure 6.7: “How much choice do you think you had over your child's secondary school?”

	England	Scotland (weighted)	Scotland (unweighted)
A great deal	35.21% (1.69%)	18.01% (2.93%)	19.35% (2.9%)
A moderate amount	46.07% (1.76%)	42.39% (3.79%)	44.62% (3.65%)
A little	16.10% (1.3%)	26.68% (3.46%)	24.73% (3.17%)
None at all	2.62% (0.56%)	12.92% (2.67%)	11.29% (2.32%)
Valid responses	801	186	186
Did not respond	0	0	0

Figure 6.8: “How satisfied are you with the amount of choice you had?”

	England	Scotland (weighted)	Scotland (unweighted)
I had enough choice	75.00% (1.53%)	75.61% (3.31%)	75.27% (3.17%)
I had too much choice	1.50% (0.43%)	0.24% (0.24%)	0.54% (0.54%)
I had too little choice	23.50% (1.50%)	24.15% (3.30%)	24.19% (3.14%)
Valid responses	800	186	186
Did not respond	1	0	0

Figure 6.9: “How much choice do you think you had over your child’s secondary school?” – Scotland only (unweighted)

	Placing Request	No Placing Request
A great deal	28.26% (6.64%)	17.60% (3.41%)
A moderate amount	50.00% (7.38%)	37.60% (4.33%)
A little	17.39% (5.59%)	29.60% (4.09%)
None at all	4.35% (3.01%)	15.20% (3.21%)
Valid responses	46	125
Did not respond	0	0

Figure 6.10: “How satisfied are you with the amount of choice you had?” – Scotland only (unweighted)

	Placing Request	No Placing Request
I had enough choice	71.74% (6.64%)	75.20% (3.86%)
I had too much choice	2.17% (2.15%)	0.00% (0.00%)
I had too little choice	26.09% (6.48%)	24.80% (3.86%)
Valid responses	46	125
Did not respond	0	0

Figure 6.11: “How satisfied are you with the amount of choice you had?” by perceived level of choice

	England	Scotland (weighted)	Scotland (unweighted)
<b>A ‘great deal’ of choice</b>			
I had enough choice	85.77% (2.09%)	85.33% (6.36%)	86.11% (5.78%)
I had too much choice	3.20% (1.05%)	0.00% (0.00%)	0.00% (0.00%)
I had too little choice	11.03% (1.87%)	14.67% (6.36%)	13.89% (5.78%)
Valid responses	281	36	36
Did not respond	1	0	0

<b>A ‘moderate amount’ of choice</b>			
I had enough choice	80.49% (2.06%)	89.02% (3.68%)	89.16% (3.42%)
I had too much choice	0.81% (0.47%)	0.00% (0.00%)	0.00% (0.00%)
I had too little choice	18.7% (2.03%)	10.98% (3.68%)	10.84% (3.42%)
Valid responses	369	83	83
Did not respond	0	0	0
<b>A ‘little’ choice</b>			
I had enough choice	44.96% (4.38%)	64.66% (7.17%)	58.7% (7.28%)
I had too much choice	0.00% (0.00%)	0.00% (0.00%)	0.00% (0.00%)
I had too little choice	55.04% (4.38%)	35.34% (7.17%)	41.3% (7.28%)
Valid responses	129	46	46
Did not respond	0	0	0
<b>‘None at all’</b>			
I had enough choice	19.05% (8.57%)	40.7% (11.01%)	38.1% (10.63%)
I had too much choice	0.00% (0.00%)	1.85% (1.87%)	4.76% (4.66%)
I had too little choice	80.95% (8.57%)	57.45% (11.03%)	57.14% (10.83%)
Valid responses	21	21	21
Did not respond	0	0	0

Figure 6.12: “How satisfied are you with the amount of choice you had?” by strength of desire for choice

#### *Weighted*

	<b>Very important</b>	<b>Somewhat important</b>	<b>Not at all important</b>
I had enough choice	73.88% (1.6%)	81.80% (2.76%)	52.71% (13.57%)
I had too much choice	1.19% (0.39%)	1.44% (0.82%)	2.88% (2.9%)
I had too little choice	24.94% (1.58%)	16.77% (2.67%)	44.41% (13.53%)
Valid responses	769	199	14
Did not respond	1	0	0

#### *Unweighted*

	<b>Very important</b>	<b>Somewhat important</b>	<b>Not at all important</b>
I had enough choice	73.86% (1.59%)	81.91% (2.73%)	50.00% (13.37%)
I had too much choice	1.17% (0.39%)	1.51% (0.86%)	7.14% (6.89%)
I had too little choice	24.97% (1.56%)	16.58% (2.64%)	42.86% (13.23%)

Figure 6.13: “I would be happy for my child to attend the nearest/catchment secondary school”

	<b>England</b>	<b>Scotland (weighted)</b>	<b>Scotland (unweighted)</b>
Strongly Agree	19.00% (1.39%)	38.13% (3.8%)	33.33% (3.46%)
Agree	33.50% (1.67%)	36.07% (3.71%)	36.02% (3.52%)
Neither agree nor disagree	22.62% (1.48%)	19.15% (3.02%)	19.89% (2.93%)
Disagree	15.5% (1.28%)	5.66% (1.52%)	8.6% (2.06%)
Strongly disagree	9.37% (1.03%)	0.99% (0.50%)	2.15% (1.06%)
Valid responses	800	186	186
Did not respond	1	0	0

Figure 6.14: Proportion of parents that say they had enough choice by agreement with the statement “I would be happy for my child to attend the nearest/catchment secondary school”

	<b>England</b>	<b>Scotland (weighted)</b>	<b>Scotland (unweighted)</b>
Strongly Agree	81.58% (3.15%)	82.34% (4.93%)	82.26% (4.86%)
Agree	77.53% (2.56%)	74.77% (5.57%)	74.63% (5.33%)
Neither agree nor disagree	71.82% (3.35%)	61.90% (8.59%)	64.86% (7.87%)
Disagree	69.35% (4.14%)	91.02% (6.27%)	87.50% (8.29%)
Strongly disagree	69.33% (5.33%)	24.24% (21.27%)	25.00% (21.71%)

## Appendix H: Data Tables for Figures in Chapter 7

Figure 7.1: “To what extent did you find the process of choosing a school stressful?”

Rating out of 10	England	Scotland (weighted)	Scotland (unweighted)
0	5.64% (0.82%)	15.76% (2.91%)	14.29% (2.6%)
1	9.15% (1.02%)	15.24% (2.87%)	13.74% (2.55%)
2	6.89% (0.9%)	6.45% (1.98%)	5.49% (1.69%)
3	7.39% (0.93%)	9.24% (2.29%)	8.79% (2.1%)
4	6.52% (0.87%)	7.89% (2.07%)	8.24% (2.04%)
5	15.66% (1.29%)	10.16% (2.35%)	10.44% (2.27%)
6	13.53% (1.21%)	12.95% (2.57%)	14.29% (2.6%)
7	11.28% (1.12%)	7.52% (2%)	8.24% (2.04%)
8	12.16% (1.16%)	7.3% (1.95%)	8.24% (2.04%)
9	5.39% (0.8%)	3.25% (1.31%)	3.85% (1.43%)
10	6.39% (0.87%)	4.23% (1.54%)	4.4% (1.52%)
High (8-10)	23.93% (1.51%)	14.78% (2.68%)	16.48% (2.75%)
Medium (3-7)	54.39% (1.76%)	47.77% (3.89%)	50% (3.71%)
Low (0-2)	21.68% (1.46%)	37.44% (3.82%)	33.52% (3.5%)
Mean	5.19 (0.10)	3.99 (0.23)	4.24 (0.22)
Valid responses	798	182	182
Did not respond	3	4	4

Figure 7.2: “To what extent did you find the process of choosing a school anxious?”

Rating out of 10	England	Scotland (weighted)	Scotland (unweighted)
0	5.92% (0.84%)	14.56% (2.81%)	13.19% (2.51%)
1	8.31% (0.98%)	13.31% (2.72%)	11.54% (2.37%)
2	6.68% (0.89%)	8.78% (2.25%)	8.24% (2.04%)
3	6.8% (0.89%)	7.86% (2.14%)	7.14% (1.91%)
4	7.56% (0.94%)	8.9% (2.26%)	8.24% (2.04%)
5	15.37% (1.28%)	13.85% (2.68%)	14.29% (2.6%)
6	10.83% (1.1%)	10.84% (2.35%)	12.09% (2.42%)
7	12.97% (1.19%)	10.3% (2.28%)	11.54% (2.37%)
8	12.85% (1.19%)	4.58% (1.57%)	5.49% (1.69%)
9	6.3% (0.86%)	4.83% (1.61%)	5.49% (1.69%)
10	6.42% (0.87%)	2.2% (1.04%)	2.75% (1.21%)
High (8-10)	25.57% (1.55%)	11.61% (2.39%)	13.74% (2.55%)
Medium (3-7)	53.53% (1.77%)	51.75% (3.9%)	53.3% (3.7%)

Low (0-2)	20.91% (1.44%)	36.64% (3.8%)	32.97% (3.49%)
Mean	5.29 (0.10)	3.99 (0.22)	4.28 (0.21)
Valid responses	794	182	182
Did not respond	7	4	4

Figure 7.3: “To what extent did you find the process of choosing a school stressful?” – Scotland only (unweighted)

Rating out of 10	Placing Request	No Placing Request
0	8.89% (4.25%)	18.03% (3.49%)
1	6.6% (3.73%)	17.21% (3.43%)
2	0.00% (0.00%)	7.30% (2.37%)
3	6.6% (3.73%)	9.80% (2.7%)
4	8.8% (4.25%)	7.30% (2.37%)
5	13.3% (5.08%)	10.60% (2.8%)
6	22.2% (6.21%)	12.00% (2.98%)
7	11.1% (4.7%)	6.50% (2.25%)
8	11.1% (4.7%)	4.90% (1.96%)
9	6.6% (3.73%)	2.40% (1.41%)
10	4.4% (3.08%)	3.20% (1.62%)
High (8-10)	22.22% (6.21%)	10.66% (2.8%)
Medium (3-7)	62.22% (7.25%)	46.72% (4.53%)
Low (0-2)	15.56% (5.42%)	42.62% (4.49%)
Mean	5.33 (0.41)	3.58 (0.26)
Valid responses	45	122
Did not respond	1	3

Figure 7.4: “To what extent did you find the process of choosing a school anxious?” – Scotland only (unweighted)

Rating out of 10	Placing Request	No Placing Request
0	6.8% (3.81%)	16.2% (3.34%)
1	2.27% (2.25%)	15.4% (3.27%)
2	6.82% (3.81%)	9.7% (2.68%)
3	2.2% (2.25%)	8.1% (2.47%)
4	4.55% (3.15%)	9.7% (2.68%)
5	18.1% (5.83%)	14.63% (3.2%)
6	18.1% (5.83%)	8.9% (2.58%)
7	15.9% (5.53%)	8.1% (2.47%)
8	11.3% (4.8%)	4% (1.79%)



9	9% (4.35%)	4% (1.79%)
10	4.55% (3.15%)	0.8% (0.81%)
High (8-10)	25% (6.55%)	8.94% (2.58%)
Medium (3-7)	59.09% (7.43%)	49.59% (4.52%)
Low (0-2)	15.91% (5.53%)	41.46% (4.45%)
Mean	5.70 (0.39)	3.59 (0.25)
Valid responses	44	123
Did not respond	2	2

Figure 7.5: “When did you first start thinking about which secondary school your child would attend?”

	<b>England</b>	<b>Scotland (weighted)</b>	<b>Scotland (unweighted)</b>
Before they started primary school	3.00% (0.60%)	14.36% (2.77%)	12.90% (2.46%)
Earlier in primary school	9.39% (1.03%)	19.40% (3.07%)	18.82% (2.87%)
Year 4/Primary 5	16.27% (1.31%)	6.36% (1.8%)	6.99% (1.87%)
Year 5/Primary 6	46.81% (1.77%)	22.49% (3.17%)	24.73% (3.17%)
Year 6/Primary 7	24.53% (1.52%)	37.38% (3.74%)	36.56% (3.53%)
Valid responses	799	186	186
Did not respond	2	0	0

Figure 7.6: “Was your decision to live in your current neighbourhood influenced by the schools in the area?”

	<b>England</b>	<b>Scotland (weighted)</b>	<b>Scotland (unweighted)</b>
Yes, schools were the main reason for moving	8.25% (0.97%)	6.51% (1.84%)	6.99% (1.87%)
Yes, schools were a consideration	41.63% (1.74%)	42.89% (3.82%)	42.47% (3.63%)
Not at all	50.13% (1.77%)	50.60% (3.86%)	50.54% (3.67%)
Valid responses	800	186	186
Did not respond	1	0	0

Figure 7.7: “How many secondary schools did you consider for your child?”

	<b>England</b>	<b>Scotland (weighted)</b>	<b>Scotland (unweighted)</b>
1	20.85% (1.44%)	49.61% (3.86%)	44.09% (3.64%)
2	33.96% (1.67%)	35.24% (3.63%)	39.25% (3.58%)
3	29.09% (1.61%)	11.13% (2.34%)	12.37% (2.41%)
4	9.74% (1.05%)	3.12% (1.34%)	3.23% (1.30%)
5-6	4.99% (0.77%)	0.90% (0.70%)	1.08% (0.76%)
7-10	1.00% (0.35%)	0.00% (0.00%)	0.00% (0.00%)
11+	0.37% (0.22%)	0.00% (0.00%)	0.00% (0.00%)
Mean	2.55 (0.05)	1.71 (0.07)	1.78 (0.07)
Valid responses	801	186	186
Did not respond	0	0	0

Figure 7.8: “How many secondary schools did you consider for your child?” (unweighted)

	<b>Placing Request</b>	<b>No Placing Request</b>
1	19.57% (5.85%)	57.6% (4.42%)
2	58.7% (7.26%)	30.4% (4.12%)
3	15.22% (5.30%)	8% (2.43%)
4	4.35% (3.01%)	3.2% (1.57%)
5-6	2.17% (2.15%)	0.80% (0.80%)
7-10	0.00% (0.00%)	0.00% (0.00%)
11+	0.00% (0.00%)	0.00% (0.00%)
Mean	2.12 (0.13)	1.60 (0.08)
Valid responses	46	125
Did not respond	0	0

Figure 7.9: “Which of the following have you ever used to find out about a possible school for your child?”

	<b>England</b>	<b>Scotland (weighted)</b>	<b>Scotland (unweighted)</b>
School visits/open days	80.15% (1.41%)	50.70% (3.86%)	53.76% (3.66%)
Ofsted/inspection reports	57.55% (1.75%)	21.05% (3.12%)	22.04% (3.04%)
Spoke to parents at the school	46.69% (1.76%)	38.63% (3.74%)	40.32% (3.60%)
School prospectuses	40.82% (1.74%)	20.59% (3.1%)	21.51% (3.01%)
League tables/attainment data	29.59% (1.61%)	20.24% (3.06%)	21.51% (3.01%)

Local authority website/adviser	20.97% (1.44%)	30.25% (3.48%)	33.33% (3.46%)
Other education websites	5.99% (0.84%)	6.45% (1.71%)	8.6% (2.06%)
Other	2.12% (0.51%)	3.54% (1.47%)	3.23% (1.30%)
None	5.24% (0.79%)	20.52% (3.17%)	18.82% (2.87%)
Valid responses	801	186	186
Did not respond	0	0	0

Figure 7.10: Number of sources of information used (from list in figure 6.9)

	<b>England</b>	<b>Scotland (weighted)</b>	<b>Scotland (unweighted)</b>
0	5.12% (0.78%)	20.52% (3.17%)	18.82% (2.87%)
1	15.86% (1.29%)	27.64% (3.49%)	25.81% (3.21%)
2	21.72% (1.46%)	18.98% (3.00%)	19.89% (2.93%)
3	23.85% (1.51%)	17.44% (2.91%)	17.74% (2.8%)
4	19.85% (1.41%)	8.34% (2.09%)	9.14% (2.11%)
5	9.11% (1.02%)	4.11% (1.43%)	4.84% (1.57%)
6	3.37% (0.64%)	1.17% (0.75%)	1.61% (0.92%)
7	1.12% (0.37%)	1.80% (0.99%)	2.15% (1.06%)
Mean	2.84 (0.05)	1.91 (0.12)	2.04 (0.12)
Valid responses	801	186	186
Did not respond	0	0	0

Figure 7.11: Number of sources of information used (from list in figure 6.9, unweighted)

	<b>Placing Request</b>	<b>No Placing Request</b>
0	10.87% (4.59%)	23.2% (3.78%)
1	17.39% (5.59%)	30.4% (4.12%)
2	26.09% (6.48%)	18.4% (3.47%)
3	17.39% (5.59%)	16.00% (3.28%)
4	13.04% (4.97%)	7.20% (2.31%)
5	6.52% (3.64%)	2.40% (1.37%)
6	4.35% (3.01%)	0.80% (0.80%)
7	4.35% (3.01%)	1.60% (1.12%)
Mean	2.63 (0.27)	1.72 (0.14)
Valid responses	46	125
Did not respond	0	0

Figure 7.12: “To what extent did you find the process of choosing a school time consuming/inconvenient?”

Rating out of 10	England	Scotland (weighted)	Scotland (unweighted)
0	8.93% (1.01%)	17.18% (3.01%)	15.3% (2.66%)
1	10.31% (1.08%)	17.12% (3%)	15.3% (2.66%)
2	10.57% (1.09%)	11.56% (2.49%)	11.48% (2.36%)
3	9.31% (1.03%)	10.16% (2.43%)	8.74% (2.09%)
4	8.68% (1%)	8.87% (2.12%)	10.38% (2.26%)
5	16.35% (1.31%)	15.52% (2.77%)	16.39% (2.74%)
6	13.08% (1.2%)	4.29% (1.45%)	5.46% (1.68%)
7	9.31% (1.03%)	5.51% (1.74%)	6.01% (1.76%)
8	6.54% (0.88%)	6.13% (1.84%)	6.56% (1.83%)
9	3.65% (0.67%)	2.01% (1.05%)	2.19% (1.08%)
10	3.27% (0.63%)	1.64% (0.89%)	2.19% (1.08%)
High (8-10)	13.46% (1.21%)	9.79% (2.24%)	10.93% (2.31%)
Medium (3-7)	56.73% (1.76%)	44.36% (3.85%)	46.99% (3.69%)
Low (0-2)	29.81% (1.62%)	45.86% (3.89%)	42.08% (3.65%)
Mean	4.37 (0.10)	3.32 (0.21)	3.57 (0.20)
Valid responses	795	183	183
Did not respond	6	3	3

Figure 7.13: “To what extent did you find the process of choosing a school time consuming/inconvenient?” – Scotland only (unweighted)

Rating out of 10	Placing Request	No Placing Request
0	6.67% (3.73%)	19.51% (3.58%)
1	6.67% (3.73%)	19.51% (3.58%)
2	11.11% (4.7%)	12.2% (2.96%)
3	2.22% (2.2%)	12.2% (2.96%)
4	17.78% (5.72%)	7.32% (2.35%)
5	20% (5.98%)	13.82% (3.12%)
6	11.11% (4.7%)	2.44% (1.39%)
7	8.89% (4.25%)	4.88% (1.95%)
8	8.89% (4.25%)	5.69% (2.09%)
9	2.22% (2.2%)	1.63% (1.14%)
10	4.44% (3.08%)	0.81% (0.81%)
High (8-10)	15.56% (5.41%)	8.13% (2.47%)
Medium (3-7)	60.00% (7.31%)	40.65% (4.43%)
Low (0-2)	24.44% (6.41%)	51.22% (4.51%)
Mean	4.71 (0.38)	2.96 (0.23)

Valid responses	45	123
Did not respond	1	2

Figure 7.14: “While you were choosing a secondary school, how big a part of your life was the decision?”

Rating out of 10	England	Scotland (weighted)	Scotland (unweighted)
0	0.87% (0.33%)	3.33% (1.46%)	2.7% (1.19%)
1	1.37% (0.41%)	6.17% (1.93%)	5.41% (1.66%)
2	1.37% (0.41%)	4.66% (1.72%)	3.78% (1.4%)
3	1.37% (0.41%)	6.14% (1.92%)	5.41% (1.66%)
4	4.12% (0.7%)	2.93% (1.26%)	3.24% (1.3%)
5	13.11% (1.19%)	15.16% (2.86%)	12.97% (2.47%)
6	13.73% (1.22%)	10.31% (2.33%)	10.81% (2.28%)
7	22.35% (1.47%)	20.74% (3.1%)	22.16% (3.06%)
8	20.85% (1.44%)	17.68% (2.92%)	18.38% (2.85%)
9	10.24% (1.07%)	7.46% (1.96%)	8.65% (2.07%)
10	10.61% (1.09%)	5.43% (1.65%)	6.49% (1.81%)
High (8-10)	.417 (.0174)	.3057 (.0351)	.3351 (.0347)
Medium (3-7)	.5468 (.0176)	.5527 (.0385)	.5459 (.0366)
Low (0-2)	.0362 (.0066)	.1415 (.028)	.1189 (.0238)
Mean	6.94 (0.07)	5.91 (0.20)	6.17 (0.19)
Valid responses	801	185	185
Did not respond	0	1	1

Figure 7.15: “While you were choosing a secondary school, how big a part of your life was the decision?” - Scotland only (unweighted)

Rating out of 10	Placing Request	No Placing Request
0	0.00% (0.00%)	4.03% (1.77%)
1	2.17% (2.16%)	7.26% (2.34%)
2	0.00% (0.00%)	5.65% (2.08%)
3	2.17% (2.16%)	7.26% (2.34%)
4	4.35% (3.01%)	2.42% (1.38%)
5	2.17% (2.16%)	17.74% (3.44%)
6	13.04% (4.98%)	9.68% (2.66%)
7	30.43% (6.8%)	20.16% (3.61%)
8	19.57% (5.86%)	16.13% (3.31%)
9	15.22% (5.31%)	6.45% (2.21%)
10	10.87% (4.6%)	3.23% (1.59%)

High (8-10)	45.65% (7.35%)	25.81% (3.93%)
Medium (3-7)	52.17% (7.37%)	57.26% (4.44%)
Low (0-2)	2.17% (2.15%)	16.94% (3.37%)
Mean	7.30 (0.27)	5.57 (0.24)
Valid responses	46	124
Did not respond	0	1

Figure 7.16: “I found it difficult to choose a school for my child because different people and sources say different things”

	<b>England</b>	<b>Scotland (weighted)</b>	<b>Scotland (unweighted)</b>
Strongly Agree	8.75% (1.00%)	3.33% (1.35%)	3.76% (1.4%)
Agree	27.00% (1.57%)	17.72% (2.96%)	17.20% (2.77%)
Neither agree nor disagree	28.13% (1.59%)	35.37% (3.68%)	36.02% (3.52%)
Disagree	22.5% (1.48%)	25.29% (3.36%)	24.73% (3.17%)
Strongly disagree	13.63% (1.21%)	18.29% (2.99%)	18.28% (2.84%)
Valid responses	801	186	186
Did not respond	0	0	0

Figure 7.17: “My choice of school will have a significant impact on my child’s success and/or happiness”

	<b>England</b>	<b>Scotland (weighted)</b>	<b>Scotland (unweighted)</b>
Strongly Agree	34.08% (1.68%)	22.89% (3.14%)	26.88% (3.25%)
Agree	44.07% (1.76%)	43.22% (3.82%)	43.55% (3.64%)
Neither agree nor disagree	19.23% (1.39%)	24.58% (3.40%)	21.51% (3.01%)
Disagree	2.37% (0.54%)	6.01% (1.88%)	5.38% (1.65%)
Strongly disagree	0.25% (0.18%)	3.30% (1.45%)	2.69% (1.19%)
Valid responses	801	186	186
Did not respond	0	0	0

Figure 7.18: “My choice of school will have a significant impact on my child’s success and/or happiness” – Scotland only (unweighted)

	Placing Request	No Placing Request
Strongly Agree	50.00% (7.38%)	19.20% (3.52%)
Agree	41.30% (7.26%)	42.40% (4.42%)
Neither agree nor disagree	6.52% (3.64%)	28.00% (4.02%)
Disagree	2.17% (2.15%)	6.40% (2.19%)
Strongly disagree	0.00% (0.00%)	4.00% (1.75%)
Valid responses	46	125
Did not respond	0	0

Figure 7.19: “How worried are you that you have chosen the wrong secondary school?”

	England	Scotland (weighted)	Scotland (unweighted)
Very worried	11.25% (1.12%)	3.18% (1.21%)	4.30% (1.49%)
Quite worried	28.63% (1.60%)	20.35% (3.02%)	22.58% (3.07%)
Not at all worried	60.12% (1.73%)	76.47% (3.17%)	73.12% (3.25%)
Valid responses	800	186	186
Did not respond	1	0	0

Figure 7.20: “How worried are you that you have chosen the wrong secondary school?” – Scotland only (unweighted)

	Placing Request	No Placing Request
Very worried	8.70% (4.16%)	1.60% (1.12%)
Quite worried	30.43% (6.79%)	16.00% (3.28%)
Not at all worried	60.87% (7.2%)	82.40% (3.41%)
Valid responses	46	125
Did not respond	0	0

## Appendix I: Data Tables for Figures in Chapter 8

Figure 8.10: Satisfaction with choice and stressfulness by school density quartile – England only

School Density Quartile	% of parents satisfied with level of choice	Average reported stress	Valid Responses	Did not Respond
1	80.95% (2.86%)	4.45 (0.17)	189	0
2	81.82% (2.60%)	4.93 (0.18)	220	0
3	70.69% (3.45%)	5.40 (0.19)	174	0
4	66.06% (3.21%)	5.94 (0.18)	217	1

Figure 8.14: Reported Stress and Satisfaction Level by parental education

Education Level	Average reported stress	% of parents satisfied with level of choice	Valid Responses	Did not Respond
<b>England</b>				
University educated	5.57 (0.16)	69.81% (2.82%)	263	2
Non-university educated	5.00 (0.13)	77.43% (1.81%)	507	1
<b>Scotland (weighted)</b>				
University educated	4.25 (0.37)	76.22% (5.18%)	74	0
Non-university educated	3.80 (0.31)	75.2% (4.31%)	109	0
<b>Scotland (weighted)</b>				
University educated	4.28 (0.34)	75.68% (5%)	74	0
Non-university educated	4.23 (0.30)	75% (4.1%)	109	0

Figure 8.15: Reported Stress (Average out of 10) by Index of Multiple Deprivation

IMD Quartile	England		Scotland (weighted)	Scotland (unweighted)
1	5.78 (0.21)		4.65 (0.51)	4.77 (0.47)
2	5.19 (0.19)		3.84 (0.47)	4.14 (0.47)
3	5.08 (0.21)		3.39 (0.45)	3.69 (0.46)
4	4.80 (0.19)		4.03 (0.43)	4.27 (0.39)
IMD Quartile	England		Scotland	
	Valid Responses	Did not respond	Valid Responses	Did not respond



1	184	0	48	1
2	201	0	41	1
3	194	0	42	1
4	219	3	51	1

Figure 8.16: Reported Stress (Average out of 10) by Child Order

Child order	England		Scotland (weighted)	Scotland (unweighted)
Only/oldest child	5.66 (0.13)		4.13 (0.30)	4.37 (0.29)
Middle/youngest child	4.71 (0.14)		3.79 (0.37)	4.04 (0.35)
Child order	England		Scotland	
	Valid Responses	Did not respond	Valid Responses	Did not respond
Only/oldest child	404	2	109	1
Middle/youngest child	393	1	73	3

Figure 8.17: Proportion of parents that said they had enough choice by Child Order

Child order	England		Scotland (weighted)	Scotland (unweighted)
Only/oldest child	70.2% (2.27%)		68.29% (4.73%)	69.09% (4.42%)
Middle/youngest child	79.7% (2.03%)		85.33% (4.19%)	84.21% (4.19%)
Child order	England		Scotland	
	Valid Responses	Did not respond	Valid Responses	Did not respond
Only/oldest child	406	0	110	0
Middle/youngest child	393	1	76	0

