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For Better or Worse: School choice in a South African working class context

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Introduction

There has been much focus in educational literature recently on school choice in other countries (especially Britain and the US) and the debate it has spawned is extensive. The debate has centred on a conceptualisation which sees 'choice' as code for the 'marketization of education'. This has implications in terms of mobility as well as a more pro-active selection process by both students (and or parents) and schools. This paper examines school choice within a specific, urban, working class context in South Africa. It takes two unequally performing secondary schools as case studies in order to examine both how students select schools and how schools select students. The paper examines the findings of this study in relation to the international school choice literature, and the ways in which school choice is theorized therein. The finding that working class families in this context are actively engaged in choice processes is related to the implicit and explicit suggestion in much of the literature that it is primarily middle class actors that exercise choice. The choice of the working class actors in this study is to a large extent framed and determined by the material constraints of their lives. Despite the limitations imposed upon these families in terms of location and cost of schooling, however, it is suggested that these working class families place a considerable emphasis on making selections towards a good education and use the resources available to them in making these choices. Despite constraints, therefore, choice appears to be exercised not only by the middle but also the working classes.

In their study of four formerly white Model C schools, Tikly and Mabogoane (1997) examine the desegregation of schooling in South Africa in terms of the concept of marketization, and in relation to two arguments in favour of education markets: that they increase parental choice and involvement, and that they lead to greater efficiency. The authors conclude that the process of introducing greater choice in the system has benefited whites and a minority of blacks, but has not increased choice for the majority of blacks. They show how this is a result of geographical location and distance (a legacy of Group Areas), and strategies employed by the schools that have limited black learners' access (such as prohibitive school fees, language related admission requirements and school marketing strategies). As a result of such strategies the authors contend that black parents have engaged with the Model C system through 'individual rather than collective consumerism' (1997:169) and that white cultural hegemony has been maintained despite the changes in the racial make up of the schools.

Whereas Tikly and Mabogoane's (1997) study examines the interface between black families and the formerly white sector of the system, this study is located within a different sector of the schooling system, and examines the choice processes of black, working class families of former DET schools.

As this is a small scale study, using a sample of forty students, these findings are probably not generalizable. However, were the choice phenomenon explained in this study found to be stable across a wider number of schools, the assumption that working class families do not engage in meaningful decision-making within the context of available options would need to be seriously questioned. This study represents a starting point for asking these questions.

School Choice Debates

The restructuring of education along the lines of a free market has led, particularly in Britain and the US, to the implementation of a number of school choice policies. These policies have resulted in considerable debate around the results and effects of school choice: whether it achieves what it sets out to achieve, or in fact accomplishes the opposite. It is argued that the primary aim of school choice policies is to bring about reform in education by developing market mechanisms, which are believed to foster educational excellence

over the long term (Dale, 1997:452). The recent literature has focused on the cultural, political and symbolic components and implications of school choice programmes (Archibald, 1991; Angus, 1992; Cookson, 1992; Edwards & Whitty, 1992; Bowe *et al*, 1994). Proponents of school choice claim that an education system organised around free choice will enhance competition amongst schools and in turn promote educational performance. Chubb and Moe (1990), two of the most ardent supporters of school choice policies, boldly state that

reformers would do well to entertain the notion that choice is a panacea ... It has the capacity all by itself to bring about the kind of transformation that, for years, reformers have been seeking to engineer in a myriad of other ways (page 13).

Some proponents further argue that enhanced choice policies and associated new bureaucratic arrangements will particularly benefit families from disadvantaged communities (Moe, 1994; Pollard, 1995).

Opponents of school choice fear the possible effects on social inequality (Astin, 1993; Lee, 1993) maintaining that it will produce elitism and segregation and entrench class inequalities (Gerwitz *et al*, 1995). Furthermore it is middle class parents that are likely to exercise choice opportunities that are available, and those previously disadvantaged in the school system are unlikely to benefit within the new educational market. Wells (1993) points to the fact that 'the lack of power that some families experience is embedded in their social and economic lives' (page 48). Walford (1992) further argues that rather than introducing mechanisms which will ensure a more fair and equal education system, the underlying ideology of choice that anyone can benefit in fact masks the differentiation in the system that it produces.

School Choice in South Africa

In order to discuss the specific realisations of school choice issues in South Africa, it is necessary to briefly sketch the broad changes in enrolment patterns of schools since the creation of a single, unified education system. Following the dissolution of the seventeen separate, and racially defined education departments, a new system of schooling has been emerging within the new educational dispensation in South Africa. The underlying principles of public education are those of a semi-private system, realised to different degrees depending on the capacity of the parent community to pay fees and make other contributions. Public schools have thus ended up on a continuum in terms of the extent of funding contributions via fees; their position on the continuum being largely relative to the economic level of the community they serve. At opposite ends of the continuum are a privileged schooling sector serving a minority, and an under-resourced, largely poor quality, public sector serving the majority. The former sector comprises independent schools and privileged state schools. These state schools are privileged by virtue of the fact that state schools are able to set higher fees; these fees are determined largely by the fee paying potential of the school community and the school is able to determine the composition of the school community by defining the school's feeder area, fees and admission policies. Due to the legacy of apartheid Group Areas legislation, schooling continues to be largely spatially defined, and these privileged state schools are located in middle-class, predominantly white suburbs. Under-resourced public schools, which constitute the vast majority of schools, are largely located in working class areas, and serve a predominantly black student population.

Schooling is thus delineated largely in terms of class. The dramatic changes in the composition of some schools since the opening up of the school system can broadly be described as follows. Middle class black and white students have moved to independent schools and privileged state schools, freeing up spaces in 'boundary schools' (former Model C schools on the borders of historical group areas), which have been taken up largely by middle and lower middle class black, coloured and Indian students. The result has been a dramatic alteration of the class composition of the under-resourced public school sector, where the majority of students are from working class backgrounds. The fact that many of the children of politicians and the middle and professional classes are not in the under-resourced sector of the public system should also not be overlooked in terms of the bleeding of social capital out of this largely impoverished sector. This impacts on the capacity of parents to participate in and influence the management of the school, and affects the school's policy and cycle of change.

The nature of school choice has also changed with the new patterns of enrolment in schools. In the

past school choice had very specific implications in terms of race. Broadly, white students attended private or local state schools which were of a generally good quality. The move now has been towards selecting schools that are independent or privileged state schools. The 'local' is not a primary consideration. In the case of black students, the issue of school choice in the past was far more complicated, and was connected to apartheid group areas legislation, demographic patterns, as well as patterns of mobility. Where there was a predominance of migrant labour amongst this sector of the population, the choice was largely between sending students to rural or urban schools, i.e. where the parent or relative worked (urban) or where the family was based (rural, generally 'bantustan'). The choice usually centred around issues of cost and social support, as well as stability, where at particular times urban schools were sites of political activity, and schooling in a rural setting was construed as being less disrupted and more stable.

This logic has shifted, and with the present composition and distribution of schools different considerations around the ways in which school choice is realized have arisen. Due to the spatially organized nature of schooling, school choice, particularly in the case of the Western Cape (where schools are encouraged to implement zoning policies), has largely to do with locality, and whether students are economically in a position to make choices beyond the borders of their locality. In the South African context choice opportunities are not evenly distributed socially, and the higher the socio-economic level of the individual the greater the choice opportunities. This is an indication as well as a result of the increasing commodification of education; i.e. more money buys a better education.

Issues of locality are compounded by issues of class and language. These also play a role in parents' and students' selecting schools within close proximity to their homes and within their social community. In addition resources and stamina are needed to appeal against decisions made by schools regarding admissions. In the South African context school choice is largely informed by the material environments which constitute and constrain the lives and opportunities of families.

Theorizing School Choice

In theorizing the process of choice, much of the British and American literature focuses on comparing middle class educational actors with those of the working class. Reay and Ball (1997) argue that educational choice is typically theorized in terms of the middle class norm which positions working class parents in 'deficit' terms. They suggest that the working class do not play the educational market in order to avoid 'high risk choices'. Gerwitz *et al* (1995) construct a typology of choosers in terms of their relationship to and functioning within the educational market. Their analysis shows how school choice is directly and powerfully related to social class. They outline three ideal types of choosers: the skilled/privileged choosers (broadly middle class), the semi-skilled choosers (broadly working class, less capable of making informed choices than the skilled), and the 'disconnected' (though not 'disinterested', working class). The disconnected do not 'play the market', i.e. they are disconnected from it. The authors assert that for the 'disconnected' 'the idea of examining a wide range of schools is not something which enters their frame of thinking' (1995:45), and choice is primarily determined by considerations around distance, safety, convenience and locality. Also choice is informed by local social networks rather than 'the individuality of the child-matching strategies' of the skilled choosers, who have the capacity to decode school systems and organisations and discriminate between individual schools in terms of their policies and practices (1995:25).

In their article on 'grapevine knowledge' Ball and Vincent (1998) examine how socially embedded local information informs parental choice of schooling. They argue that this knowledge (about schools and the schooling system) is unevenly distributed and used differently by different social class groups. They introduce the three categories of choosers as outlined by Gerwitz *et al* (1995). However, in their discussion of the use that parents make of grapevine knowledge in choosing schools, the 'disconnected' do not feature. When loosely matching certain attitudes towards grapevine knowledge - suspicion, doubt and acceptance - the 'disconnected' once again are not mentioned. Either the typology is limiting in terms of their discussion, or by omission they are suggesting that the 'disconnected' working class choosers are not engaged with local, informal information networks, and do not make use of this resource.

Gerwitz *et al* (1995) present several characteristics of the 'disconnected' (working class) choosers: the belief that all schools are basically the same, the emphasis on the child's happiness in the short term as opposed to the consideration of the long term benefits in terms of employment, and the belief that academic

ability is fixed regardless of which school is attended.

In their analysis of parental choice of schools, Gerwitz *et al* draw out the material and cultural dimensions of choice. They use Bourdieu, his notion of 'habitus' - 'the dispositions of agents, their habitus, i.e. the mental structures through which they apprehend the social world, are essentially the product of the internalization of that world' (Bourdieu, 1990:130) - and the concept of cultural capital, which is used in decoding schools and interpreting information to make educational choices. Parental cultural capital affects the ability to make educational decisions in a number of ways. One is knowledge about the education system and admission procedures, and being able to make a more or less accurate assessment of children's ability in relation to what is available. It is also argued that middle class parents have more effective social networks. As well as offering practical support and sharing common aspirations for their children's education, these networks facilitate the diffusion of information about schools effectively. They also address the issue of material capacity, which includes resources to pay for transport, childcare opportunities, etceteras. Across the social classes that are represented by the typologies presented by Gerwitz *et al* (1995), it is argued that the possession of these material and cultural capacities are unevenly distributed.

The work of Gerwitz *et al* (1995) has been sharply criticized, notably by Tooley (1996) who challenges the generalizations the authors make about class and choice, saying that their methodological approach cannot support their claims. His critique focuses on what he regards as the 'opportunistic', non-representative nature of their sample, which cannot carry the weight of their conclusions, and on the operationalisation of their categories, i.e. the extent to which their judgements in matching families to the categories of choosers is made explicit, so that their constituting of class categories is open to scrutiny.

Despite these criticisms, Gerwitz *et al*'s analysis is useful in this study in illuminating how some are better positioned to interact with the schooling system in making choices than others, and secondly how this positioning is related to class and the possession of material capacity and cultural capital.

Hatcher (1997) provides a different angle on theorizing educational choices. He evaluates Rational Action Theory (RAT), originally applied to the education context by Boudon (1974), which examines the secondary effects of social class and which offers an alternative to culturalist explanations. These secondary effects are the effects other than the initial distribution of class-differentiated ability through families. RAT has been taken up by several authors in relation to educational decision-making (Erikson and Jonsson (1996), Duru-Bellat (1996) and Goldthorpe (1996). In terms of the RAT model,

success is defined in terms of the subsequent economic returns (as measured by income and class location). Class differences result from the different evaluations that people from different social classes make ... As a result of economic inequality in society, different social locations give rise to different costs, benefits and probabilities of success. It is a rational evaluation of these, rather than class cultural factors, which generate class differences in transition propensities (Hatcher, 1997:10).

Hatcher demonstrates through a number of examples that the model has not been applied in such a reductionist economic fashion as suggested in the above definition. However, he points out that the weakness of RAT lies centrally in the fact that it counterposes rational choice to culture, rather than viewing rational choice as embedded in culture. The strength of the RAT framework is that it highlights the significance of rational decision-making in educational choices.

Hatcher goes on to situate this 'rational choice' within Bourdieu's culturalist paradigm, and in particular the notion of 'habitus'. He draws out the emancipatory potential of conceptualizing educational choices in this way, arguing that the implication is that for working class families, the ability to enter into *conscious strategic thinking and action* presents a way of overcoming the reproductionism of their habitus (Hatcher, 1997:23). He concludes:

A comprehensive theory of agency in education on the part of children, young people and their parents would need to retain the strengths of the culturalist paradigm while creating within it space for rational strategic decision-making (ibid.).

This provides a useful frame for the discussion that follows. Perhaps what is lacking here is a sufficient analysis of the material environment of choosers, and how this has the potential to enhance or constrain choices. The constraints in terms of location, and the potential to make choices within and beyond the

boundaries of that physical space, to a large extent determine the rational, strategic decision-making that can or cannot be undertaken by educational agents. In other words, choosers in a certain context may not be inhibited by class but by physical constraints. They are constrained in terms of the fact that choices that would have been made are nullified. Working class choice can thus be explained in terms of greater constraints rather than different criteria. This will be taken up in the course of the discussion.

The Case Studies

Using the two case studies I will focus on how school choice is realized within the under-resourced public sector of South African schooling outlined earlier in the paper. Within this sector there is a scarcity of 'good schools', or schools that are regarded as 'good' by local residents. Although these schools are not perceived as being 'good' against an external standard, within the area relatives are deployed in terms of more and less desirable schools. The way choice is realized within two schools within this context is compared, in order to illustrate the ways in which the internal dynamics of schools create a certain interface between the school and learners and pull learners in different directions. It also shows how some learners are able to, and do, exercise a measure of choice, whilst other learners are confronted with less opportunities for choice, or greater degrees of constraint. These choice processes will be discussed in the light of the theoretical positions outlined above.

The schools

A sample of forty students from two urban secondary schools constitute the case study. The two schools are situated in Khayelitsha on the Cape Flats. The distance between the two schools is approximately four kilometres and the schools serve socio-economically similar communities of several shack settlements and formalized housing settlements in the surrounding area. The student populations at both schools come from black, working class families. Most of the parents and students in this area who could afford to do so have 'crossed the line' and moved to schools in Mitchell's Plain, the adjacent coloured area where schools are better resourced and historically have a higher achievement record. This has implications in terms of the financial and other contributions the school community is able to offer the schools in the study.

Both schools are co-educational secondary schools, formally administered by the Department of Education and Training (DET). The official medium of instruction at the schools is English. The school fees for both schools are R60 a year. Though in many ways similar, a significant difference between the schools is their academic performance. In the 1997 Matriculation examinations one of the schools achieved an 86% pass rate, and at the other only 27% of the Grade 12s passed. The respective achievement records of the schools have been consistent for several years. (For the purposes of this paper the better achieving school will be referred to as 'School A' and the less achieving school as 'School B'). For the nine secondary schools in the district, School A was the highest achiever in terms of its Matriculation results in 1996, and School B was the lowest.

Although the student population profiles of the two schools appear similar in terms of socio-economic level and location, there are important differences which have implications for both the way in which the learners select schools and the schools select learners. These will be outlined below.

'At risk' student populations: migration and age

There is a difference between the student populations of School A and School B in terms of how long they have been resident in the Western Cape, and the amount of schooling received in this context. As opposed to School B, the majority of students at School A have received most or all of their schooling in the Western Cape. Several studies are being conducted around the vast number of migrants from the Eastern Cape where opportunities for employment and education are far less favourable than in the Western Cape. These educational migrants are often inadequately prepared for schooling in a different context (urban, Western Cape). As Paterson and Kruss (1997:9) observe,

[migrant children] may have come from under-resourced farm or small rural schools, or have a multiple experience of moving between schools. Such a background would impact on their ability to gain what Morrow (1993) calls 'epistemological access'.

A large number of the students at School B come from the Eastern Cape¹. There is a large influx of students particularly at the Grade 10 level from the Eastern Cape, where many of the schools end at Grade 9. There may be a connection between this fact and the high failure rate at this level (43% in 1997) at the school.

The fact that a large proportion of the students at School B are from the Eastern Cape has a number of implications in terms of student achievement. Migrant students (largely Xhosa-speaking) encounter language problems in school if they are required to study Afrikaans, which has historically not been part of the curriculum in the Eastern Cape. In addition, although English is officially the medium of instruction in both provinces, its actual use is far less prevalent in the Eastern Cape both outside the schools and in the schools (especially in the primary phase), particularly in rural contexts. Several students reported only having started to learn English in Grade 8 when they came to the Western Cape.

There are also social problems associated with migrancy that impact on student achievement, including the disruption of familial relationships and support. Families are frequently spread between two provinces. There is frequent (and at times disruptive) movement of students between these two contexts, which often entails long periods of absenteeism from school. The support networks of families are often also dispersed. Although these social networks based on kinship relationships often provide adequate support for migrant children, the sporadic movement of parents and children means that often migrant children cannot expect caregivers who provide emotional and material support to do so over an extended period of time, and migrant children are often moved between a number of households (Spiegel & Mehlwana, 1997). Cases of neglect, exploitation of child labour and abuse by the caregiver are frequently reported (Kruss & Paterson, 1998). Parental involvement in the school and relationships between the school and home are also hampered by dispersed families and frequent movement between households. Thus at School B there is a disproportionate number of socially and educationally vulnerable students, within a school that does not have the resources to address special needs, or provide the support that these students require.

Another significant difference between the two schools are the number of appropriately aged learners. At School A 55% of the learners in the entire school are overaged, as opposed to 76% of learners at School B. The data collected around overage learners shows that there is a strong connection between failure and overage. At the Grade 12 level 71% of the failing students at School A and 75% of the students who failed at School B were overage. What overageness indicates is that learners' schooling has been disrupted, whether this be through failure, repetition or drop out due to either in-school or out-of-school factors, and it can be assumed that their future chances for success are less than for those students who have progressed smoothly through the schooling system.

School B can thus be said to have a more 'at risk' student population, if age and length of time in the Western Cape are taken as primary indicators of this, and the children of the migrant working class appear to be more disadvantaged than the children of the settled working class.

The Sample

Twenty Grade 12 students from School A and twenty Grade 12 students from School B were interviewed, with the purpose of ascertaining how choices were made at points of institutional transition, and why these choices were made. The selection of students was based on academic achievement and gender. The five highest achieving girls, and the five highest achieving boys and the five lowest achieving girls, and the five lowest achieving boys were selected from each school so that the sample is balanced in terms of gender and is made up of the ten highest and lowest achievers from each school. The sample of students is small, and the purpose here is not to hold them as representative, but rather to point to some of the dynamics around school choice within the context under study. Furthermore, although the sample was chosen partly on the basis of achievement, there was no significant difference between the ways in which high and low achievers engaged in choice processes. There were also no significant differences in terms of gender. The comparison will focus on the schools rather than on differential achievers within each school.

Based on parental education level and occupation the sample can broadly be defined as coming from working class homes. Data on a total of 75 parents of the 40 interviewees was gathered. Of these 75 parents, almost a third (29%) were unemployed. Apart from three teachers the remaining parents were

employed in service jobs, such as domestic labourers, drivers, labourers and cleaners. As regards educational level, 53% of the parents had not progressed beyond Grade 8, and 10% of the parents had received no education. 15% of the parents had attained a Grade 12 pass. None of the sample had a university degree, though 8% had undertaken partial or complete courses at a college. No significant differences were found between the parental occupation and educational level of students at school A and School B².

The table below indicates the amount of schooling that students in the sample received in the Eastern Cape or in Cape Town. It can be seen that students in School A have had a more stable schooling in the Western Cape, whereas most of the sample from School B (80%) have migrated from the Eastern cape, having received the greater part of their schooling there.

	>6 years of schooling in the Eastern Cape	>6 years of schooling in Cape Town
School A	5 (25%)	15 (75%)
School B	16 (80%)	4 (20%)

Table 1: Province where the sample received the greater part of their schooling (more than 6 years), School A & B

Who Chooses?

The majority of students (55%) of the entire sample chose the schools themselves. In much of the school choice literature it is assumed that it is the parent that interfaces with the system in the choice of schools. According to the principal of School A parents are often involved in the choice of secondary school, but mainly at the transition between primary and secondary school. Most choices beyond this initial level of secondary school (Grade 8) are made by the students themselves. Although data is not available, the high incidence of institutional transition amongst students in ex-DET schools in the course of the secondary phase is well-known.

	Self	Parent/s	Sibling	Other	TOTAL
School A	11	8		1	20
School B	11	7	2		20
Total	22	15	2	1	40

Table 2: Decision-makers of the sample in terms of selecting schools

Student's selection of schools

School A

For the students at School A the vast majority stated that the school was their first choice. Seventeen of the twenty students gave reasons for their choice in reference to School A's past Matriculation results, or in reference to the school being the 'best', 'important' or having a 'high standard of education'. Their choice was thus academically oriented, and their concern centred around the school that offered them the optimal chance of academic success.

School A is considered among the best schools within the range of options available to students and parents in this context. The school was generally chosen because of the reputation it had established in the community. If School A is considered to be a 'good' school by parents and the educational community, it must be understood that this classification is relative in terms of the choices available to students. This qualification is one that is made by several of the students:

[School A] was the **best black school** in the Western Cape. Many people recommended it (Oscar).

Because [School A] had the **highest pass rate in [the area]** (Zanozuko).

At [School A] you get an important education. [School A] is different from other schools in [the area]. It is the **best school there is around here** (Thembinkosi).

(Emphasis mine)

Questions around the actual success of School A arise when one considers the percentage of students who obtained a Matriculation Exemption – seven percent - meaning that only fourteen of the 207 Grade 12s at this school achieved a result which potentially gave them access to university education. When individual subjects are considered the notion of ‘good’ must also be seen as relative. In Mathematics, which has a high currency value in terms of entering tertiary education, the pass rate was 24%. What passing means needs to be problematized, and the notion of ‘good’ must be seen as relative to a schooling sector with a low level of student academic performance. Nonetheless, School A has clearly been established as a ‘prestigious’ school in the community, and it is on the basis of this reputation that the majority of students interviewed base their choice.

The students/parents at School A have made strategic decisions in their choice of school. The school is chosen on the basis that it offers the optimal chance of academic success within the range of options available. As in the case of School B, choice is also constrained by the structural arrangement of schooling, the question of vacancies, and the delimiting of school choice in terms of locality. Although the constraint of locality is largely a result of the spatial organisation of apartheid, Harvey (1989) offers a time-space analysis which shows how this is also linked to class. He shows how the distribution of ‘time-space biographies’ is class-related - and in this way ‘the organisation of space can indeed define the relationships between people, activities, things and concepts’ (Harvey, 1989:216). In this way ‘finite time resources and the ‘friction of distance’ (measured in the time or cost taken to overcome it) constrain daily movement’ (p 211). Within the constraints of locality and cost, however, parents and students have made rational choices about the best available option.

There is also an informal, local information network which operates within the locality of the schools, which informs students and parents of the more and less desirable schools. The part of the media in establishing school reputations is significant in this regard. The notice board in the principal’s office of School A is pasted with press clippings referring to the school’s success in the Matriculation examinations in previous years. In the interviews with students reference was also made to the fact that the school featured regularly in the media in response to its high pass rate, and it was ‘known to be a good school in Cape Town’.

School B

Of the twenty students interviewed at School B, 50% stated that the school was not their first choice. They were there because all other schools were full, and it was the only school which still had places available. The fact that the students at School B stated that they could not find places at other schools is largely attributed to the fact that they had come later in the school year (generally in February and March) from the Eastern Cape as educational migrants or children of migrants.

A large proportion (35%) cited nearness to their homes as the reason for their choice. Of the remaining 15% of students interviewed, one student quoted sibling attendance as the reason, and the remaining three stated that they did not know why the school was chosen. Thus the school was generally chosen because it was close to the homes of students, or because it was the only available option, all other schools being full.

The fact that half the students at School B chose the school as their *only* option raises questions of vacancy. There is a lack of attention in the literature to the inability of some choosers to consummate their choice. Half the learners at School B would have gone to another school (in several cases School A) were they able to make the choice. In this context, the availability of school places, and the ‘filling up’ of certain schools ahead of others needs to be considered. The inability of some students to choose in this regard

cannot be explained purely in terms of cultural inclinations which are class-related, nor in terms of the degree of engagement with the schooling system, but need to be viewed in the light of the 'ecology' of the community's schooling, which means that in terms of the inter-school stratification within this context, the 'better' schools are filled first, and a hierarchy of schools in terms of vacancies is established:

I couldn't find another school. I didn't have a report or a transfer. This school [School B] could take me (Nomvula).

I didn't find a school in my community. There were still spaces here [at School B] for registration. I was doing Standard 7 in the Eastern Cape and I came late in January (Siphokazi).

It was the only school [School B] that could take me because all was full (Mzuvelile).

I came late from the Eastern Cape. They accepted late registration here [at School B]. I went for the holiday to the Eastern Cape. I had to wait for money for the train (Bathini).

In the case of the students whose choice was governed by the school's proximity to their homes, for material reasons, their decisions are grounded in rational considerations of their material constraints, and the costs in terms of distance:

[School B] is near to my house. I haven't got money for transport to other schools (Nontsikelelo).

[School B] is near to my home so I can walk here (Sakhiwo).

Although many of the learners at School B chose to pursue their schooling in the Western Cape, once there their choice in terms of schools was limited.

Monica: In Transkei the schools are not good things. They don't make you creative. People pass Standard 10 in Transkei and can't communicate in English or their Mother Tongue. I came to the Western Cape for school.

Interviewer: Is this school (School B) your first choice?

Monica: No ... I wanted to go to [School x] but there was no place.

Interviewer: Why did you want to go to [School x]?

Monica: Because it is nearer. And because the music, the choral is very good.

Migrancy and overage can be taken as indicators of a more vulnerable student population profile at School B than at School A. It is clear that the students at School A are better positioned to choose than those at School B - where choice 'by default' determined to a large extent the school in which they are placed. The migrant working class as represented by the students at School B is more disadvantaged than the settled working class in terms of their potential to consummate their choices. Arriving late when many schools' admission processes are complete and lack of access to local knowledge about schools and admission practices further compound their disadvantage. Children of migrant working class families are also disadvantaged in terms of the disruption of familial relationships and a less stable prior schooling experience.

Other factors

There are a number of other factors affecting the way in which choices around schools are made in this context. The information gathered about schools by the community are also based on visual perceptions of

schools. The principal at School A, as well as a number of the students interviewed at both schools, drew attention to how the school was assessed within the community in terms of how many of the students appeared to wear the school's uniform. Another visual indicator of a school's quality in the eyes of the community rested on the times of day that students were visible outside the school gate, arriving late or leaving early. A student at School B wrote in the school magazine:

The children who come late are putting our school in shame and disgrace because the community is watching them and saying bad words about the school, which means that late-coming is one of our big problems.

In examining students' choice of schools there is also an element of 'self exclusion' that occurs with regard to School A. A 30-year-old student at School B had dropped out of school, married and had children, and returned to school after an eight year absence. She had previously attended School A, but chose not to return there. As she stated:

I would be shy of the teachers who taught me before I was married. They would look down at me, and they would shout me not to continue. At [School B] there are a lot of married women as opposed to other schools. I will have friends (Patricia).

Another student stated:

I prefer this school [School B], where the others are like me, to the other high class schools like [School A]. They are like Model C schools. I am more comfortable with people here (Nosithembele).

These statements allow some insight into the local class structure of the community, as well as showing that some students' choices are related to class identification. The preference is for participation in a more congenial working class culture. It has not been my intention to suggest that class cultures do not inform decision-making, but rather that they do not fully explain the way in which parents/students choose schools. Choice is often the result of rational considerations, related to class mainly by virtue of the fact that class-related constraints (such as location and availability of schooling) limit choice opportunities. There is a movement between rationalities in the way in which choices are realized here: at times a better Matriculation is more desirable than class comfort, and in a few cases the converse applies. The discussion highlights the fact that the internal dynamics of a school do create a certain interface between the school and different learners are drawn to schools in different ways. Also, choosers in this context do not regard all schools as basically the same, but distinguish between schools in terms of their choice rationale.

School's selection of students

In the school choice debates there has been a shift in focus to market theory related analysis of how parents choose schools, to the neglect of the way in which schools have selective mechanisms. In the context of the case studies I will show how the operation of choice both by the school and the student needs to be taken into account in examining the operation of choice.

White (1988) suggests that the school's power over students is a function of the competition of many (students) for one (school). By 1 December 1997, the end of the school year, School A had a notice posted on the front door saying '1998 Standard 6 full', whereas School B was sending letters to a number of primary schools in the near community stating that places were still available for Standard 6 students. School B's registration process extended two weeks into the first term of 1998; very little teaching and learning occurred during this time. School A had approximately 4500 applicants of which 400 could be accommodated. One HOD from the school put it this way: 'Of course the parents and students who care the most are the first in line'.

There are no clear admission policies at either of the schools, except for the fact that neither school accepts students from other schools into Grade 12 (although School B did in fact admit several new students at this level in 1998). However, there are strategies in place at School A to draw high achievers from the surrounding primary schools. Ten application forms for School A are sent to the principals of the

primary schools to be given to the top ten achievers in Grade 7. Several students reported having received these forms in Grade 7, for example a student at School A stated: 'I was in the top ten at primary school and I got given forms to go to [School A]. At [School A] you get an important education'.

The schools thus have differential capacity to employ selection processes. These serve to further constrain the opportunities of some. In this context, as in others, despite legislation that states that no learner may be excluded from a school, students still compete for places in the better schools, and often have to settle for schools that still have vacancies.

The above discussion seeks to explain the dynamics of school choice in the context of the case studies, how both students and schools choose. Issues of class identification, academic results, overage and migrancy determine to a large extent the kinds of schools that students choose (or are able to choose). Further the selective mechanisms employed by schools and the competition for 'better' schools enhance choice for some learners and constrain choice for others.

Conclusion

The international school choice literature has been criticized for presenting an 'overly individualistic depiction of the power of clients over schools' (Yair, 1996:454). There is a focus on agency to the neglect of a sufficient analysis of the material environment of class actors and how this constrains or enhances choice. In the South African context it is necessary to consider agency, and the individual choices of students, in the light of the constraints within which these choices are made. It is also necessary to consider the ecology of schooling in specific contexts, and to consider the contingency of students' choice of schools and schools' choice of students.

It is useful to consider the cultural capital of students and parents within the context of the case studies presented, and their capacity for decoding the schooling system. However, I have shown that students and parents are engaged in rational, strategic decision-making in choosing schools. Gerwitz *et al* (1995) argue that:

choice is very directly and powerfully related to social-class differences ... choice emerges as a new factor in maintaining and indeed reinforcing social-class divisions and inequalities (Gerwitz *et al*, 1995:55).

These class differences are explained in terms of inclination and capacity. This study reveals results consistent with the thesis of many of the critics of school choice policies (notably Whitty *et al*, 1998) that in systems of choice more advantaged schools and more advantaged families seek each other out. This study also highlights different fractions within the working class, the existence of varying degrees of constraint across and within these fractions and the exercise of choice within the system. Most significantly this study has shown how choice is constrained by resources, opportunities to exercise and consummate choice, but a high inclination towards seeking the best educational opportunity available.

The question of who is able to consummate their choice is significant in examining school choice in this context. The constraints of distance and cost to a large extent mitigate against choices outside the immediate locality, and choice is largely determined by the material conditions of the students' lives. Finally the inter-school stratification within this locality, and the establishment of the 'prestige' of certain schools should be considered as an important explanatory factor in considering school choice, resulting in a 'selective effect', the filling up of certain schools which limits the choice of many. Furthermore, some learners are more able than others to get to the front of the queue.

The study has also shown that there is a broad class pattern of choice; the working class are disadvantaged. However, within the study's sample, the migrant working class is more disadvantaged than the settled working class. Despite differing degrees of constraint, both groups engage in rational choice processes, and distinguish between different school in terms of their choice rationale. Schools are not regarded as basically the same, and academic ability is not construed as fixed regardless of which school is attended. Choosers are not disconnected from local knowledge about schools nor from the process of selecting schools from the range of opportunities available to them.

The study illuminates both a positive and a negative story attached to school choice within this context. On the one hand it shows that for the large majority of learners choice is largely constrained by location and cost, and the opportunities promised by the post-1994 legislation and the opening up of

schools to all who may choose to attend them regardless of race do not extend to all sectors of the population. The working class is disadvantaged. On the other hand, to the extent that they can, families exercise choice in rational and informed ways. In no way do they appear to be disinterested or disconnected from the educational market. As Muller (1998:6) puts it, ‘...in South Africa, the desire for education, the burning thirst for it, is spread throughout the entire community’. Choice in this context is class-related mainly in terms of the limitations of the choices, but not in terms of the inclination to pursue the best educational choices available.

End notes

- 1 In a survey of 669 Grade 8 students at School A and B, 31% of learners at School A had moved between the Eastern Cape and the Western Cape in the course of their schooling, as opposed to 61% at School B.
- 2
2. In a broader survey of 669 Grade 8 students at the two schools differences were found in parental educational level. At School B, 44% of parents had not progressed beyond the Grade 8 level, as opposed to 25% at School A. 14% of parents at School A were reported to have attained some post-secondary education, compared with 3% at School B.

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