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CHOOSING PUBLIC SCHOOL: SOCIAL EFFECTS AND DILEMMAS IN SOUTHERN SPAIN

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Discussion paper

1 - INTRODUCTION

In developed societies with universal access to primary education, the role played by public authorities in providing educational services is being redefined as is the role played by users of public goods, particularly the families participating in the distribution and administration of such services. One of the most important changes is the way in which national and regional governments regard users: parents are no longer consider passive receivers but active clients. One of the fundamental issues related to this change is the role families play in the process of choosing where and how their children should be educated.

Several initiatives have been taken to provide parents with the opportunity to choose centers in the public sector and to evaluate them accordingly. This process has been incorporated into the general evaluation procedures of public schools to bridge the gap between offer and users' demands (OECD, 1994). Undoubtedly these policies have certain advantages, although they also give rise to important organizational and social issues. On the one hand, the educational administration must make an effort to provide a large number of choices in a context of limited public resources that should be distributed in a wide range of territories (Whitty, et.al, 1993; Department of Education, 1998. On the other hand, a problem arises from the different ways in which families evaluate the educational services they receive and the criteria they use to choose a particular center or not (Bowe, 1994; Hunter, 1991; Thomas, 1997). This diversity, however, runs the risk of widening the gap in public educational systems, not so much in terms of available resources, but in terms of the social differences of its clients (Ball, et.al., 1992; Herán, 1996; Coleman and Hoffer, 1987). Thus, it is up to the administration to deal with the problem of social *integration* versus social *segregation* of groups of families who choose different types of centers.

The problem can be summed up as follows. Given that universal schooling must be guaranteed, the educational offer can be unified, thereby limiting the freedom of the families to choose. If all centers are similar in terms of resources, teaching staff and educational curricula, choice would be restricted to certain aspects, namely the location of centers or their identification with particular clients. Another possibility is to create a diversified system offering a range of choices in both public and subsidized schools. This second type of system implies not only a process of diversification of resources and personnel in the schools, but also a diversification marked by the different social background of the students.

The present paper is the result of a research project carried out by the IESA[1] on the educational system in Andalusia, Spain. Different choice behaviors have been studied

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[1] The Institute of Social Studies in Andalusia (IESA) was commissioned by the Andalusian Regional Government Department of Education to conduct a study of the management criteria of the public educational system in Andalusia. The general findings are included in Fernández Esquinas and Pérez

in the framework of current choice policies established by the regional government and the evaluation by families of the schools they choose. The social profile of families has been examined in both public and subsidized private schools. The study is based on a representative survey of 2400 families whose children studied in primary or secondary schools in 1999. The paper gives further consideration to the social consequences of the processes outlined above.

2 - SCHOOLING AND EDUCATIONAL POLICY IN SOUTHERN SPAIN

Until relatively recently, choosing a school was not considered an important social issue in Spain. The current situation can be explained by the peculiarities of our educational system, a system which is marked by two fundamental characteristics: i) a delay in the development of universal schooling in comparison to other countries and ii) the existence of an important private sector linked to the Catholic church. The introduction of free basic education for all became a reality with the emergence of social policies and increased public investment in the 1980's. The major turning point was the educational reform law (Law for The General Organization of The Educational System - LOGSE), which extended and unified compulsory schooling until age 16 and allowed private schools to receive public funding. In Spain, the large private sector of education has traditionally been defined by its religious character. Although primary education has essentially always been public and available throughout most of the country, secondary education has been the domain of private Catholic schools in urban areas and in towns with enough students to offer more advanced levels (Lerena, 1986).

The development of the Spanish educational system in the last 20 years has given rise to diversity in both the public and private sector, but more importantly it has integrated a large number of Catholic schools in the public system by subsidizing specific centers (these are the so called 'colegios concertados' or subsidized schools). Schools that receive public funding do so under certain conditions. Namely, students are admitted according to the guidelines established for official state schools and the schools must adopt the educational standards outlined in the LOGSE (CIDE, 1995). Although families who choose subsidized centers have free access to educational services, there continues to exist both a territorial division (due to the location of the centers) and a symbolic one (many subsidized schools offer private education at certain levels and extra-curricular activities that are not usually available in public schools).

Yruela (1999). The different characteristics of families whose children study in public schools were examined by means of a survey of 2400 families taken from a random sample of 98 centers (max. error margin +-2% for a 2 sigma confidence level). The study was comprised of 1200 families with children in public schools and 1200 families whose children were enrolled in subsidized centers. Parents were interviewed and the answers given by the parent who was most involved in the child's education of were selected. The results and technical features of the study can be found in IESA (1999).

The transfer of educational policy-making to the regional governments has meant that decision-making criteria differs among the regions of Spain. With regard to the choice of schools, the Andalusian government has implemented an administrative procedure which allows families to choose the school they want for their children, albeit with certain limitations (Junta de Andalucía, 1997). The first objective is to open centers according to the demands of the families. The second aim is to organize the system into school districts which assign centers and programs to the students who reside in a given district. To combine both aims, guidelines have been set for enrollment in a specific schools. When demand exceeds the number of available enrollments in a particular center, admittance depends on objective criteria.

Students are usually enrolled in the first school year at a given school where parents have to apply for admission. For subsequent school years those students that were already enrolled in the center are guaranteed admittance and if there are any remaining openings, more students may apply for enrollment. The criteria for admitting a student are, in this order: the school district where the family resides, residence in an area adjacent to the school district, other brothers or sisters enrolled at the same school and, lastly, family income. It should be stressed that all students are entitled to enroll in one of the centers in their district upon request. Additionally, parents may request that their children be admitted to a center in the school district that corresponds to their place of employment.

The procedure used by the regional administration is therefore based on three ideas: easy access to schools, family grouping and priority for low-income families. Nevertheless, it is important to note that although this procedure operates in both public and subsidized schools, the educational administration only guarantees enrollment in public centers due to the smaller number of existing subsidized schools. This policy leads to a greater demand for subsidized schools than public schools and competition is quite fierce among parents to enroll their children in subsidized schools. It also means that families who want their children to go to a particular school for which access is difficult or practically impossible prefer to use their place of employment rather than their residence and even go so far as to change their permanent address to the school district where the center they want is located.

In the context described above, the consequences of choice policy are observed from two angles: with reference to the opinions about both public and subsidized schools and to the social makeup of both types of center.

3 - CHOOSING AND EVALUATING SCHOOLS

Family behaviors regarding school choice

In southern Spain, as in the rest of the country (Fullat, 1993; Sánchez of Horcajo, 1995), the most common behavior is to accept the assigned school according to the geographical organization of the public school districts. Thus children are usually assigned to the school that is nearest the family home. With the exception of families living in towns with a single center whose choices are limited for obvious reasons, parents living in areas with a diversified educational offer are often unaware that they can choose a school and therefore accept the school assigned to them according to the district in which they live.

Thus, most families accept the school which has been assigned to them by area of residence, although 40% of the families choose a different center, 26.9% choose from among the schools located in the district where they live and 14.1% opt for a school in a different district (See Table 1). If we consider the two types of schools in Andalusia, two clearly different situations can be observed. While the parents in 'pure' public centers accept the assigned option, the great majority of the parents who opt for subsidized schools have chosen the center they want their children to study in, regardless if it is located far from or close to their home. The data also highlight two types of behavior concerning the social characteristics of the families. While parents who do not choose tend to be less-qualified and have completed less years of study, families who *do* choose include professionals, administrative and business personnel and executives with high-school and university degrees (see Table 2).

Table 1: Choice behavior by school type (Primary Education)			
Base for all cases: parents living in areas with more than one school	School type*		
Type of choice (% in columns) (school districts assigned according to residence)	Public	Subsidized	Total
Choice not possible	14.9	4.1	12.2
School assigned by school district	53.3	28.8	46.8
Choice of one school inside school district	23.0	37.4	26.9
Choice of one school outside school district	8.7	29.7	14.1
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0
Reasons for choosing school (% each item cited as one of the three most important reasons) (base: cases where a specific school is chosen)			
Proximity	78.0	49.1	61.9
School facilities	13.9	20.7	13.6
Quality of education	26.4	66.2	48.3
Prestige of school	12.9	31.6	23.4
Friends or relatives at the same school	26.8	26.3	26.4
Religious school	0.9	27.8	15.9
Discipline in the school	4.4	17.7	11.8
*Source: Data compiled from IESA, 1999 (Study 99-03) * All tables refer to the school where the child is currently enrolled.*			

% in rows	Type of choice				
Highest occupation of one parent	Choice not possible	School assigned by school district	Choice inside school district	Choice outside school district	Total
Executives and business professionals	5.9	34.3	35.6	24.2	100.0
Administrative and qualified workers in the service sector	14.2	43.1	27.1	15.6	100.0
Qualified workers in industry and agriculture	22.0	48.2	20.4	9.4	100.0
Non-qualified workers	24.9	54.8	16.1	4.2	100.0
Other	13.7	39.7	31.5	15.1	100.0
Highest degree of one parent					
Less than primary education	27.3	50.7	15.8	6.2	100.0
Primary education	20.1	49.3	21.7	9.0	100.0
Secondary education	12.8	45.1	25.2	16.9	100.0
Higher education	8.0	35.4	35.8	20.8	100.0

Table 2: Occupation and educational level of parents in different choice behaviors

The reasons for choosing a center also differ in the two types of schools. While proximity, compulsory choice and the quality of the education are given priority in the public sector, in the subsidized sector not only are quality and proximity valued, but also the prestige of the school, the existence of friends and relatives at the same school and religion. Hence two types of strategies are used by the different educational customers: one which is based on criteria of location and easy access, and another which uses a combination of pedagogical and symbolic factors which reflects the importance of the school's "image."

Additionally, access to a certain type of school determines the outcome of the students throughout the different stages of the educational system. Once a student has been admitted to a public or subsidized school, it is likely that he/she will stay in the same school or a similar one if it is not possible to continue to study in the first one. When changes do occur they are usually for reasons having nothing to do with education (i.e. mobility) and most of the students will remain in the same sector (IESA, 1999).

Satisfaction with schools

Like most of the services provided by the State (i.e. health, transport and social services), the opinions regarding educational services are generally positive. The context of social change occurring in Spain in the last 20 years, especially in less developed regions such as southern Spain, merit special attention. In contrast to the period prior to the political transition to democracy when access to free and universal public services was anything but easy, citizens nowadays positively evaluate the current situation of public services, including public education. Nevertheless, a marked difference can be observed before and after Spain was admitted as a member to the European Union. Thus, people who are over 50 usually have a more positive opinion as do those who live in less-developed areas or in areas where the quality of services is far from achieving the standards of more highly-developed regions of Europe. (Pérez-Yruela and Moyano-Estrada, 1999).

The case of education in southern Spain is especially significant for two reasons. Firstly, because the users are relatively young and their levels of satisfaction with almost all the aspects of the system are generally high. Nevertheless, differences arise from the introduction of choice policy in terms of evaluating the education that children receive and the opinion regarding the conditions of schools. As shown in table 3 more than 70% of the users have a very positive opinion of the educational environment in which their children study. However, people that prefer subsidized schools value all the aspects of their centers more highly, especially those having to do with school facilities, extra-curricular activities and the 'school climate', that is, the absence of internal conflict, students' social status and certain educational values, particularly concerning religion. Overall satisfaction with the schools is high: more than 80% of the families stated that they were quite or very satisfied.

Table 3: Opinion of school by school type			
	School type		
Opinions of school features (% who answered 'good' and 'very good')	Public	Subsidized	Total
Information provided to parents	79.5	85.6	83.0
School facilities and resources	71.4	83.3	76.5
Educational program	82.0	90.1	86.9
Training and work of teachers	87.2	91.1	893
General satisfaction with the school (% answering 'satisfied' and 'completely satisfied')	80.2	85.9	82.6

Table 4: School choice and satisfaction level		
Scale:: 1 'Completely dissatisfied' 5 'Completely satisfied'	**Satisfaction level**	
	Mean	Standard. Deviation
No choice possible	3.58	0.77
School assigned by school district	3.66	0.78
Choice of one school inside school district	3.74	0.71
Choice of one school outside school district	3.97	0.66
Total	3.79	0.73

Levels of satisfaction increase when parents are able to choose a specific school. In short, people that have chosen a school which is different from the one assigned to them are more satisfied with almost all the features the school has to offer. In contrast, people who have unsuccessfully requested a change are more dissatisfied with their situation (see Table 4), regardless of the type of school their children are enrolled in and independently of their children's educational achievements or the type of education they receive[2]. This seems to be a direct result of the parents' lack of

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[2] In the analysis of variance, level of satisfaction with the center (dependent variable) and type of center (independent variable) were included with no significant differences observed in the means of

information about what really happens inside the schools. A large majority of the families, for example, know little or nothing about the school facilities and rarely attend parent-teacher meetings or speak with their children's teachers. Satisfaction with the center, much like choice behavior, has more to do with external issues, namely the school's image of quality and prestige and the perception of the school that parents have gained through the children themselves.

It is clear, then, that choice and satisfaction are two closely inter-related factors: the larger the choice, the greater the satisfaction with the chosen school. When a school is perceived to be better, the parents are more active in choosing a given center. However, we should not overlook the fact that this process is also determined by a question of social differentiation and is directly related to public opinion and choice behaviors.

4 - THE SOCIAL SEGMENTATION OF THE EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM.

The possibility to choose implies differentiation in social terms. Traditionally, the clientele at public schools was determined by the location of the centers. Of course there have always existed schools which were considered low, middle or high class, but this difference was a reflection of the social makeup of the neighborhood where the school was located. Private schools, on the other hand, have traditionally attracted students from more upper-class, higher income families given that their services were not provided free of charge and most of them were located in middle-class urban areas.

The incorporation of a large number of formerly private schools into the public system has produced a greater social homogeneity among students. But at the same time, choice policy has opened the way for a wider social gap between public and subsidized schools and also within the public sector in certain areas. The customers of subsidized schools continue to be defined by their social milieu since the majority are located in cities and middle-class neighborhoods. It is, therefore, the economic status of the client, as the economic makeup of the neighborhood or district, what determines the image of the different sectors of the educational system.

Public opinion continues to highly value the traditional private sector due to the advantages that these centers offer in terms of prestige and resources, but especially because of the better social climate in the centers since the majority are run by the Catholic church, making them particularly attractive to families with deep-rooted

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either group. When type of choice is controlled, levels of satisfaction do not differ for public or subsidized schools. See Fernández-Esquinas and Pérez-Yruela (1999). Otherwise, the level of satisfaction is directly correlated to choice, family income and the available educational offer.

religious beliefs[3]. Moreover, the parents believe that there is closer supervision and stricter discipline in private schools. Nonetheless, they also consider that teachers in public schools are more qualified, have better working conditions and are hired according to merit. Thus, the decision to choose a subsidized school is based more upon the image of the school and its social makeup than on the quality of education.

Subsidized education is therefore chosen by families that can be defined by particular characteristics. People who choose a subsidized center usually have higher incomes and better educational backgrounds, meaning that a larger number of children in subsidized schools come from middle and upper-middle class families. Although this is mainly due to the geographical location of the centers[4], the mobility of certain families within the same social class is also an important factor. Table 5 shows how the majority of children enrolled in subsidized schools come from middle or upper-middle class families in terms of occupation and educational background of parents.

A similar process occurs in public centers, albeit to a lesser degree. Firstly, the choice of schools is more restricted in rural areas because there may be only one public school in the town. Secondly, when schools are located in urban areas with a diversified offer more families accept the school assigned to them by district, either because of their cultural or economic characteristics or because they are unable to compete for a place in a subsidized school if none of the family members works outside the home, meaning that they cannot broaden their choice to include the school district where they work.

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[3] According to public opinion, subsidized centers are better in terms of their facilities, installations, extra-curricular activities, the attention given to parents and the supervision and monitoring of students. Public schools are considered to be equal or better in that the teachers are more qualified, the quality of the education is better, academic achievements of the students are more satisfactory. Nevertheless, subsidized education is still identified more closely with middle and upper-middle class families (see IESA, 1999). Here public opinion refers to the opinion that users have of the system overall and not their opinion of the specific center where their children study.

[4] 60% of the directors and teachers at public schools describe the social environment of their centers as being "lower class" or "lower-middle class," compared to only 28% of those who work in subsidized schools. In contrast, 59% of the directors and teachers at subsidized centers describe them as middle class (IESA, 1999).

Table 5: Occupation and educational level of parents by school type			
% in columns	School type		
	Public	Subsidized	Total
Highest occupation of one parent			
Executives and business professionals	10.0	26.2	17.3
Administrative and qualified workers in the services industry	24.4	41.2	32.3
Qualified workers in industry and agriculture	30.9	15.9	23.1
Non-qualified workers	30.8	12.5	23.4
Other	3.5	4.3	3.9
Highest degree of one parent			
Less than primary education	30.8	10.5	22.0
Primary education	35.8	26.0	30.2
Secondary education	21.5	32.2	25.1
Higher education	11.9	31.3	19.7
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0

5 - AN ASSESSMENT OF THE SOCIAL CONSECUENCES OF CHOICE POLICY

Our findings clearly demonstrate that segregation is inherent to the educational system. Although this is certainly not a new situation, it is important to note that a larger gap exists between the public school system and the purely private school system. The process described above does not take into account upper class families since the majority of their children are enrolled in private schools paid for entirely by the families. Given that few totally private schools exist in the Spanish and Andalusian educational system, segregation occurs within the large middle class sector and the underprivileged classes. Although the previous system was certainly far from egalitarian, the process of social homogenization undertaken during the construction of the welfare state may be hindered and bring about a reproduction of the previous system.

Segregation is defined, as it has always been, by class and status differences although it is necessary to make clarify certain aspects in the system. On the one hand, segregation occurs in terms of the social relations among students since students of the same social origin tend to come together in the classroom. On the other hand, segregation exists in social images terms since higher value is placed on the degrees awarded in certain sectors of the system, namely in subsidized schools[5]. But do all these factors translate into a segregation in terms of educational results? The results of our survey would seem to suggest that while this is not so at the primary level, it is true in compulsory secondary education. Table 6 shows that children's achievements

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[5] Although the methodology used in this study does not permit an examination of the ethnic or geographical origin of the students, cultural segregation may also occur as a result of the current migration by people from less developed countries.

are similar in primary education but that a larger number of secondary students in public centers have difficulties with their studies or have repeated a course[6].

Table 6: School achievements according to parents, by school type and by educational level carried out by children

% in columns	School type			
(shaded areas indicate educational level being carried out)	Public		Subsidized	
Primary Education	Primary Educ.	ESO	Primary Educ.	ESO
Satisfactory progress	75.4	82.0	80.0	80.0
Progress with some difficulties	14.4	11.7	13.1	12.1
Repeating the current year or has repeated in the past	2.5	5.7	1.5	7.9
Too soon for evaluation	7.7	-	5.3	-
ESO **(Compulsory Secondary Education)**				
Satisfactory progress		42.3		60.7
Progress with some difficulties		32.1		31.5
Repeating the current year or has repeated in the past		10.8		7.5
Too soon for evaluation		8.4		-
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Public opinion regarding satisfaction with the centers sheds some light on this version of segregation. As shown in Table 7, when parents are asked their opinion about the possibility to choose, the majority state that they prefer a system with public and subsidized schools which allows them to choose, but this implicitly means that they support a segmented system. This opinion, then, can be interpreted as reflecting their acceptance of the inequalities of the system.

Table 7: Opinions about public educational offer by school type

% in columns	School type		
Educational offer preferred:	Public	Subsidized	Total
Unified system of public schools only	36.9	16.8	27.0
System admitting choice of public or subsidized schools	57.2	80.0	68.4
Don't know	5.4	2.6	4.0
No answer	0.6	0.6	0.6
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0

6 - CONCLUSIONS

The arguments outlined above bring the authorities face to face with the citizens over an important dilemma: How can we reconcile plurality with equality? That is, how can we offer the freedom to choose without creating a system which is even more

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[6] In Andalusia, primary and *bachillerato* (the last two years of secondary education) are not subsidized by the public administration in private schools. Hence, families must pay for the cost of schooling.

segregated? Unquestionably, an educational system that does not offer a wide range of options and leaves the fair distribution of educational services (including enrollment in schools) in the hands of public management cannot be justified.

The possible choices, like a great part of those that concern the organization of national educational systems, are ideological in nature. They respond, however, to two opposed visions regarding education in particular and the organizational criteria regarding society in general. The first advocates a self-regulating system in which the families are free to decide how and where to educate their children. It is marked by a diversity of options that make plurality possible and create offers according to user demand. In this option the state acts as a "safety net" to regulate the system and ensure that minimum educational standards are met in the public schools. The second option sustains that the public school system must guarantee equality and uniformity by establishing criteria to compete with private schools on an equal standing, although it may act independently and be organized in a context different from private market-oriented educational sector. This model foresees initiatives to guarantee equality that is compatible with plurality, even though its restricted by the available resources. In this type of system, extra-curricular activities or other educational options are offered and criteria for positive discrimination are established that favor, among other things, the geographical mobility of lower-income families between school districts.

The measures needed to resolve this dilemma can hardly be based upon decisions of a technical nature. Both options present advantages and disadvantages and both are within the sphere of the ideological debate that confronts state and market-oriented visions of society. While this may not be completely true regarding the way in which centers are run or managed, it is certainly so in terms of the social consequences of a unified public school system versus a diversified offer in both the public and private sector. Perhaps the only issue which is not subject to political or ideological debate, at least within the European Union, is the role the public administration plays in providing universal and minimal educational resources.

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