

Choice: 'why is the word so inflammatory in education circles?'

By Allan Peachey

Published on *Breaking Views* on 25 July, 2010

Why is the word “choice” so inflammatory in education circles? Why are so many on the left side of the debate over school quality so affronted by suggestions that parents should have some sort of choice about where they send their children to school? Why do they see choice as some sort of violation of their egalitarian view of schooling?



There is crazy logic to those on the left who argue against choice. This is well illustrated by the behaviour of Tony Blair's Deputy Prime Minister, John Prescott, who fought Blair's efforts, in the closing days of his prime ministership, to reform English schooling by expanding choice. This is what Preston said, "If you set up a school and it becomes a good school, the great danger is that everyone wants to go there". Read that quotation again and ask yourself the question, "danger to whom?" It staggers me to listen to left wing Members of Parliament and self-styled educationalists criticise parents for trying to get their children into good schools as if this

was some type of sin delivered upon the better off at the expense of the less well off. I find myself frequently retorting that whether as a teacher, a school principal or now as an electorate MP I have seen little distinction between parents of all backgrounds in terms of wanting a good education for their children. It staggers me how poorly the present New Zealand Labour Party understands the aspirations of their traditional backbone supporters, especially when it comes to their children. I have heard previous ministers of education argue that children should attend their nearest school, be it good or bad.

The fact that people want to send their children to good schools should never be an argument for not creating more good schools. And yet so often it is.

Choice only exists in schooling when parents have a choice between at least two good schools. A choice between a good school and a bad school is no choice at all. A choice between a good school and another good school is a genuine choice.

And the quickest way to increase choice for all is not using mechanisms like vouchers or scholarships to independent schools. The trouble with these mechanisms is that they are rationed; they touch far too small a number of youngsters.

***... clos[e] bad schools that
have lost parents' confidence,
and re-open ... new schools
which reflect the values
and ambition of their
communities. Then you get
genuine choice.***

One may argue that this is better than nothing, but I would argue that better than nothing is just not good enough. Now, provide vouchers to every school age youngster in New Zealand and my view would be different.

Except for one thing; we do not yet have enough good schools for all youngsters to have the choice of going to one.

I read a case study in an old "Times Education Supplement" written by a gentleman called Andrew Rigby, Head of Skegness Grammar School in Lincolnshire, one of about only two grammar schools that survived the efforts of successive British Governments attempts to abolish them. The case study is instructive.

Rigby argued that parents were not desperate to send their children to a grammar school if they were not equipped to cope with the academic education that was on offer. He went on; "what they seek is the ethos, traditional discipline, good manners and courtesy offered by grammar schools". He said that where the alternative school, a comprehensive "is well disciplined, safe, its pupils smart in appearance, where louts are tackled and not allowed to rule the roost, parents are not only reassured but appreciate that the provision of a combined academic and vocational pathway is actually better for a less able pupil".

I would express Rigby's last few words in a broader context but otherwise totally agree with what he is saying.

The situation in Skegness was that there was a very successful grammar school and a comprehensive school, which should have given the parents a choice between two different but good schools. That choice did not exist because the comprehensive school was not performing. To quote Rigby again "many parents did their utmost to make sure their

children got a grammar school place – not through any desire to inflict a level of work that was beyond them, but to avoid the worst".

What happened? The comprehensive school was re-opened as a school with a clear traditional ethos, and a balanced

academic and vocational curriculum. This is Rigby's telling comment; "at either school, they [parents] will know their child will be able to work hard, achieve their full potential and be challenged or enthused with a curriculum appropriate to their needs and capabilities".

Now, that is a real choice.

That is why I worry about vouchers and scholarships. They extend choice to too few families unless they apply to everyone. To me vouchers as they work internationally amount to no more than tinkering around the edges of the real problem. They are a soft alternative, a token affirmation of choice, which excuse us from dealing with the real problem; closing bad schools that have lost parents' confidence, and re-opening new schools which reflect the values and ambition of their communities. Then you get genuine choice.

This article does not necessarily reflect the views of the Education Forum

Allan Peachey is the National MP for Tamaki and the chairperson of the Education and Science Committee.

Education Forum

P.O. Box 10 539

The Terrace

Wellington, New Zealand

Telephone: +64 21 607 636

Fax: +64 4 471 1304

Email: info@educationforum.org.nz

Web: www.educationforum.org.nz