

PART IV THIRD YEAR OPTIONS

12 The Process Of Option Choice

In the autumn of 1983 the study children moved into their third year of schooling. By this time two schools in area 1 had withdrawn from the study and one school in area 4 had amalgamated with another and drawn in some pupils not previously studied, leaving 18 schools out of the original 20. Much previous research had indicated that the third year of secondary schooling, when choices of subjects to be studied in years four and five and allocation to examination groups made, was a crucial year for all pupils.¹ The option allocation process had become a critical point in the school career of pupils, as decisions made in this third year had clear implications for future careers and life-styles. There was also some evidence that ethnic minority parents felt considerable anxiety about option choice processes, particularly the examination levels to which their children were allocated in their third year.² It was therefore decided to focus in the third year of the study on the option choice process.

Two of the research team conducted a project during 1983-4 which followed the study children in the eighteen schools in order to examine the processes by which their curriculum in their final two years of schooling was decided. The more specific objectives were to examine

- the core subjects and stated options selected for all of the study children in the 18 schools, and the levels of the courses to be taken for all subjects, with analysis in terms of previous attainment;
- the procedures by which the pupils actually 'chose' their options, the extent of guidance and advice they received and the amount of parental involvement in the process;
- the school policies, resources and organisation, varying between schools, that affect option choices.

Methods

The difficulties encountered in carrying out this research project have been described in Chapter 4. Problems in gaining the cooperation of the schools continued in this third year of the project. As at earlier stages, the amount of work involved in collecting the data was greater than expected.

During the school year September 1983 to July 1984 teachers involved in the option choice processes were interviewed, option choice booklets and other literature was collected, and 2,273 pupils filled out an 'option choice questionnaire' in class time a few days after they had finalised their subject choices for years four and five. The timing varied

between the schools, the process being completed in some schools by early April, and in one school not until the end of July. The data from the option choice questionnaires had to be merged with data collected at earlier stages of the project about the same children. This inevitably leads to some attrition of the sample. Among those who completed the questionnaire, gender was established for 1,839 pupils, and ethnic origin for 1,678.

To gain further information about the advice and guidance offered by teachers at option choice time, the researchers observed fifty interviews between teachers, pupils and parents at two of the schools.

The questionnaire asked the pupils to record the core subjects they 'had to' study in years four and five, the option choices they had made after guidance, the level to which they would study subjects, their views on the whole option choice process and their thoughts on the job or career they would like to pursue. In 1983-4 preparations for the GCSE examination had not begun in the schools and none were yet involved in the technical and vocational educational initiatives (TVEI) developing around the country.

It would have been more satisfactory to obtain information about the subjects and levels finally decided from the schools rather than the pupils. In principle, this could have been done by asking schools at the end of the year to provide lists of the subject choices and levels to which each subject would be studied, for all pupils. However the majority of schools (13 out of 18) signified that they were not willing to do this and preferred the researchers to ask the pupils soon after their option choices had been finalised. In the event five schools did provide school lists of subject choices at the end of the year and this provided a check on the information obtained from pupils. This check showed that pupils perceptions of their choices *did* tally with the school records at the end of the third year. However it is likely that there was a certain amount of movement of pupils between subjects and exam level in the fourth and even in the fifth year. A linked study which followed pupils in schools 34 and 35 through years four and five showed a third of pupils changing at least one option subject. For example, several girls were asked to give up their places in metalwork to boys!³

Background to option choice

During the past twenty-five years, most comprehensive schools have adopted a broad foundation curriculum for pupils in their first three years of secondary schooling, apart from pupils designated as less able, having special needs or having English as a second language. The third year became a transition year: some schools offered subject choices to some pupils, notably of modern languages, but all schools required all pupils to participate in a process of taking advice and guidance and 'choosing' the curriculum and levels of study for years four and five. From the 1970s, particularly after the school leaving age was raised to 16 in 1973, a large number of lower-level practical, creative and semi-vocational courses were developed in comprehensive schools and pupils were invited to 'choose' from a wide variety of subjects and courses. Studies of option choice have led to the unsurprising conclusion that the system could lead to considerable educational differences in the curriculum for pupils aged 14-16. More specifically, marked differences have been found in the subjects studied and exams entered according to social class, gender and ability level. It has been shown that many pupils do not study a balanced curriculum; that there are wide differences between the curricula studied by pupils in different schools and indeed between pupils in the same schools, and that curriculum choices made by the less able and by girls are likely to be fairly restricted. An HMI survey⁴ also found considerable disparities between schools in the proportion of time allocated to optional

subjects, which could range from 30 per cent to 70 per cent. HMI and DES have, from the late 1970s consistently held the view that a larger compulsory core element in the fourth and fifth years and a reduction in options would provide more 'breadth, balance and coherence'⁵ in the secondary school curriculum.

The year 1983-4 was particularly important for those concerned with the secondary school curriculum. The Secretary of State, in an address to the North of England conference in January 1984, proposed that the curriculum should accord more with the four principles of breadth, relevance, differentiation by ability and balance. A discussion paper on the content and organisation of the curriculum from the age of 5 to 16 was issued by DES in September 1984, and a command paper *Better Schools* was published in March 1985. This paper noted a lack of clarity about priorities in the curriculum that was apparent at option choice time when 'a difficult balance has to be struck between accommodating pupils' special interests and aptitudes and retaining breadth and balance so that no pupils can drop subjects ... whose continued study may be an essential foundation for subsequent learning, training or work' (p23). The balanced curriculum suggested in *Better Schools* was English, maths, a science, an humanity, an art, a practical or technical subject, PE or games, religious education, and a foreign language for most pupils.

This study was thus undertaken during a period when important changes were being suggested or were about to be made in the school curriculum and examinations. The study examined how a selection of schools, just before these changes, managed the procedures by which pupils choose, or more accurately, are guided into a curriculum for their fourth and fifth year, and what sorts of curriculum policies the schools followed. The results show that the schools, while attempting to respond to initiatives and suggestions from DES, LEAs, employers and parents, were subject to contradictory pressures. In particular the notion of a broad, balanced curriculum, advocated by DES, was felt to contradict specific subject requirements of jobs, and the results show that very few pupils would experience the balanced curriculum suggested in *Better Schools*.

Ethnic minorities and option choices

There is a large body of research and writing to show that gender differences in subject choice made at 13+ do disadvantage girls in their subsequent careers,⁶ and an equally large literature suggesting that option choice procedures also disadvantage pupils of manual working-class origin.⁷ Pupils designated as less able, as speaking English as a second language, or as having behaviour problems are also allowed less choice at option time.

By contrast, research examining the effects of option choice processes on ethnic minority pupils is minimal. Minority communities, particularly Afro-Caribbean parents, have consistently expressed concern that their children have been wrongly placed in less academic subjects and low level examinations groups, and that pupils were 'unfairly channelled into CSE rather than O level groups'⁸ Other studies of Afro-Caribbean parental opinion have found parents reiterating this concern. One study claimed that parents in Tottenham moved their children to the all-black John Loughborough School to take advantage of a 'GCE climate'.⁹ A report on educational standards in Brent, compiled at the request of Brent black parents association for educational advance concluded that 'dissatisfaction with the education system and pupil progress, and with disciplinary difficulties, can frequently be traced back to the period of options and subsequent disappointment experienced at that time'.¹⁰ A study of the history of black supplementary schooling in Britain noted that a major reason for parental support of the schools was to help able pupils acquire O levels.¹¹ In 1980 it was recorded that at the Gresham Centre

School, Brixton, pupils not entered for O levels by their mainstream schools, were entered by their supplementary school via the local FE College.¹²

Previous research has been limited and carried out on a small scale, but it suggests that minority parents may have some justification for their concern. Cecile Wright claimed from her research in two schools that Afro-Caribbean pupils whose third year school marks would warrant placement in O level classes were placed in CSE groups.¹³ Hussain and Samarasinghe in a study of Asian girls at three schools found that only one girl in their sample had the right combination of O levels to give unrestricted access to higher education, and over 80 per cent of the Moslem girls in their study were not entered for any exams in English or maths.¹⁴ A linked ethnographic study was carried out from 1983 onwards in school 45 within the present sample. It documented the difficulties West Indian pupils faced in attempting to succeed academically and noted particular problems at option choice time.¹⁵

The schools and their curricula

The 18 schools offered a wide subject choice to pupils in 1983-4. Almost a hundred subjects or courses appeared on the option choice forms handed out to pupils, although a number of these had similar content under different titles. Ninety option choices and compulsory 'core' subjects appeared on the forms the pupils finally chose from. These are listed in Table 12.1, which also indicates which subjects were offered at particular schools. Among the subjects which did not 'run' were electronics, geology, ceramics, painting and decorating, and traffic education. Approximately 58 of the courses offered were non-academic in the traditional sense. They could be labelled as technical, practical, creative, commercial, physical or remedial, and three of the remaining subjects were recently offered community languages (Bengali, Punjabi, Urdu). Some 28 subjects could be described as academic: in the table, these are described as English, maths, sciences, humanities, social sciences, and European languages. French was offered at all the schools, German at seven, Spanish at five and Italian and Latin at one school each. A large number of subjects were described as recent arrivals on the curriculum, including computer studies, electronics, environmental sciences, science at work, economics, sociology, Islamic studies, and understanding industrial society. A number of the 'non-academic' courses had been devised by schools as mode III CSE examination courses: for example, jewellery-making, homecraft and environmental sciences.

All the schools required pupils to study a 'common core' of subjects and all included maths and English in their core, although the level to which pupils study these subjects varies from O level to remedial work. Sixteen of the schools included PE or games as compulsory. School 15 had made a policy decision not to compel its (predominantly Asian) girls to take PE, and school 33 had made a policy decision to exclude compulsory PE.

All schools offered some form of careers guidance within the compulsory core, nine as careers lessons, the others within some form of social education. For example, schools 23 and 25 included careers under social education, school 41 under a lifeskills course, school 42 under compulsory activities and schools 43 and 45 under compulsory guidance. At school 24 a general studies course was compulsory. Although, as one school pointed out, 'RE is compulsory in schools', only seven schools in fact had compulsory religious education, although school 15 had a general course on 'issues and perspectives in religion and life', and school 33 included moral education in careers guidance. Area 4 schools did not include religious education in a compulsory core and school 45 resolutely excluded

religion from the curriculum. However, religious education was offered as a humanities option, to either O or CSE level in nine schools. School 32 offered a 'choice' of compulsory social studies education or Spanish, but Spanish could only be chosen by those who had studied the language in year three.

The notion of a compulsory option subject to be selected from a group of subjects, was common to all schools, notably in the sciences and humanities. All schools reported that they required all pupils to study a science, and indeed all schools offered courses in the three major sciences – physics, chemistry and biology – three schools offering human biology. Twelve schools also offered sciences described as combined, integrated or general, and six offered modular, applied, environmental or science at work. Sixteen schools specified that a humanity had to be studied but only six schools reported a (European) language as a compulsory option. Seven schools specified that art or a creative subject be studied, five specified a practical subject and five either a creative or practical subject. School 45 had recently introduced a compulsory 'Design' option.

Including the compulsory options, some eighty subjects were available to be combined as option choices to make up a curriculum for each of the pupils in the eighteen schools. The median number of option choices was five; three Area 3 schools specified six option choices and two Area 4 schools asked for four choices. School 35 had taken a policy decision to require only three option choices, the rest of the curriculum being compulsory; however 'choice' was still made between for example, physics and general science. Physical education could be taken as both a compulsory activity and an option choice leading to an examination in three schools. School 23 offered a CSE in dance. Most schools required pupils to pick 'reserve' subjects in case they could not be accommodated in their first choices. Of all the option courses on offer, only six were common to all schools and these were all traditionally 'academic': physics, chemistry, biology, French, history and geography. Home economics and needlework were common to all but the two boys schools, and graphical communications and some form of craft, design and technology common to all but the two girls schools. The remaining courses varied in their degree of commonality, but the very wide range of option choices available did suggest that some pupils moving schools might find difficulties in terms of curricular continuity.

Several schools offered as an option a linked course with a local College of Further Education. Three schools offered a linked engineering course and motor vehicle engineering course. One school offered a typing course linked to a local College course.

Overall the majority of courses or subjects offered as option choices in the schools were practical, vocational and creative rather than traditionally academic.

Despite the large number of subjects available, option 'choice' was in reality quite heavily circumscribed. School organisation during the first three years acted as a constraint on both choice and the level to which subjects could later be studied at (see Table 12.2). Thirteen of the schools streamed, banded or 'setted' pupils for some subjects in the first three years and those in lower streams, bands, sets, remedial or special needs groups would be less likely to be placed in higher level academic exam groups later.

The schools which come closest to complete mixed ability teaching in the first three years, and which therefore could in principle offer all pupils a 'choice' unrestricted by having studied a particular subject to a particular level, were schools 12, 15, 34, 35 and 45. School 33 and all area 2 schools were those which streamed, setted or banded pupils most thoroughly during the first three years, a curriculum organisation which may in principle restrict choice. Pupil choice of a European language in year four was however most obviously restricted by schools which began a language for a minority of selected pupils

in the third year. This occurred in school 12 and 15 in German; all area 2 schools had setting in all languages in year two, school 32 offered Spanish to 'higher ability' pupils in year two, and 33 offered Latin only to those in the top stream.

Levels of study

All the schools specified, during the option choice and guidance process, that subjects could be studied to a particular level, for a particular examination, although some schools made this clearer than others. Area 2 schools, and school 31 and 33 in particular, made it clear which courses would be studied to O level. However although much of the written material given to pupils indicated that many subjects could be studied to O level, the majority of schools apart from those in area 2, and schools 31, 32 and 33, began a number of fourth year courses as O level and CSE combined, selected small groups of pupils to take O level examinations during the fourth year, or double-entered pupils to take both examinations. Similarly only a few schools specified that some subjects would be non-examinable, the preferred policy being to describe courses as CSE/non-exam and select those who would take a CSE exam during the fourth year. School 41 provides an example of these policies.

We shall continue to offer both GCE and CSE examinations in most subjects. Remember that a grade I obtained in CSE is equal to a pass at GCE O level. The external examinations were designed for the top 60% of all pupils but we believe most of our pupils should have a chance to study for them. However, we recognise that the standard of CSE grade 4 is the expected result for the average pupils - but again we believe that hard work and parental co-operation can improve on this. (Extracted from the option booklet issued by school 41.)

The examinations offered by the schools were as follows:

GCE	General Certificate of Education. (Associated Examining Board, Joint Matriculation Board, Cambridge Board.)
CSE	Certificate of Secondary Education. Modes I, II and II.
RSA	Royal Society of Arts.
Pitman	Examination Board.
16+	Joint Examination (set up by six examination boards to provide a single exam system. Candidates awarded both a GCE and a CSE grade on the basis of performance).
C and G	City and Guilds examinations.
NAMCW	National Association of Maternal and Child Welfare examination.
	Cambridge Certificate of proficiency in English as a second language.
LCM	Lancashire Certificate in Mathematics.

All the schools offered special treatment to pupils designated as remedial, less able, having special needs, or being ESL speakers and all offered a modified option system for those who had been in special classes or groups in year one to three. The following are examples.

Schools 12 and 14 offered special options in 'basic skills and communications' for the less able, and offered a modified option system for those who had been in remedial classes in years 1-3. At school 15 a Special Needs Department covered both remedial and ESL pupils. At school 21, according to the head, 'remedial pupils are guided more thoroughly and encouraged to do non-examination in every option package'. At this school, a remedial

course from the age of 13 might include maths, English, R.E., social education, life skills, history or geography, art or dance, and outdoor pursuits. School 22, and thirteen other schools, reported that they offer special guidance for less able pupils. For example, at school 22 the remedial teacher attended the pupil's guidance interview if the parents did not attend. School 23 steered low ability pupils into integrated or practical subjects: 'We do not encourage them to do hard subjects like physics or chemistry or any languages' (head).

Twelve schools noted that less able pupils could drop an option or do fewer courses; at school 24, extra English took the place of a dropped option. The head of school 25 specified actual subjects which were considered more suitable for the less able. These included child care, home economics, science at work, design and craft, social studies, typing, and PE. At school 41, pupils in lower bands were encouraged to take non-exam options, particularly science, and did not study a foreign language, and in 43 the less able were guided towards a more restricted choice of options, particularly the lower-level sciences. The head remarked that 'no lower ability child will choose physics once he or she has been through the guidance process'.

All but four schools offered some form of special help for ESL speakers.

At five schools ESL speakers were encouraged to take special option courses leading to the Cambridge Certificate of language proficiency, or a CSE Certificate. ESL speakers were more likely to be regarded as having learning difficulties which might affect their general performance. 'Because of the type of Asian child this school takes, apportioning their learning difficulties between ESL and remedial is difficult' (school 31, head of year).

Area 2 schools guided their ESL speakers towards specific options, and schools 32 and 33 had few ESL speakers, and they 'would be placed with the remedial group'. At school 34 'remedial' ESL pupils were placed with the remedial group and others could choose to take CSE in English as a second language although the head reported 'I don't encourage this. An employer will take a lad with a real English CSE, rather than one which looks as if the lad can't speak English'.

The curriculum for girls

The co-educational schools were all asked whether they had specific curriculum policies to encourage girls to move out of 'traditional' female subject areas and choose scientific, technical and practical subjects. Although most of the schools had given some thought to the issue, the general consensus was that gender divisions were so strongly entrenched in the school curriculum that little change was possible. Only four schools (14, 32, 33, 35) appeared to make positive efforts to encourage girls away from traditional domestic and commercial subjects. School 14 held seminars for third year girls to discuss careers, and used Kelly's work on 'girls in science and technology'.¹⁶ School 32 separated pupils by gender for craft subjects in years one and two, but had a supposedly free choice in the third year, and offered a non-exam option of 'cooking for boys' in year four. School 33 encouraged boys to take home economics, and urged girls to take Latin rather than home economics. The head teacher of school 35 also had a policy of encouraging girls to have 'equal opportunities for choice of traditional boys subjects' but was disappointed to find that 'girls opt for needlework and boys metalwork'.

Even in schools where the stated policy was to encourage girls to choose freely, the consensus was that in theory the choice was open, but in practice girls and boys made traditional gender-based subject choices. The schools in Area 2 did not have specific policies to encourage girls to take non-traditional subjects. School 21 reported that the

child care option 'usually included a few boys', but at school 22 a special child care option was organised for remedial girls. School 23 had no specific policy on girls option choices, though the option booklets do describe typing as a 'useful subject for boys and girls'. At school 24 'girls are advised against doing technical subjects if they have not previously studied them'. School 25 noted that there was no single sex teaching in the school, but some subjects were biased towards girls: child care, biology, home economics, typing and office practice were offered as examples. Technology, physics and craft design and technology were regarded as 'boys' subjects by staff and pupils.

School 31 divided the sexes for technical subjects and PE during the first three years, and felt that because of the large number of Asian girls in the school it was necessary to make concessions to some single-sex teaching. The girls in school 43 had followed a rotational craft course with the boys in years one and two, but by year three were taking largely traditional girls subjects. The head noted that it was 'hard to change attitudes – at parents' evenings it's the girls who take the tea round'. School 44 tried to encourage girls to choose options freely but 'in practice they will do dress and nutrition and the boys will do metalwork and TD [technical drawing]' (Senior Tutor). School 45 had no particular policy but noted that child care and typing were always over-subscribed by girls.

The balanced curriculum

It has been noted that of the focus of attention on the secondary school curriculum over the past ten years has been largely on the provision of a broad balanced curriculum particularly in the fourth and fifth years of secondary schooling. There has been much debate as to what constitutes a balanced curriculum and how it can be achieved. The problematic nature of defining and providing a balanced curriculum was well illustrated by the schools in this study, which were aware of the contradiction and ambiguities inherent in the notion. Only four schools actually reported that they did not consider a balanced curriculum to be an over-riding consideration at option time; the other fourteen all reported that balance was a consideration. On closer inspection however, the notion of balance turns out to be highly qualified.

In particular a balanced curriculum was not thought necessary for the less able. School 31 aimed for a 'balanced and relevant curriculum' and the option booklet urged pupils 'to study a group of subjects which make for unity and balance' but the head of year noted that the less able did not have a balanced choice. At School 22 a letter from the head stressed that 'students should receive a properly balanced education' defined as including a science, a humanity and a creative subject, but the less able were less likely to take the same balance of subjects. The head also noted that 'disruptive pupils may not be allowed to do any science', and at school 25 balance was stressed as 'covering a broad range of skills development' and pupils urged to 'make sure you can show any employer you have a wide range of interests and skills'. Only the more able were encouraged to take three sciences and two practical subjects were not encouraged. This school recognised the contradiction that for particular kinds of higher education or employment a balanced curriculum might be a disadvantage rather than an advantage. School 34 stressed balance to the point of suggesting that pupils should not do 'what they want'; the option booklet noted that 'you will be lucky if the option pattern is such that you can choose your favourite subjects and even if you could the timetable you arrive at could be unbalanced and restricting of the job you want to do'. However, at school 35 a reduced option choice system (three subjects only) had been devised by the head with balance in mind: 'a science, a humanity and social education help to balance the curriculum'. Pupils were discouraged

from taking three sciences and a language, which created some problems for south Asian pupils particularly who wished to do this. It was noticeable that a balanced curriculum for the more able pupils could consist almost entirely of say, science and technical subjects while a curriculum for the less able could be overweighted to practical, craft or creative subjects.

How the decision is made

The pupils were introduced during the first or second term of the third year to the idea that they would be expected to participate in a process of 'choosing' a part of their curriculum for the fourth and fifth year, that this process would involve them in making decisions, and that the curriculum they chose could influence their future post-school career. The schools, by and large, wished to convey an image of a free choice of the subjects that were right for a particular pupil; they employed a variety of persuasive techniques to this end. In reality, as the staff knew very well, and pupils and parents partly understood, there were a variety of constraints on choice. One of the functions of the guidance process (which could last several months from the introduction of the idea of options to the pupils' completion of final option forms) was to inform pupils of possible constraints. The major constraint was the perceived ability of the pupil; and in some cases, the pupil's behaviour was an additional factor. These constraints were a restriction both on entry to a particular subject and on the level at which it would be studied. The majority of schools tested pupils, in year three, on standardised tests or subject examinations or both, and they collected information on previous performance and behaviour. This information was collated by or available to the staff who 'guide' the pupils. The staff used their own discretion in deciding how much of this information to reveal to pupils and parents. Other constraints on choice were school resources, particularly staff available to teach particular subjects, equipment, and organisational constraints such as timetabling. Staff were very much aware of the discrepancy between presenting the notion of free choice to pupils and then having to talk them out of choosing particular options or levels of study. Some schools were more open than others about how far the schools perceptions of a pupil's ability or behaviour influences placement in particular options. The option staff are very important 'gate-keepers' at this point in the pupil's school career. If pupils are excluded from entry to a subject or from studying it at a given level, they can never have experience of it, or achieve examination success in it at a that level. This can have far-reaching consequences for career choice, for post-school training and for opportunities in further and higher education.

One head summed up what he saw as the aim of the guidance process as follows: 'Our idea is to let them feel they're choosing, when really they have no choice, we get our way in the end, but its best for them too – some of them wouldn't survive on the courses they've chosen'.

The timing of the choice processes varied between schools. The minimum period, from the time the idea of choice was introduced to pupils to completion of the option form, was three months; the maximum was nine months. Two schools, 33 and 43, said that after the final choice by pupils they did not make adjustments and move pupils in and out of subject groups; four schools 21, 22, 24, 25, said they did this as a matter of course. The other schools all reported that they made 'some adjustments, if necessary' and two schools said these could go on into the fourth year.

A good deal of staff time and effort was taken up by the guidance process by which pupils were helped to choose their subjects. In all the schools the head of house or year, the form teacher or tutor and subject heads or teachers were involved in the option process.

Careers staff were involved at ten schools, the head teacher took a personal interest in five schools and the deputy head in seven.

In every case but one, schools reported that subject staff had 'the final say' in choice of subject and level of study. By 1984, schools had begun to use computers to record option choices. Nine schools did a pilot survey to check on possible choices and, by using the computer, were able to decide quickly whether there would be sufficient staff and resources to accommodate choices, or whether some pupils would have to be guided away from particular subjects.

Other constraints that the schools most often mentioned as limits on their ability to offer particular option subjects, or on the number of pupils that could be taught particular courses, are set out below.

- 12 equipment, particularly computers
- 14 staff shortages in physics/chemistry/ESL
- 15 timetabling problems
- 21 staff shortages, particularly CDT
- 22 equipment - particularly typewriters, timetable problems
- 23 staff problems, particularly in craft
- 24 general resource problems
- 25 staff shortages, particularly in technology
- 31 staff problems, timetable problems
- 32 staff shortages, particularly in science teaching
- 33 equipment - particularly computers
- 34 equipment - particularly typewriters
- 35 staff problems
- 41 staff shortages, in science/needlework/technical areas
- 42 staff shortages in technology/chemistry
- 43 timetabling problems, staff shortages in modern languages
- 44 general timetable and staff problems
- 45 staff shortages in biology/CDT and equipment - typewriters

The complexity of the process

Some examples of the length and complexity of the option choice process in particular schools are given below.

At *school 12* (a boys' school with 60 per cent minority pupils) option choice procedures began in January. In the third year teaching was in mixed ability groups, and no formal examinations or testing took place. A broadsheet sent to staff in all subject areas required teachers to rate pupils on the criteria of attainment, behaviour and effort and suggest whether they were suitable for O levels.

Reports went out to parents in February, and option choice booklets were prepared and given to pupils at the end of February. Shortly afterwards, pupils had a talk on options by the head of house; form tutors and subject teachers held discussions with individual pupils, and joint discussions took place between the teacher, pupil and parents, with 60 per cent attendance by parents. A parents' evening was held in March to explain option choice to parents. A worksheet on 'Thinking About Careers' and a 'Decision-Making Chart' to help pupils decide the subjects they 'like – are good at – are recommended – need for career' were included in the option booklet.

The head of house was in overall charge, with form teachers, tutors and subject teachers giving advice. One of the reasons subject teachers talk to pupils is to introduce those 'new' subjects which pupils will not have met in their curriculum up to then.

At *school 14* (a mixed inner-city 11-18 comprehensive with 40 per cent ethnic minority pupils) option choice procedures were initiated in the Autumn term. A programme designed to help pupils make decisions, think about their preferences, capabilities and futures began in September. At that time, all form tutors received a package on options prepared by the MSC, in conjunction with BBC Radio 1 (who publicise options and careers via a disc jockey). A BBC TV video 'It's Your Choice' was shown to all pupils, active tutorial work on choice and futures was undertaken, and an Actors' Workshop visited the school to act-out 'decision-making'.

In October the school counsellor tested all third year pupils on a battery of differential aptitude tests; the results were made up into pupil profiles and the counsellor added a recommendation as to suitability for particular options. A pilot option survey was carried out in January, an option choice booklet handed out in February and a seminar for girls on science and technology was held. In March a parents evening was held, with parents of English as a second language speaking pupils invited to a separate evening with interpreters. By April choices had been made, but at this school some re-arrangements to reduce over-subscribed options went on during the Summer term and not all pupils got their first choices. Thus there was some discrepancy between the work that encouraged pupils to make their own choices, and subsequent juggling of pupil decisions in response to organisational constraints. At this school the head of third year organised a team of eleven staff to give advice to pupils.

At *school 24* (an 11-18 mixed comprehensive school with 53 per cent minority pupils) a parents evening and a careers convention were held in the Autumn term. In March pupils were examined and staff compiled recommendations of levels of study for each child. An HMI report on this school in 1983 had suggested that there was 'a disproportionately high number of O level entries in relation to the abilities of the pupils' (which the school felt was in response to parental pressure). An open evening for parents was held, at which careers advisory staff were present, and early in April option booklets and reports on pupils went out to parents. In May, pupils were seen individually by the head and 'helped to shape realistic options, being steered away from unsuitable careers' (head teacher). This head took overall charge, and option forms were returned to her. After 'negotiations on misplaced pupils and timetable clashes', final option lists were arranged in June.

At *school 32* (an 11-16, RC comprehensive school with 17 per cent minority pupils) a new 'blocking system' for option choice was being tried out in 1983-4. Some 40 pupils identified as having O level potential were given different choices from the rest. In January these Block A pupils, then Block B pupils, completed a pilot option choice form (B pupils' choices leading to CSE or non-exam). Exams were held in February and pupils assessed on NFER tests. Reports went home with option booklets at the end of February and by 10 March completed forms were returned. Subject staff were asked to assess the pupils 'suitability for their subject' and whether they would accept the pupils into their group. A parents evening was held in March to discuss pupils aptitudes and attainments, after staff had decided whether they thought choices were 'suitable'. The guidance process and the idea of 'choice' were first introduced in this school through social studies lessons, but senior staff, the head, deputy and head of year, were involved in guiding and advising pupils.

At *school 41* (an 11-16 girls comprehensive school with 65 per cent, mainly Moslem, ethnic minority pupils) option procedures began in December when a booklet was prepared and option forms discussed with staff. A series of talks were given by heads of Departments, covering option subjects, during the Spring term, and exams were held in March. Comments from form tutors on 'attainment and effort' were collected, reports went to parents, and a meeting for parents and pupils was held in May. Careers officers and Further Education College staff attended this meeting to talk about commerce and typing. Option forms were returned and computerised early in the Summer term. The option forms were checked for 'balance', and a typing test was held for those who had opted for a College Link typing course. A final check was made to see that heads of Departments would take the pupils who had opted for their subjects, and the process was completed by June. The head of year, head of social studies, form and subject teachers were involved in guidance.

At *school 44* (an 11-16 comprehensive school which was created in September 1983 by the amalgamation of two schools) curriculum option choice procedures were necessarily late. The head and staff (many of the staff had only just been appointed) had to resolve a variety of organisational problems. The school had a new name and uniform, but a 'new' curriculum suitable for all the pupils had to be worked out. A trial option form was given out in February, for pupils to 'complete with their parents'. The completed forms were scrutinised by subject staff, who advised on changes. Pupils were tested in the Summer term, and test results were set against option choices. The choices were finalised by June. A senior tutor coordinated the whole process.

All the schools were asked on what basis staff would finally recommend pupils as suitable for particular subjects and level of study. In every case, the perception of the pupils ability, as measured by past attainment and standardised tests, was quoted as the most important.

Table 12.3 summarises the school replies to questions about the part played by assessments of ability in the option choice process. Only three schools said they did not use standardised tests or make use of the results of subject examinations, but one of these schools (12) asked subject staff to 'rank' pupils as suitable for subjects or levels of study. Schools 14, 31, 32, 33 assessed pupils' 'ability' most comprehensively, and all the area 2 schools used past attainment as an important criterion for entry to subjects. School 25 employed a system of continuous assessment of pupils from their first year. Allocating pupils to subjects and levels of study on the basis of ability and past attainment may seem to be a perfectly reasonable process, but it should be noted that teaching organisation in years 1-3 has already influenced levels of attainment.

Only one school (35) reported mixed ability teaching in the first three years. All the other schools had taught pupils in at least some subjects in streams, bands or sets which in turn depended on levels of ability and attainment reported by the primary schools the children had come from. Thus, past attainment can cumulatively influence school decisions to the point where, at option choice time, some pupils are not able even to make an attempt in particular subjects.

The Broadsheet below gives an indication of teachers' comments as to whether a pupil is deemed suitable or not for a particular subject or level of study.

Please indicate the suitability or otherwise of boys for this subject as an Option Choice. Indicate where appropriate that O level could be attained. Other useful comments are welcomed.

SUBJECT: Physics

	TEACHER: Mr K.
Name of pupil	
A	Suitable - possible O
B	Possible - if he applied himself substantially more than now
C	Possible - if his attitude were to mature and work-rate improves
D	Not suitable
E	Not suitable
F	Should not really be considered for any science subject
G	Suitable
H	Suitable - possible O
I	Unlikely to be able to cope with any science subject
J	Not suitable given present attitude
K	Not suitable
L	Suitable - possible O
M	Suitable - possible O
N	Suitable - very strong O level candidate
O	Totally unsuitable for any science subject
P	Possibly suitable
Q	Possible suitable - certainly has necessary ability
R	Very strong O level candidate
S	Suitable

[Extract from a broadsheet filled in by subject teachers at one school, and used to guide pupils' choices]

The teacher's judgement that a particular boy was 'not suitable' for physics could lead to relegation to a lower-level or integrated science despite pupil choice.

There is, however, some evidence both in this and in previous studies that 'ability' as perceived by schools may not always be the over-riding consideration for pupil placement. Although only four schools specified 'behaviour' as an ultimate basis or recommendation to a particular subject or level of study, in all the schools the overall behaviour of pupils during their first three years of secondary schooling influenced pupil placement at option time. 'Behaviour' included not only controlled social behaviour in classrooms or in school, but also perceived 'effort' at schoolwork, whether homework was completed, and whether pupils truanted or not.

School 35 was the only school that said they placed pupils in options by their own choice, rather than ability, or behaviour. The teacher in charge of the option process said that 'I don't show pupils choices to staff until final groups are listed. This stops them saying I won't have him or her on ability or behavioural grounds'. Ability as a constraint on pupils' entry to particular options was mentioned most often by schools in the case of European languages, where higher-ability pupils frequently started the language in the third year, and also in economics, art, and computer studies to O level. However as findings set out in Chapter 13 indicate, there are cases where measured ability in years one to three is not the only criterion of access to higher-level examination groups or to particular subjects.

Option booklets

Option choice booklets, which were produced by all the schools except one, were the most important method of conveying information about the curriculum and examinations to pupils and parents. They always took the form of mimeographed sheets, stapled together,

with a decorated cover. Two schools translated each page into Bengali and Urdu. All the booklets but one introduced the notion that pupils had arrived at a momentous moment of choice in their school career and that they would, for perhaps the first time, be able to participate in decision-making. All either opened with a description of the examination that could be taken at the school, or followed each subject description with the level and type of examination course. All the booklets explained subject content, some briefly, some more elaborately, and ten booklets made strong links between subject choice and level of study on the one hand and future careers on the other. All but three stressed a 'balanced choice' as desirable, and seven booklets encouraged pupils to find links between courses and subjects. Two booklets offered additional material in the form of questionnaires to be worked through to encourage choice and decision-making. One of these questionnaires, filled out by a young Patel, indicated that he planned to work 'behind a shop counter' and that he would like to work 'ten hours a day and four on Sunday'! Five booklets specifically mentioned equal opportunities for the sexes, in terms of courses being available for both girls and boys. One school described typing as a 'useful skill for girls and boys'.

Schools in areas 1 and 4 aimed the level of language and information at the pupil, those in areas 2 and 3 more at the parents. The following are examples of these approaches, and of the way subject choices were presented as linked to future careers.

In the school 12 booklet, pupils were told that 'choosing will involve a lot of decisions, it will give you a chance to concentrate on subjects you are good at and drop the subjects which don't interest you or which you find difficult. If you have some idea what you want to do in the future you can choose subjects which lead directly on to this career but remember you can change your mind ... so think about opting for a range of subjects'. The booklet gave pupils information on O level, CSE and other examinations, and explained that 'CSE courses are taken by the majority of pupils – an average ability person is expected to get a CSE grade 4 – O level courses tend to be more academic'. Pupils were introduced to the various options in relatively simple language. The Link engineering course at a local FE College had 'places strictly limited which must be reserved for those whose future lies in engineering'; a modified course of basic skills plus four options was offered to less able pupils. Integrated science was presented as 'useful if you want to keep in touch with a wide range of scientific topics and if you will need a science pass for your future job. Employers often ask for a science pass and don't say what the subject has to be.'

Linking subject choice with future jobs, even non-academic and non-vocational subjects, was common in the option booklets. The school 21 booklet told parents: 'Now that your child is coming to the end of his or her third year it is time to consider the subjects that should be taken in the next two years. Before making a final choice, you should bear in mind your child's ability, strengths and weaknesses as well as the type of career he/she hopes to enter.' This booklet gave a clear message that pupils are O level, 'good' CSE or 'other'. Pupils in the upper band were recommended to take physics, chemistry or biology, pupils in the lower band modular science, or a LAMPS course. This was offered as a 'non-examination course split into short scientific topics' but 'Less Academically Motivated Pupil Science' was not spelt out. This booklet also indicated that the school wished to respond to new technologies and to the Secretary of State's intention that pupils should have greater awareness of the wealth-creating function of industry and commerce.¹⁷ A package 'for pupils in the good CSE range ... who want apprenticeships in engineering or a general understanding of modern technical processes' was on offer as craft, design and technology (CDT), technical drawing, physics, extra CDT and computer use or electronics. A course entitled 'understanding industrial society' which 'deals with the economic side

of running a business and the problems the government has in running the country' was planned to be offered at O and CSE level, and an O level course for upper band pupils of physics, chemistry, technology, technical graphics and a language – preferably German – was intended to 'give an understanding of the type of problems facing industry and engineering which are the basic life-lines of the country'.

There are clear differences in the way schools convey information through the option booklets. Some schools, notably those in area 2, pitched the booklets at the level of parents, used relatively serious and sophisticated language, and made clear the kinds of courses and examinations that will lead to higher education or particular kinds of jobs. Other booklets, notably those in areas 1 and 4, pitched the booklets at the level of the pupil, used cartoons, illustrations and jokes, which made them more entertaining, but sometimes conveyed less information than parents would need to be clear about examination levels and their relevance or subject utility. It was notable that the schools that offered the least serious information pitched at the level of parents were those with a high proportion of ethnic minority pupils.

All the booklets stress examinations as the one major goal of courses in the fourth and fifth years. However there are differences again in the presentation of the importance of examinations. Some schools, again notably in area 2 and schools 32 and 33, made it relatively clear that a tripartite division was being made, on the basis of 'ability and effort' for O level, into 'good' CSE, lower-level CSE, and non-exam candidates. The majority of schools however seemed anxious to persuade pupils and parents that CSE is a useful level at which to study – an 'intelligent citizens guide to a subject', as one booklet put it – or stress that selection for O levels will not be made until after a course has been running for some time. They were also likely to stress 'intrinsic interest' of subjects rather than utility. Some schools were clearer than others about the utility of subjects and examinations for jobs or for further or higher education.

The 1983-84 option booklets indicated some ambivalence in the schools towards careers and work, and indeed encapsulated a series of contradictions concerning the preparation of pupils for jobs. One contradiction is that schools thought they should encourage pupils in a broad general education up to 16, but at the same time they were aware that particular jobs or careers need specialisation at 13+ (those wishing to move into scientific or medical areas need three sciences, future engineers need Link engineering courses). The curriculum for those of perceived higher 'ability' or for those with a clear vocation is less likely to be 'balanced'. Some schools, in attempting to respond to external pressures to prepare pupils for the emerging technological society, are clear that such preparation from 13+ excludes the possibility of a broad, balanced education. A second contradiction is that schools in 1984 were still largely presenting educational activities and examinations, to all pupils, as culminating in employment, and from 13+ encouraging pupils to think in terms of 'careers'. Since for a large proportion of the pupils at these schools, full-time employment on leaving school at 16+ was already becoming a remote possibility, and the kind of manual work many of the pupils would formerly have undertaken has now disappeared, schools were placed in an unenviable situation. The schools were responding in different ways: some, again notably area 2 schools, stressed the enhanced examination levels required for jobs and careers, others notably in area 4, minimised the idea of 'work' and discussed further education and leisure. It is interesting that only three option booklets actually mentioned the Youth Training Scheme in linking subjects to employment possibilities. Some schools, with the best intentions, were somewhat unrealistic in their

information to pupils, suggesting that subjects will lead towards jobs; others stressed that employers will be 'irritated' if pupils think subjects will lead to jobs!

In addition, some schools do not make clear the limitations of particular courses and levels of study for future careers.

Conclusions

The option allocation process is a critical point in the school career of all pupils. Previous research as well as opinion suggests that this is the point at which ethnic minority pupils could be at a disadvantage. As with most school processes, the option choice and allocation procedures turned out to be lengthy and complex, taking up much teacher-time in the third year. A very wide choice of subjects was ostensibly offered to pupils, although in fact the 'guidance' process, school organisation in the first three years (particularly whether the teaching was in mixed ability groups or not) and school resources all acted to constrain free choice of subjects and examination levels. Schools recognised but did not always make clear to pupils and parents, that entry to a variety of post-school careers could be affected by the choices made at 13+. The option staff did emerge as important gate-keepers at this point in a pupil's schooling; also, past attainments can cumulatively influence school and teacher decisions, to the point where, at option time, some pupils are not able even to attempt a particular subject or examination. Option booklets, a primary source of written information between home, school and pupil, show that there are distinct differences between schools in the way that they convey information to parents at option choice time. It did seem that schools with a higher proportion of ethnic minority pupils had attempted to simplify information for parents and pupils, but in doing so offered them less serious information than the rest. The booklets all stressed examinations as the one major goal of school life, and the following chapters indicate that all pupils, but particularly those from ethnic minority backgrounds, are well aware of this emphasis, and eager to take more rather than fewer public examinations. Teachers are constrained, at option time, to require pupils to link subject choices with careers or 'jobs' in an increasingly unrealistic manner, and the whole option process encapsulates a series of contradictions concerning the required specialisation of pupils at the early age of 13+.

Notes

1. See, for example, Reid, Barnett and Rosenberg (1975); Ryrie, Furst and Lauder (1979); Hargreaves (1984).
2. See Department of Education and Science (1981); Homans (1986); Barrow (1986).
3. See Fry (1988).
4. See Her Majesty's Inspectorate (1979).
5. Department of Education and Science (1980).
6. See Pratt, Bloomfield and Seale (1984) for a review of research and writing on the subsequent effects of gender differences in subject choice.
7. The effects of subject choice in reinforcing the disadvantages of the working class are reviewed in Ryrie, Furst and Lauder (1979); Ball (1981) Gray, McPherson and Raffé (1983); and Hargreaves (1984).
8. Department of Education and Science (1981), p38.
9. Homan (1986).
10. Barrow et al. (1986).
11. Da Costa (1987).
12. Tate (1980).

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13. In Eggleston et al. (1986).
14. Hussain and Samarasinghe (1987).
15. Gillborn (1987).
16. Kelly (1988).
17. Department of Education and Science (1985), p16.