

14 Pupils' Attitudes to Choice of Subjects

Much educational research neglects to enquire into the views of pupils about the school processes in which they take part. This research attempted to avoid such neglect by asking pupils for their views of aspects of the option choice process. There is a limited amount of previous research which has sought pupils' views and perceptions of the choices and constraints, of the pressure of expectations about the subjects that boys and girls will take, and of the links between particular subjects and careers,¹ but there is no previous large-scale study of the views of pupils of different ethnic origin. This chapter sets out some of the pupils views of the choice process. The questionnaire avoided making the suggestion to pupils that their choices might be circumscribed, but however unbiased the questioning may be, pupils' perceptions still depend heavily on the amount and kind of information that has been made available to them previously. Actual choices are often the resolution of a conflict between the wishes of the child and pressures from teachers, parents and peer groups to study particular subjects or combinations of subjects. Subsequently, the perceptions of the child may tend to adjust to this outcome.

Satisfaction with the degree of choice

Pupils were asked how much choice they felt they had at option time, and how happy they were with the options that had been chosen. Overall, 26 per cent thought they had a lot of choice, 53 per cent quite a lot, and 22 per cent thought they had not very much or none (though nearly all of these responses were 'not very much' rather than 'none'). Thus, the proportion who thought they had not much choice was a significant minority of over one-fifth.

The great majority were happy (42 per cent) or quite happy (50 per cent) with the options that had been chosen; only 3 per cent said they were not happy, while the remaining 5 per cent didn't know.

Boys were a bit more likely than girls to feel they had a lot of choice (29 per cent compared with 23 per cent). Boys were also very slightly more likely to be very happy with the chosen options (44 per cent compared with 40 per cent).

South Asian pupils were distinctly less likely than others to think they had a lot of choice (south Asians 19 per cent, UK/Eire 28 per cent, West Indians 30 per cent). They were also less likely to be very happy with the chosen options (south Asians 37 per cent, UK/Eire 46 per cent, West Indians 44 per cent).

Pupils belonging to the lower social classes were rather more likely than those belonging to the higher social classes to think they had not very much choice or none (no parent has

worked group 27 per cent, professional or managerial group 17 per cent). However, in the proportion who are unhappy with the chosen options there is no clear or consistent set of differences according to social class.

Whether the options are suited to the child's ability

Pupils were asked whether the chosen options, in terms of the examinations they were leading to, were 'right for them'. The responses are partly a measure of how far the children are willing to accept the school's definitions and placements. Previous research has shown that children tend to accept the school's definition of their 'ability', particularly if they have been given information about their past performance in school exams or on standardised tests.² They also tend to accept that past ability should be an important factor in deciding which subjects or levels of examination they should take. However, research has previously been limited to all-white schools.

Overall, two-thirds of pupils (67 per cent) thought the option groups and levels of study they were entered for were right for their ability. One-fifth (21 per cent) did not yet know what exams they would be entered for, and could not, therefore, give any further answer. Ten per cent thought they should be doing more O levels (or 16+ exams), 2 per cent thought they should be doing more CSEs, and 1 per cent thought they would be doing too many exams. These results confirm that there is a strong tendency for pupils to accept the school's definitions and placements. At the same time, they show that where pupils are dissatisfied, it is because they would like to do more and at a higher level, not because they think they are being over-stretched.

There are some large differences between schools in the extent to which pupils think the chosen options are suited to their ability (see Table 14.1). There is considerable variation in the proportion of pupils who felt too unsure about the exams they would be taking to be able to answer the question. This is largely a reflection of school policies. At school 35, for example, 39 per cent answered that they didn't know what exams they would be taking; this school in fact made a point of not deciding who should take O levels until the fourth year. By contrast, at schools 24, 31 and 33, the course levels are firmly decided at an early stage, and very few pupils were unable to answer this question.

There are, however, some very wide variations between schools in the proportion of pupils who felt they should be taking more O levels, even after taking account of the differences in the proportion who were unsure what exams they would be taking. Two schools stand out as having high proportions of pupils who are dissatisfied in this respect: school 24 with 28 per cent, and school 12 with 18 per cent. A considerable number of schools have a middling proportion (around 10 per cent) of children who were dissatisfied, but in eight schools this proportion is less than 5 per cent.

The proportion who thought they should be doing more O levels is slightly higher among boys (11 per cent) than girls (6 per cent). Differences according to country of origin are small, except that a relatively large proportion of African Asians (21 per cent) felt they should be taking more O levels. It is interesting that African Asians are more likely than other groups to be dissatisfied, since they are in fact more likely to be taking high-status science subjects. These responses suggest that, with the exception of African Asians, ethnic minorities are satisfied with the course levels to which they have been allocated. This fits with the earlier analysis of the allocations themselves, which showed that although children belonging to ethnic minorities tended to be allocated to lower course levels than children of UK origin, this was a reflection of differences in second-year attainment.

There is little difference between social class groups in their attitudes to the course levels allocated, though there may be a slight tendency for the underclass group (those whose parents have not had a job for five years) to be less satisfied than the rest.

People who influenced the choice

Pupils were asked how important each of a number of people inside and outside the school had been in helping them to choose their options. The proportion who thought the help of each person was very important is shown below.

Inside school	%
Subject teacher	53
Careers teacher	43
Form teacher	43
Head of year	35
Head teacher	27
Outside school	
Parents	73
Brothers and sisters	18
Others in family	12
Friends	8

Thus children felt that their parents as well as various teachers were a very important influence on the choice of options. For the great majority, there were no important influences outside school apart from parents. Within school, teachers with a pastoral role were felt to have at least as much influence as subject teachers.

Information available when choosing options

Pupils were asked whether they had enough information of various kinds to help them when choosing options. More specifically, they were asked whether they had enough information about

- how good they were at various subjects
- what the new subjects were about
- which subjects were needed for jobs and careers
- who to ask for advice
- how to find about getting jobs or going on to 'college'.

A high proportion of pupils felt they did not have enough information about these matters. Thus, 78 per cent thought there was too little information on getting jobs and going on to college; 67 per cent on what new subjects were about; 59 per cent on which subjects were needed for jobs and careers; 48 per cent on who to ask for advice; and 41 per cent on how good they were at subjects. Thus pupils feel that they are lacking many kinds of information needed to help them make a choice of options. The schools clearly see it as their responsibility to provide this information, and devote a considerable amount of staff time to trying to give it. The perception of pupils, nevertheless, is that they are not well enough informed.

Both south Asians and West Indians are more conscious of a lack of information than children of UK origin (see Table 14.2). The proportion who think they have too little information is particularly high among Bangladeshis.

Subjects considered useful

The pupils were asked which subjects they thought would help them to achieve their post-school aspirations. The replies to this question indicate that pupils are far more likely to see 'academic' subjects as useful in this way than any other. One-fifth of all pupils (21 per cent) rated the humanities – history, geography, social studies, economics, sociology, English Literature, classical and Islamic studies – as most useful in helping them achieve their post-school aspirations; boys were rather more likely than girls to take this view. A similar proportion (20 per cent) rated the separate sciences – physics, chemistry, biology, computing as most useful; again, boys were more likely than girls to take this view. Creative subjects were in third place, with an equal proportion of boys and girls thinking them the most useful for their careers after school. The practical subjects were in fourth place, though boys mentioned the practical I subjects (traditionally associated with boys) while girls mentioned the practical II subjects (traditionally associated with girls). Only 5 per cent of all pupils rated the science II subjects (the lower status ones) as useful, and very small numbers rated Asian languages, physical subjects, social and careers education, remedial and ESL options as useful after school.

Pupils from professional and managerial homes are more likely than any other socio-economic group to think the 'academic' subjects (humanities, sciences and European languages) will help them in their post-school careers, and are less likely than any group to think practical, commercial or the integrated sciences likely to help. This information of course, accords with the subject choices and examination levels made by pupils from professional and managerial homes. Conversely, pupils whose parents do not work are least likely to specify the humanities, or separate sciences as helpful after school, but most likely to think commercial subjects and integrated science subjects useful. It is pupils from the lower socio-economic groups generally who are most likely to think that practical subjects, commercial subjects, remedial and ESL, and Asian languages, will be helpful post-school. Pupils from single-parent families were less likely than those from two parent families to rate the humanities and separate sciences as useful, and rather more likely to think European languages, commerce and creative subjects useful.

Overall however, given the stated ambitions of a majority of the pupils towards professional, managerial and white collar jobs,³ perceptions that the academic subjects on the curriculum were the most helpful subjects after compulsory schooling ended were 'correct'. Although pupils thought they knew too little about how to get jobs or go on in education, they appeared to know enough to link the 'right' option choices to the right careers in broad terms. The lower regard for practical subjects as helpful after school does also accord with the smaller proportions of pupils aiming (at 13+ anyway) to go into manual occupations. It is however, of interest that the third most popular set of subjects chosen as useful post-school are the creative ones. Perhaps this is an indication that pupils do not necessarily see their post-school careers purely in terms of vocation or employment.

Conclusions

Pupils choose their options within the framework of the subjects and combinations of subjects on offer and in response to teachers' judgements about their abilities and past performance. Perhaps for the first time in their lives they are in a position to make an important choice, but the range of possibilities is limited and they are heavily dependent on others for the feedback about their own performance and for other information that would help them to exercise the limited degree of choice that is in principle available. Immediately after the decisions have been taken, it is not surprising to find that few are

prepared to say that they were wrong. If pupils lack the information and experience required to make an independent choice, for the same reasons they also lack the ability to make an objective judgement about the decisions just arrived at. For this reason, the great majority of pupils said they were happy or quite happy with the options that had been chosen. Again, over two-thirds of pupils thought the option groups and levels of study they were entered for were right for their ability. In general, they tended to accept the school's definitions of their ability (lacking any other point of reference).

At the same time, where pupils are dissatisfied, it is because they would like to do more and at a higher level, not because they think they are being over-stretched. There are large variations between schools in this respect, and in particular, there are two schools where a large minority of pupils (28 per cent in one case and 18 per cent in the other) felt they should be taking more O levels.

Though few pupils, immediately after the decisions have been taken, were unhappy about the outcome, a high proportion felt they did not have enough information on a whole range of matters that would have helped them to make the best choice: for example, two-thirds thought there was too little information on what the new subjects were about. The schools clearly see it as their responsibility to provide this information, and devote a considerable amount of staff time to trying to give it. The perception of pupils, nevertheless, is that they are not well enough informed.

Pupils tend to see the traditional academic subjects (the humanities and the separate as opposed to integrated sciences) as being the most useful for their careers after school. This is connected with the fact that most of them, at this stage, hope to have professional or white-collar jobs for which these subjects would, in fact, be required.

In general, perceptions of the options process do not vary much between ethnic groups. However, African Asians were more likely than other groups to feel they should be taking more O levels, and Bangladeshis were more likely than others to think they lacked information. The actual allocations between subjects and levels of study vary considerably between social classes (as shown in the last chapter) but differences between social classes in their perceptions of the process are surprisingly small. No doubt this is because children's expectations adapt to the judgements of their past performance and future potential that are made by teachers and others.

Notes

1. See Reid, Barnett and Rosenberg (1974); Ryrie, Furst and Lauder (1979); Pratt, Bloomfield and Seale (1984).
2. See Jones (1983).
3. In this questionnaire, pupils were asked what they would like to do on leaving school. The results are not reported here, but broadly they show that at 13+ a majority of the pupils had ambitions to enter professional or white-collar jobs, and no pupils wished to do unskilled work.