The Influence of the School in the Decision to Participate in Learning Post-16

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Executive Summary

This research study was commissioned by the Department for Education and Skills to enhance understanding about the role of the school in shaping the perceptions and choices of post 16 pathways amongst young people in school. The primary aim of the study was to identify the nature and influence of school based factors in the choices of young people about their post-16 education, training and career pathways.

The study also contributes to the wider understanding of “choice”, and aims to identify implications for the development of careers education and guidance and decision making awareness amongst pupils and students in schools. It also further enhances the modelling of pupil decision-making in education and training markets, and in labour markets.

The research is based on a series of qualitative interviews in 24 schools across nine LEAs. Focus groups were undertaken with young people in years 10, 11 and 12. Interviews were also conducted with Head Teachers, Heads of Year and Heads of Careers, as well as a postal survey of parents.

Key findings

• Choice was a dynamic process in that the precise nature of the preferences expressed by young people changed over time as a range of factors influenced their ideas.

• The provision of a sixth form within the school was an important influence on the decision of young people to stay on and participate in post 16 education and training. Schools, particularly those with sixth forms, often actively promote post-16 academic routes, compared to other forms of post-16 participation which were much less clearly promoted.

• On a comparative basis, knowledge about post-16 provision in schools and colleges tended to be strongest amongst pupils in schools with sixth forms and weakest in schools with no sixth form. The opposite was true about knowledge of post 16 training and labour markets. However, awareness of work based routes was low across all schools.

• The effectiveness of the school in providing advice and guidance often depended on the way the school was organised. This research identified six school based factors which were particularly influential on young people’s choices: school type; available careers programme; socio economic status of the school catchment; school leadership, culture and ethos; teacher influence; and, subject curriculum issues. Schools with a more pupil-centred ethos, rather than school-centred, often built a richer and broader understanding of post-16 routes.

• Careers advice in schools with sixth forms was qualitatively different from that in 11-16 schools, with pupils attending the latter more positively inclined towards careers education they had received. Pupils in schools with sixth forms tended to judge the advice and guidance functions of their schools as being less impartial than those in schools with no sixth form. There was greater tendency in schools with a
sixth form to provide post-16 advice and guidance which was more closely related to academic sixth form provision than that which the broader FE sector would require.

- Connexions was an important intervening agency for the majority of pupils, particularly in low socio-economic status schools without sixth forms, and with stable or falling participation rates. Pupils expressed satisfaction with Connexions where it had a permanent residential status in the school.

- School was a less important source of advice than parents or home-related influences for pupils likely to pursue academic post 16 pathways. For pupils from low socio-economic background in schools without a sixth form the school was a very important source of advice.

- Experience of a broad and balanced curriculum and post-16 learning was acknowledged as an important facet of supporting choice post-16. Alongside a continuing preference for academic pathways there was a growing tendency amongst pupils to opt for subjects combining vocational and academic learning.

- Pupils wanted more direct experiential learning to inform post-16 choices, rather than information. Young people placed a great premium on visits to post-16 providers and on concrete experience gained from interacting with outside visitors. The prominence given to work experience highlighted the need for an experiential careers curriculum, rather than one based on text and the transmission of information.

- While final decisions were rarely made before Year 11, the majority of pupils wanted careers advice well before then. This research showed that year nine is the time when the majority of pupils start to think about post 16 options. Equally, many pupils did not consider the timing of school interventions as suited to their needs, and therefore it is likely that pupils needed career advice and guidance earlier on to help them with their thinking.

**Choices and Choice process**

The overwhelming majority of Year 10 and 11 pupils had the intention of staying on in some form of education or training and had some idea of what they wished to do upon completing compulsory education. However, there was a small, but significant, number who had little or no idea about what they would be doing post-16. The extent to which post-16 goals had been clarified by pupils differed according to their year group. Pupils in Year 11, who wished to stay on, tended to have decided on the subjects they would be doing, but Year 10 pupils were more hesitant about specific subject choice.

Gender differences were manifest in the extent of knowledge of post-16 goals, with more boys than girls at both Y10 and Y11 not knowing what they are going to do. The same was true in schools in low socio-economic environments.

Post-16 colleges were the preferred option for a majority of Y10 and 11 pupils across the schools in the study. However, it was more common for pupils in schools with sixth forms to talk about sixth forms rather than post-16 colleges. The numbers of
pupils considering work based training routes, particularly Modern Apprenticeships, was low across all schools. There also appeared to be a strong imbalance between male and female pupils when it comes to opting for work based training routes. Boys were more likely than girls to indicate work or apprenticeship opportunities.

Alongside the desire for academic careers is a growing tendency amongst pupils to opt for subjects combining vocational and academic learning.

The data clearly showed that Year 9 was generally considered the time the majority of pupils start thinking actively about post-16 options, which was when most career guidance began. A significant number of pupils, particularly in high SES schools with sixth forms, followed by low SES schools with sixth forms, claim to have begun the process of thinking about post 16 options before they started secondary schooling. Equally, many pupils did not consider the timing of school interventions as suited to their needs, and therefore it is likely that pupils needed career advice and guidance earlier on to help them with their thinking.

**Relative influence: the role of mediating agencies**

The school was identified as an important influence on choices at 16 mostly by pupils in schools in low SES localities and in particular by those in schools without sixth forms. Staff in such schools tended to view this as a direct challenge requiring their concerted effort to influence the choices pupils make at 16.

Parental and home related influences were most significant in schools in higher socio-economic environments, particularly those with sixth forms. However, these are the social groups most likely to participate post-16 anyway and for whom the research has shown it is most easy to do so. Teachers and class tutors were generally viewed by young people as having little or no influence on the post 16 choices of pupils, except where teachers were perceived to be “inspirational”.

Work experience was seen by young people as an important influence in the choice processes of the majority of pupils across all schools. It was important in affirming their post-16 decisions and also in gaining experience of the outside world of work. Pupils, particularly in schools with no sixth form, saw the provision of external information and visits to post-16 providers as having been of tremendous benefit during their choice and decision processes.

Connexions was an important intervening agency for the majority of pupils. The relative importance of Connexions was highest in schools in low socio-economic environments without sixth forms and with falling or stable participation rates.

**Reasons for choice**

Young people gave a wide range of reasons for making choices at 16. Subject enjoyment, the influence of parents, and a perception of being good at subjects appeared to exert the greatest influence on choices pupils make, particularly in high socio-economic status schools. Conversely there seemed to be less enjoyment of schooling reported in low socio-economic status schools, as this factor appears to have little influence on the choices pupils were making.
Despite the finding that schools in low socio-economic status areas, particularly those with no sixth form, tend to play a stronger careers guidance and advice role, pupils in these schools appear to make fewer connections between their post-16 aspirations and the ultimate careers they want to pursue in later life.

**The influence of School organisation on Pupil choice**

Schools emphasised their aim to meet the individual needs of students centred either on the pupils, the school, the external policy agenda, or focussed on management functions within the school, and revealing a universal commitment to post-16 education and training. The research showed that the effectiveness of the advice depends critically on school culture. For example, a functionally-oriented school can lead to an over-reliance on Connexions for advice and guidance, assigning each task to a particular mediating agency, as and when a response to new policy is needed. However, although Connexions has a high profile and was valued by staff and pupils, it sometimes appeared that supporting decision making about post-16 did not appear to be a high priority.

There is a clear geographic variation in the schools perceived to be promoting their own sixth form. Nearly all are schools in metropolitan or urban local authorities where there are other post-16 providers available to young people.

Experience of a broad curriculum and post-16 learning was acknowledged by school staff as an important facet in supporting choice at post-16. However, this sat alongside a reluctant acknowledgement that such a curriculum diet is not engaging all young people. Teachers respond to the disengagement of some young people with reference to two key ingredients. Firstly, they identify the need for changes in the curriculum and secondly, they emphasise the need for young people to experience ‘enjoyment’ in their learning. Schools need to find ways in which young people can take vocational options and engage in practical activities that enable them to enjoy their schooling.

The lack of available impartial advice, support and guidance was a recurring theme in the focus group-discussions. Students were recommending that they should receive impartial advice and guidance and support earlier in their schooling and would prefer to have greater freedom to specialise and choose their own subject combinations.

The need for experience of post-16 learning was acknowledged as an important fact in supporting choices and choice processes, and was a key and recurring theme in feedback from the young people themselves. Students needed to know what it was like and what it meant to study a particular vocational or a specialist programme of study in a particular institution. Leaflets, teachers’ talks and websites did not provide young people with sufficient information on which they could make informed decisions, rather there was a need for positive post-16 learning experiences.

**Modelling the Influence of the School on Post-16 Choice**

The schools’ influence on pupils’ choice in the post-16 market is complex. Although the relative influence of different aspects of the school could not be accurately determined on the basis of this data it strongly suggests that the provision of a sixth form within a school is an important influence on the decision of young people to stay
on and participate in post-16 education and training. This influence operated in a number of ways, in relation to careers education and guidance, the impact of the potential frictions of change, the prioritisation of academic pathways and the importance of university as a priority destination.

The Influence of sixth form provision
Careers advice in schools with a sixth form is qualitatively different from that in 11-16 schools, with pupils attending the latter more positively inclined towards the careers education they had received. Pupils in school without a sixth form tended to judge the advice and guidance functions of their schools as being more impartial than those in schools with a sixth form. There is a tendency in schools with a sixth form to provide post-16 advice and guidance which is more closely related to sixth form provision than that which the broader FE sector would require.

The research also suggests that there was a greater tendency for pupils in schools with a sixth form to choose academic subjects in the post-16 phase. The subject choices showed that 50% more pupils in schools with sixth forms chose science and mathematics as A level subjects. This compared to students in schools without a sixth form who had a 50% greater chance of choosing vocationally oriented subjects in their post-16 phase.

The influence of the socio-economic environment
On the whole, schools in low socio-economic status areas tended to exhibit a greater preference for vocational trajectories, while those in schools with high socio-economic environments are more inclined towards the academic trajectory.

The influence of the schools’ culture, ethos and leadership
Despite the general feeling of indifference expressed by pupils about the role of their head teachers in post-16 choice and decision processes, the analysis revealed four broad categories of school leadership styles. The categories were not discrete entities representing a field of forces interacting with each and influencing choices.

a) School/Image focused culture, ethos and leadership.
Schools with a school/image orientation had a strong culture or ethos focussed on high academic achievement that permeated all its activities. They tended to be schools with sixth forms in high SES localities with a strong academic tradition and a focus on university entrance. There was an expectation that the school included years twelve and thirteen and students would continue at school post-16. There was minimal connection with mediating agencies or school inputs that provided information, advice and guidance on options other than staying on at school.

b) Student-centred orientation.
Schools driven by pupils’ needs and post-16 markets tended to place great emphasis on ‘taking pupils along the lines of natural disposition’. There were many mediating agencies and students were exposed to a rich network of information, guidance and advice from diverse sources. These students reported a wide range of events and activities introduced by the school to support them in their decision making. There appeared to be a structured whole-school commitment to supporting students in their decisions about post-16 pathways. Typically these schools did not have their own
sixth form and were perceived not to promote any specific option in preference to any other one.

c) Functional/administrative focused schools.
In functional/administrative focused schools there was greater emphasis placed on day-to-day operational management procedures, and the roles of specific groups or individuals. Such schools tended to have careers support and advice demarcated through a small number of pathways such as PSHE lessons or interviews conducted by the Connexions Service. Pupils in these schools tended to perceive the support as coming from one or two key individual teachers or careers advisers linked to the school. Their strength lay in the utilisation of external mediating agencies, such as incorporating colleges’ marketing materials into the corpus of the post-16 agenda.

These schools generally have no sixth form and are more likely to be in low socio-economic status environments and metropolitan areas.

d) Strategic/policy orientation.
The key feature of this orientation is a responsiveness to changing external policy circumstances which reflects the motivation of such schools to optimise the opportunities and entitlements of their pupils. This model represents a secondary, rather than primary, orientation in the profile of schools, in that it is found to some extent in all schools, but particularly those with a student centred orientation.

Conclusions

The academic pathway continues to be the preferred and easiest to follow post 16 route. Across all school types, a clear majority of pupils considered the A-level route as the most preferred, which is probably linked to a clear anticipation by the majority of young people interviewed of progressing to university. Alongside the desire for academic pathways there was a growing tendency amongst pupils to opt for subjects combining vocational and academic learning. There does appear to be a gradually increasing acceptance of vocational learning in schools which, while needing to be cultivated, augers well for the 14-19 curriculum currently being debated.

This research has shown that the influence of the school on pupils’ choice in the post 16 markets is complex and the extent to which structural constraints influence post-16 choices and decisions varies between schools. Two important issues stand out from this research. The first is that different schools control and manage post-16 choices and decisions in different ways. Schools with sixth forms have a ready made post-16 route and pupils in these schools are more channelled in their choices and decisions, with the school exerting influence through processes aimed at maintaining a position, image and status consistent with excellence and the highest standards. In schools with no sixth form, there is a greater democratisation of choice and decisions aimed more generally at providing students with opportunities that more adequately address their needs.

The second is that the socio economic environment of schools influences them to reproduce the inequalities of inputs and experiences which directly influence pupils’ ultimate destinations in life. The academic ethos of the schools offers a very powerful influence on the post-16 choices and decisions of pupils. Schools in high
socio-economic environments see themselves as developing pupils for academic university based education pathways, while schools in low socio-economic environments maintain a stronger commitment to vocational pathways.

The research suggests that schools can play a pivotal role in the decision of pupils to participate post-16, being particularly influential relative to other agents for pupils from more disadvantaged backgrounds. The nature of that influence often depends on the school’s culture and ethos. At its best this is characterised by pupil-centred approaches where all of the forces within a school combine to build a rich understanding of post-16 routes by capturing a diversity of viewpoints and experiences. Less effective approaches can arise where other aspects are more dominant drivers of school organisation, such as school image, managerial expediency and a bureaucratic response to the organisation of careers advice and guidance. These can result in structures reducing the range and diversity of influences of young people. The research also suggests that having a sixth form is more closely associated with deficiency in the impartialness of advice and guidance related to post 16 choices.

It is clear that all schools are concerned with four key elements and schools experience pressure in each of these areas: the needs of students; the school as an institution; management functions; and the policy environment. Rising participation is achievable across the range of schools, however, the differences are generally more textured and subtle, and are to be found in the ethos and leadership culture of how schools operate and the way in which this in turn influences the choice process.

What shines through is that young people want more experiential learning of the range of post-16 options that will be available to them if they are to make informed choice. This does not have to be lengthy exposure, often short tasters are all that is required. Information does not confer the same degree of realism for young people.
Chapter 1

Research Context and Methodology

Modelling choice in education and training

A study of the influence of institutional factors in schools on post-16 choices by pupils is particularly timely. Research into the process of choice in relation to education, training and careers pathways post-16 has not been extensive, yet understanding the choice process of school leavers has an important contribution to make towards matching young people’s aspirations and abilities to local education and training opportunities and national priorities. This is particularly so in the current context of the expansion of participation rates post-16 and the emphasis on strategies of widening participation in post-compulsory education. Recent research (e.g. Foskett and Hemsley-Brown, 1997, 1998; Hemsley-Brown and Foskett, 1997, 1998; Foskett and Hesketh 1995, 1996a, 1996b; Hodkinson, 1995; Macrae et al, 1996; Hemsley-Brown, 1996a, 1996b; Ball et al, 1998; Brooks, 1998) has explored some of the perceptions and the decision-making processes at work in young people’s career decision-making and has traced these decisions back to perceptions formed sometimes at quite a young age.

Choice at 16 must be considered in the context of broader models of choice in education and training. No single model is ever adequate to explain the intricacies of the choice process, and three main groups of models have emerged. Firstly, structuralist models (for example, Gambetta 1996, Roberts 1984, and Ryrie 1981) view choice as a result of institutional, economic or cultural constraints over which pupils have no control. Based on this model, it can be assumed that pupils do not make conscious decisions about their progression beyond compulsory education, but that their ultimate destinations can be predicted from the environmental constraints surrounding them. Long standing assumptions based on socio-economic status, cultural and ethnic origin and the inherent capabilities of the pupils have been found to be positively associated with progression to various post pathways. Thus, according to structuralist models, post 16 decisions cannot be rational and consciously driven, because there are forces operating within schools over which pupils have no control, but which all the same have a significant influence on the choices pupils make. Such forces include the SES (socio-economic status) of the school, parental levels of education and occupational status, curriculum organisation issues in the schools, and the influence of teaching groups.

However, structuralist models fail to explain the prevalence in some schools of pupils’ decisions that are driven largely by economic imperatives. Some choices may be strongly related to the need to become successful and earn ‘loads of money’ through following a post 16 curriculum that lead to what some pupils call ‘the rich occupations’. This suggests that post 16 choices can be explained through economic or human capital models, originally developed by Becker (1975). Such models are based on the assumption that pupils will make decisions based on estimations of the relative returns associated with various post 16 options. The returns do not necessarily have to be measured in monetary terms, and indeed may be difficult to ascertain, particularly over short periods of time. Cultural reproduction and the reality of pupils
lives and experiences the ‘street wisdom’ of young people form part of a complex web of information and experience that shapes the pupils decision making. In Willis’s study of ‘Learning to Labour’ (1997) the ‘lads’ enjoyed the prestige and status associated with leaving school and entering the world of adult work and were equally dismissive of conformist children they called ‘ear-‘oles’. In 2003 this study detected similar cultural positions and demarcations; the terms ‘lads’ and ‘ear-‘oles’ being replaced by pupils defining each other as ‘boffins’ and ‘duffers’. For the majority of children a key task was to navigate a path through school that kept them out of either category. Many teachers in this study expressed concern, in some cases despair, about the people and criteria pupils relied upon to make decisions about their future. A challenge for the schools is to provide credible alternative sources of information and experience. A key weakness of explaining choice on the basis of perceived economic benefits is that the returns from education take a long time to accrue, and rationalizing choice on this basis is like crystal ball gazing, something pupils at this stage are often not easily amenable to. Furthermore, it is clear that the benefits that accrue from education are not entirely financial. They can be related to how ‘cool’ the choice is perceived to be, the prestige associated with the choice and the ‘fashionability’ (Foskett, Lumby and Maringe, 2003) of the chosen pathway in the post-16 market. Such benefits are often seen by pupils as short term and act as a powerful force to steer their decisions towards specific options in the post-16 market.

A third group of models is based on the importance of personality and subjective judgment in the choice process. Originally proposed by Hodkinson, Sparkes and Hodkinson (1996) the theory of pragmatic rationality argues that choice is a ‘rational process that is constrained by a realistic perception of opportunities and shaped by individual personality’ (Payne 2002:13). Hemsley-Brown (1999) has endorsed this theory through her study in which she found that while pupils often gave utilitarian reasons for making choices, these were usually filtered through layers of ‘preconceptions’ emanating from influences of family background, culture and life history. This recognises that choice, while not strictly rational in the sense that it is based upon vigilant information collection, it is rational in that it occurs after some degree of search for supporting information (Foskett and Hemsley-Brown, 2001). This type of ‘rationality’ is seen in terms of promoting self interest and utilizing a base of information and life experience to arrive at decisions.

Choice is clearly both complex as a process and multi-factorial in terms of the range of influences that bear upon that choice, therefore. The model of choice developed by Foskett and Hemsley-Brown (2001) (Figure 1.1) seeks to bring together the relevant elements of the three groups of models described above into a single integrated mode to show this complexity, drawing on existing research evidence about choice at all key transition points within the education and training system. The model seeks to conceptualise and represent choice, but does so with the clear provisos that:

a) Choice is not a ‘rational action’ (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992 p40) in the sense of a systematic weighing up of all facts that enables the individual to make one clear unambiguous decision. The model represents a dynamic system in which all of the elements exist and all of the processes are occurring on a continuous basis. Hence the individual chooser is continuously subject to each of the influencing elements and processes, and the psychological processes supporting choice are also continuously in operation. ‘Choice’ is therefore simply an expression of the preference that exists at a
particular moment, and is subject to change and modification on any timescale. In a world of rapid and wide ranging change young people are forced to respond to changing and contradictory information; their decision making process is therefore likely to be more volatile and consist of reflexive responses to experience.

Figure 1.1 An integrated model of educational choice

b) While choice is not ‘rational action’ in a strict sense, it is also not irrational or random. Choices that are made or exercised will reflect some active process by the chooser, but that process will have been based on partial evidence, perception and circumstance rather than any rational, comprehensive and objective search for, and weighing of, evidence.

c) The role of perception and individuality must be stressed in understanding the process of choice. There is no deterministic connection at the level of individuals between a particular set of circumstances and a specific outcome or ‘choice’ – one individual may respond to a set of circumstances in a very different way to another individual, in part because of their different personalities and personal histories. However at the level of larger groups or populations such individuality may aggregate up to patterns that reflect the probability of particular ‘choices’ under prescribed circumstances, however.

The influence of the school on choice at 16 – the research evidence

In the context of the research described here, from the work of Foskett and Hesketh (1997), Foskett and Hemsley-Brown (2001), Hemsley-Brown and Foskett (2002), Hodkinson and Sparkes (1997) and Maguire, Macrae and Ball (2001) has emerged the recognition that choice is a complex iterative process based on perceptions, set within a number of important contextual influences. Both factor analysis studies (e.g. Brooks, 1998) and generic models suggest that the influence of the institutional
context on choice may be particularly significant, and there is a need to explore the precise nature of that influence and the processes and pathways through which it operates. The importance of ‘in-school’ factors in influencing choice is highlighted in the work of Cheng (1995), Paterson and Raffe (1995) and Ferguson and Unwin (1996), who show that, after controlling for GCSE results and socio-economic context as illustrated by parental occupation, there remain substantial differences between individual schools in the proportion of students who continue in full-time education after the age of 16. It seems likely, therefore, that there are characteristics of individual schools, whether organisational, structural or cultural, that promote or dampen young people’s aspirations to continue their education or formal training beyond 16. Foskett and Hesketh (1997), Payne (1998) and Connor et al (1999), for example, all suggest that young people are more likely to stay in full time education after 16 if they spent Year 11 in a school with a sixth form.

The influence of the institutional context is the key focus of this research, for, as Lauder, Jamieson and Wikeley (1998) suggest, there is as yet insufficient evidence or theoretical basis to understand the ways in which such school-based influences operate on ‘choice’. Throughout a child’s school experience the influence of both individuals and of the culture and ethos of the school shape the choices and preferences that emerge. At primary school, head teachers are important gatekeepers to subsequent stages of education, while class teachers implant in children, knowingly or unknowingly, a range of cultural perspectives and values as well as specific career, education and labour market ‘knowledge’. At secondary school these roles continue but are added to by the impact of formal and informal careers education and guidance, and, as the child approaches 16, the promotional messages emanating from post-16 education and training providers. Several aspects of this institutional context appear to be of particular importance in the choice process.

First, the interaction of institutional ‘messages’ and personal values may act as positive reinforcement to each other or, alternatively, provide contradictions and dissonance in the young person’s thinking. In general terms, for example, the emphasis on academic pathways and examination achievement in a context of middle class values in suburban schools serving relatively affluent catchments will reinforce existing pupil and parental ambitions and views. This synergy might therefore create an almost irresistible pressure towards particular post-16 choices. In contrast, the contradictions between school values and the values and aspirations of some sectors of particularly lower socio-economic groups may generate very significant tensions for young people. Hemsley-Brown (1999) has shown how the choice of academic as opposed to vocational pathways at 16+ is strongly related to the dominant ethos of the pre-16 educational institution, but also to whether the young person’s perception of specific post-16 pathway aligns with their view of ‘what people like me should do’.

Second, the knowledge and guidance of teachers other than careers teachers is of importance in shaping perceptions. However, the accuracy and reliability of that knowledge is questionable. Added to this limited knowledge is the institutional pressure for teachers to push young people towards decisions that are primarily in the school’s or college’s interests because of its own competitive needs. Between them these two dimensions compromise an important part of the information system in choice, and may constrain the choice process for young people. Hemsley-Brown and Foskett (1998) have shown how teachers’ own knowledge and understanding of post-
16 options and careers may be extremely limited, and how this narrow perspective may be reflected in the emphasis that teachers place on certain choices as part of their day-to-day discourse with pupils.

Third, the role of careers guidance is important as a counter to existing attitudes, knowledge and perception, and is a critical factor where young people from social backgrounds with no family traditions of, or experience of, post-16 education make a choice to pursue such a pathway. Although not without its own organisational needs relating to the aims of careers companies and the Connexions service, careers education and guidance (CEG) could, potentially provide the nearest approximation to ‘objective’ guidance available to young people in support of their choice processes. CEG, however, is constrained by resources in the extent of its influence, and its ability to act as a counter to entrenched perceptions, therefore, is limited. CEG provided within school by careers teachers will itself reflect the priorities and values of the school and the careers teacher. In a study of choice of Modern Apprenticeships (MAs) by pupils in inner London schools, for example, the key factor in determining the numbers choosing MAs was not the level of GCSE performance but the emphasis given to both MAs and alternative academic pathways by the schools and the CEG within the school (Hemsley-Brown and Foskett, 2000).

Fourth, the role of marketing and promotional strategies is important. These have emerged as a very important influence on choice, perhaps more by providing ‘just-in-time’ information to enable choices to be justified rather than in fundamentally changing the choices that may be made. In relation to post-16 choice transactional marketing processes become more important, although relationship marketing may still be significant in some market segments, particularly in recruiting into training pathways. Nicholls (1994), Hemsley-Brown (1999) and Maguire, Macrae and Ball (2001) have all shown how the marketing of post-16 choices both by 11-16 schools and by post-16 providers has a strong influence on the perceptions that are formed by pupils and hence the decisions those young people make.

Amongst the wide range of factors which shape and influence choice at 16, the role of schools is one of the most important to understand in detail. Schools function within the organisational and operational context established for them by national and local government and by individual governing bodies. Understanding the ways in which schools currently influence choice will provide a grounded basis for the future development of policy and practice. In particular it will provide an evidence base to promote more effective development of guidance and support within schools and an understanding of approaches that may be more effective in raising pupils’ aspirations and hence achievements. It is this dimension of choice, the influence of schools, which is the focus of this research study.

Project aims

This research study on The Influence of the School in the Decision to Participate in Learning Post-16 was commissioned by the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) in January 2003 to enhance the understanding we hold about the role of the school in shaping the perceptions, and hence choices of post-16 pathways amongst young people in school. The primary aim of the study was:
To identify the nature and influence of school-based factors in the choices of young people about their post-16 education, training and career pathways

The study also contributes to wider understandings of choice and their policy implications, and so had two additional aims:

- To identify implications for the development of careers education and guidance and decision-making awareness amongst pupils and students in schools.
- To enhance further the modelling of pupil decision-making in education and training markets, and in labour markets.

Within the context of these aims, the specific objectives of the research were to:

a) Identify the attitudes to, and preferences in, post-16 education options of Year 10 and 11 pupils across a range of schools, socio-economic contexts and local educational organisational structures.

b) Identify the attitudes to, and preferences in, post-16 education options of head teachers, teachers and careers teachers in those schools.

c) Identify the factors influencing the attitudes and preferences of Year 10 and 11 pupils in post-16 choice.

d) Identify the factors influencing the attitudes and preferences of head teachers, teachers and careers teachers to the post-16 option choices of pupils.

e) Identify the relationship between pupil attitudes/preferences and the attitudes/preferences of school staff about post-16 choices in the school context, as expressed through formal and informal ‘messages’.

f) Identify the influence on attitudes to post-16 options of factors identified in previous research as having some influence in the school context. This includes:

- The nature and quality of careers education and guidance available to and accessed by pupils
- The ethos of the school
- The style of leadership in the school
- The teaching methods used within the school
- The curriculum content and organisation within the school
- The perceived quality of post-16 options available to young people
- The facilities in the school, in terms of general educational provision (e.g. classrooms), specialist facilities (e.g. laboratories, drama or sports facilities) and the specific locational environment of the school
- The presence or absence of a sixth form in the school
- The attitudes to each post-16 option of teachers, careers teachers and the head teacher
The availability of, and access to, information about post-16 options within the school.

The messages about post-16 options within informational/marketing material

**The research team**

The research was undertaken by a team based at the School of Education at the University of Southampton during the period January 2003 – March 2004. The project team comprised:

Professor Nick Foskett  Project Director
Dr Martin Dyke  Senior Researcher and Lecturer in PCET
Dr Felix Maringe  Senior Research Fellow
Sabina Sica  Research Assistant (September – November 2003)
Lianne Larner  Project Secretary (January – July 2003)
Kimberley Dale  Project Secretary (July 2003 – February 2004)

**Research methodology**

The research methodology adopted for the study used existing qualitative methodologies that have been developed by the research teams at the Centre for Research in Education Marketing (CREM) at the University of Southampton in their previous studies of post-16 choice. These methodologies were designed to:

a) use qualitative approaches to analyse young people’s perceptions and choices and their evolution and development

b) triangulate between the expressed attitudes and views of teachers, careers teachers and head teachers and those that can be identified from both documentary sources within the post-16 choice market (e.g. careers booklets, sixth form brochures) and from the views, attitudes and knowledge of pupils and their parents

c) conform strictly to the Ethical Research Guidelines of the British Educational Research Association (BERA)

The research programme was organised into five distinctive stages:

- Preliminary interviews and literature review to inform the design of the qualitative research instruments.
- Design and piloting of research instruments
- Data collection
- Data analysis
- Reporting of the findings

Each of these stages is detailed below.
1. Preliminary Stage

The preliminary stage of the research comprised two components to support the development of the detailed qualitative research instruments:

a) A literature review in relation to the influence of schools on choice at 16.

b) Face to face semi-structured interviews with a representative of each of the following groups in each of two localities.

- The Connexions Service
- Secondary school head teachers
- LSC sector college principals

The two localities were selected on the basis of opportunity and to ensure a geographical contrast between them. Hence the research team undertook the preliminary interviews in a shire county in south-central England and in the area served by one of the Learning and Skills Councils (LSC’s) in London. These interviews explored the perceptions of the role of each of the potential influencing factors in choice identified in the Objectives for this research (see above). Interviews were conducted during late January and early February 2003, and were recorded and transcribed for later analysis.

2. Design and Pilot Stage

The Design and Pilot Stage of the project involved the preparation of the research instruments, and the use of piloting to refine and develop their effectiveness in relation to the research objectives. The instruments comprised:

a) Focus group scripts. Separate scripts were developed for use with Year 11, Year 10 and Year 12 students. Since the focus groups with each year group were undertaken at different times, the scripts were developed in an evolutionary way, in that the Year 10 scripts drew on the experiences of the use of the Year 11 scripts, and the Year 12 scripts were developed in a similar way at a later stage. All three scripts contained a number of common questions to facilitate comparisons, but all also contained additional questions that were specific to the year group and, in the case of Years 10 and 12, sought to explore issues raised in earlier focus groups. The scripts comprised two elements:

i) A self-completion questionnaire to provide profile information on each participant and their engagement with the choice process

ii) A tightly scripted series of questions exploring the pupils’ views and perspectives in relation to each of the research objectives.

The scripts were designed to be undertaken in 45 minutes so that focus groups could be arranged for single lessons within a school timetable or during the lunch break.

b) Parental questionnaires. For both Year 11 and Year 10 pupils a questionnaire was developed to be issued by post to the parents of those pupils who had attended the focus groups. The parental questionnaires were designed for completion in
approximately 15 minutes, and used a combination of structured questions requiring ‘tick box’ answers, and open response questions. They sought to explore parental knowledge and perceptions of the influence of the school on their son’s or daughter’s choice and choice process, with particular reference to the research objectives.

c) Semi-structured interview schedules. Separate schedules were developed for use with: - the respective Heads of Year within each school; the teacher with responsibility for careers education and guidance within each school; and the head teacher of each school. These were designed for completion in a maximum of 45 minutes, to enable them to be undertaken within the time constraints of a single school lesson slot.

d) Telephone interview schedules. These were designed for use with Year 12 pupils who had moved from the school in which they had completed Year 11. They comprised semi-structured questions which followed the sequence of questions covered in the Year 12 focus group, but also included questions to explore the factors and processes involved in the choice to move into a different school, a post-16 college or into training/employment at 16.

Each of the instruments was piloted with an appropriate individual or group in a convenience sample of schools in south-central England.

The Design and Pilot Stage was spread across the period January to August 2003. Each instrument was developed at the appropriate time to ensure its readiness for use in the research study proper.

3. Data Collection Stage

a) Sampling Issues

The Project was designed as a qualitative study based in a sample of case study schools chosen to represent a broad picture of school settings in England. The total sample size was determined in part by the operational constraints of the Project (funding, timing etc), and was originally determined to be 20-25 schools across some 7-10 local education authorities (representing approximately 10% of all authorities).

To provide a sample of schools representative of the range of schools within England, five key characteristics of schools relevant to the study were identified:

1. GCSE attainment rates. Data on individual school GCSE attainment rates are published annually in DfES GCSE Performance Tables. From these tables it is possible to identify the changes in the percentage of pupils in each school achieving 5+ GCSEs at Grade C or better over the last five years. Schools were deemed, for the purpose of the research, to demonstrate rising GCSE attainment if that proportion had increased continuously over the period 1999-2002.

2. Post-16 participation rates. This is the percentage of pupils in Year 11 who progress into full-time education in a school or college in Year 12. Data is collected on post-16 participation by local Learning and Skills Councils at the level of individual young people, and is then aggregated up to generate the data for individual schools and individual local authorities. The data at authority level is collected and
published by DfES, but the data at school level is not published and is subject to confidentiality agreements between the LSCs and schools, although schools receive their own summative data. Schools were distinguished between those with continuously rising post-16 participation rates over the period 1999-2002, and those where participation rates had fluctuated, declined or remained stable.

3. **Post-16 provision within the school.** National patterns of post-16 provision show that many schools continue to make provision for pupils through to age 18, while others provide only for pupils up to the age of 16. Schools are distinguished therefore by whether or not they have a sixth form. Data on post-16 provision in each school is available from the DfES schools database, published on the DfES website.

4. **The socio-economic profile of the parents of pupils.** The socio-economic profile of a school is difficult to determine with accuracy, and is normally expressed through the proxy measure of the proportion of pupils within the school entitled to free school meals. Data on school meal provision is published in a number of databases on schools, including that produced on the website of *The Guardian* newspaper. The mean percentage of pupils receiving free school meals in England is 14%. Those schools with less than 14% of pupils receiving free school meals were deemed for the purposes of this research to have high proportions of parents of high socio-economic status, and those with more than 14% were deemed to have low proportions of parents of high socio-economic status.

5. **Geographical location.** For the purposes of this study, schools were distinguished according to the local education authority in which they are located. Three locational groups were identified – metropolitan authorities, where the LEA was part of one of the six former metropolitan counties; shire counties, where the LEA was one of the former county council local education authorities; and urban unitary authorities.

On the basis of these criteria, it was decided that the sample should be stratified in the following way:

i. All schools in the sample should demonstrate rising attainment rates at GCSE level i.e. GCSE passes at Grades A*-C should have increased over the period 1999-2002

ii. Half of the sample schools should demonstrate rising post-16 participation rates, and half should show stable or declining participation rates

iii. Half of the sample schools should have their own sixth forms and half should be schools without their own sixth forms

iv. Half of the sample schools should have high proportions of parents of high socio-economic status, while half of the schools should have low proportions of parents of high socio-economic status

v. The schools should represent three groups of local education authorities - schools in metropolitan LEAs, schools in urban unitary authority LEAs, and schools in shire county LEAs

From the school criteria and the stratification the sampling grid shown in Figure A1.1 was constructed. This identified a sample from within 8 LEAs (*A to F in the sample grid*) and 24 schools (*1-24 in the sample grid*).
Recognising the variations in LEA size and the fact that many LEAs only have one form of post-16 organisation (i.e. 11-16 schools with sixth form colleges or 11-18 schools), it was decided that where LEAs were not large enough, only contained one form of post-16 organisation, or did not contain enough socio-economic contrast to provide the full sample indicated by the sampling grid, then other similar LEAs would be used, provided that matched pairs of schools were always sampled within single LEAs. The matched pairs are indicated by bold or non-bold fonts within the table. Furthermore, in recognition of the need to provide an appropriate geographical coverage, the eight LEAs selected were chosen from across England to include representation from the north and the south of England and at least four standard economic planning regions.

Identifying local authorities and schools to constitute the sample was undertaken through an iterative process. Using DfES published data on post-16 participation rates (DfES, 2002), four LEAs were identified in each of the three locational categories (metropolitan LEA, urban unitary LEA, shire county LEA), one in each quartile of the data, to provide a broad geographical coverage within England. Within each LEA each secondary school was then profiled to identify:

i. its GCSE attainment rate, using DfES data (DfES, 2003)
ii. the proportion of its pupils receiving free school meals, using data within The Guardian Education website (The Guardian, 2003)

Figure 1.2 The research sampling grid

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>With Sixth Form</th>
<th>Rising Participation</th>
<th>Metropolitan LEA</th>
<th>Urban Unitary Authority LEA</th>
<th>Shire County LEA</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>High SES</td>
<td>Low SES</td>
<td>High SES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>With Sixth Form</td>
<td>Rising Participation</td>
<td>A1</td>
<td>A3</td>
<td>C9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>With Sixth Form</td>
<td>Stable/Falling</td>
<td>A2</td>
<td>A4</td>
<td>C10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Without Sixth Form</td>
<td>Stable/Falling</td>
<td>B5</td>
<td>B7</td>
<td>D13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Without Sixth Form</td>
<td>Stable/Falling</td>
<td>B6</td>
<td>B8</td>
<td>D14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

iii. the presence or absence of a sixth form
iv. the post-16 participation rate for the school over the period 1999-2002. As we have indicated above, this data is not available in the public domain as school level data and is published only in summary data for whole LEAs. However, the data was made available by the relevant local Learning and Skills Councils for those schools that the research team identified as meeting all other criteria.
This process enabled the sample of schools to be identified to match the sampling grid requirements. The schools identified as appropriate to each cell were approached directly to participate in the study, with ‘reserve’ schools and LEAs drawn in to replace those schools that declined the invitation. The final sample comprised 23 schools drawn from 10 local authorities, with all cells within the sampling grid represented with the exception of cell A1. This reflects the relatively small number of schools nationally that meet the criteria indicated by this cell, and the decision not to include a school from this cell was taken only at the point where the timescale of data collection meant that it was not possible to fulfil all the relevant data collection for such a school.

b) Data Collection Phases

The key stages of data collection, the data collected, and the methodologies used within the research were as follows:

**Phase 1: Year 11 Data Collection   (February – May 2003)**

Data collection was undertaken using the following approaches in each school in the sample:

i) Single sex focus groups with Year 11 pupils, comprising one focus group of 12 girls and one focus group of 12 boys.

ii) A questionnaire mailed to the parents of those young people in the focus group who had indicated they were content for such a questionnaire to be sent, and had given written authority for this to happen.

In total 474 pupils participated in the focus groups, and 165 parents responded to the questionnaire.

**Phase 2: Year 10 Data Collection   (May – July 2003)**

This research phase used the same methodologies as Phase 1, but with Year 10 pupils in each school. In addition to the focus groups and parental questionnaires, face-to-face semi-structured interviews were undertaken at this time with the school’s senior careers teacher, the head teacher, and with two Year 11 tutors. A small number of schools declined to continue to be engaged with the project at this stage, so that Phase 2 was conducted on only 20 schools. A total of 450 pupils participated in the focus groups, and 169 parents returned questionnaires.

**Phase 3: Year 12 Data Collection   (October – November 2003)**

Phase 3 of the research involved collecting follow-up data with Year 11 pupils after they had progressed into Year 12. Data collection for this phase of the research was complicated by the dispersal of the original interviewees into a range of post-16 situations, and as a result a number of data collection approaches were used. Two focus groups were undertaken in each school with a sixth form, involving all those participating students remaining in that school from Year 11, with one focus group for girls and one for boys. Of the 11 schools that could potentially have been engaged
with Phase 3 of the research, three chose not to do so. As a result the Year 12 focus groups were undertaken in only 8 schools. Furthermore, not all students who had participated in the Year 11 focus groups were available for the Year 12 focus groups, so the final number of students participating was 56.

One-to-one telephone interviews with a 10% sample of those pupils originally in a school with a sixth form, but who had opted to go to a different institution, were then undertaken, together with one-to-one telephone interviews with a 10% sample of those pupils originally in a school without a sixth form. These were only undertaken with those young people who had indicated during the Year 11 focus group that they were content to be contacted by telephone if necessary once they had moved on from Year 11. A total of 28 telephone interviews were conducted.

**Phase 4: Data Analysis Stage**

The data collection process generated both qualitative data, from focus groups and interviews, and quantitative data, from the student profile returns within the focus groups and from the parental questionnaires. Data analysis was undertaken through:

a) Transcription of all taped interviews and focus group sessions

b) Transfer of the quantitative data to an SPSS data base

c) Content analysis of the tapes by one member of the research team, validated through sample checking by a second member of the team

d) The use of the data analysis package NVivo to code and analyse all qualitative data

**Structure of the Report**

The chapters that follow describe and interpret the key findings of the research project. The chapters focus on the following aspects of the findings:

**Chapter 2 (Choices and choice processes)** presents the main patterns identified within the choices and the choice processes of the young people within the study

**Chapter 3 (The influence of school organisation on choice at 16)** considers how the internal structures and organisation of the school (for example, the physical characteristics of the school, or the organisation of the timetable and curriculum) impact upon young people’s choices

**Chapter 4 (Modelling the influence of the school)** draws out some of the principal models and conceptualisations that emerge from the analysis

**Chapter 5 (Conclusions and recommendations)** indicates the key implications for policy, practice and future research that emerge from the study
Chapter 2

Choices and Choice Processes

Introduction

The primary aim of this study was to understand the role that the school plays in the choice processes of pupils. The formal end of compulsory schooling in England at age 16 provides three broad routes for pupils’ progression into the post 16 phase. In recent years the majority has traditionally stayed on in some form of post compulsory education and/or training (PCET). Most have chosen to follow a full-time academic or vocational programme leading to the award of, usually, A-levels/GNVQ/AVCE, while a relatively small number has moved on to training through, for example, Modern Apprenticeships (MAs). An even smaller percentage has chosen to find work that is not related to any form of training (Foskett and Hemsley-Brown, 2001; Payne, 2002). The purpose of this chapter is to map out the current preferences of pupils at 16 as demonstrated by the evidence from the present study, and to examine factors that influence pupils’ decisions in the context of the circumstances of the specific institutions in which they experience compulsory schooling. The chapter addresses the following issues:

- Pupils’ knowledge of their own goals post-16
- Pupils’ intended destinations post-16
- The perceived influences on choice of school interventions
- The timing of decisions and the timing of school interventions
- Changes as pupils move through the decision processes
- Pupils’ reasons for the choices they make

Pupils’ knowledge of goals post-16

The data demonstrates that an overwhelming majority of Year 10 and 11 pupils in all schools (84.2%) had some idea of what they wished to do upon completing their compulsory education. There remains a small but significant number of Year 11 and 10 pupils (15.8%) who have little or no idea about what they will be doing post 16. However, there were differences in the extent to which post 16 goals had been clarified by pupils in different schools and in different school years. Year 11 pupils, for example tended to have developed their decisions to a greater level of finality than Year 10 pupils. Where pupils wished to stay on in school, the Y11 pupils tended to have decided on the subjects they will be doing in college or sixth form, whereas Year 10 pupils were a lot more hesitant about specific subject choice. Gender differences were also manifested in the extent of knowledge of post 16 goals. Of the 15.8% who did not know their goals post-sixteen, 60 % were boys and 40 % were girls. Similarly, the percentages of pupils indicating knowledge of goals across school types showed small but interesting differences as Figure 2.1 below shows.
Figure 2.1  Pupils’ knowledge of goals across school

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Shire County Schools (N=297)</th>
<th>Urban Schools (N=315)</th>
<th>Metropolitan Schools (N=277)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>High SES</td>
<td>Low SES</td>
<td>High SES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Know Goal</td>
<td>Don’t Know Goal</td>
<td>Know Goal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M F</td>
<td>M F</td>
<td>M F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sixth Form</td>
<td>79 10 5</td>
<td>61 7 4</td>
<td>78 6 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Sixth Form</td>
<td>49 11 4</td>
<td>56 8 3</td>
<td>66 3 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total %</td>
<td>128 21 9</td>
<td>117 15 7</td>
<td>144 9 5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Know = 83%: Don’t Know = 17%
Know = 86%: Don’t Know = 14%
Know = 84%: Don’t Know = 16%

Key:
M = male
F= female
SES = socio-economic status
From Figure 2.1 we can identify the following principal observations of patterns of choice and knowledge about choices post-16:

- In aggregate the data shows that 750 pupils (84%) knew what they wanted to do after Y11
- Although the differences between local authorities were very small, shire county schools recorded the highest percentage of pupils who had no idea what they would be doing post 16
- Overall, more boys than girls at both Y10 and Y11 did not know what they were going to do post 16. This is a significant result given the fact that the sample comprised more female participants than the males
- Schools in low SES environments tend to record higher numbers of pupils who do not know what they will be doing post 16 than those in high SES. About 54% of pupils in this category belong to schools in low SES environments
- Although differences are small, schools with sixth forms recorded a higher percentage of pupils who knew their goals than schools with no sixth form. This could be related to the fact that pupils in schools with a sixth form generally see progression to that sixth form as the normal progression route, as illustrated by the comments of several in the study. Typical was the view of a Y11 pupil in a shire county school with a sixth form

> I have always seen sixth form as a natural progression. For me coming to this school was a decision to have 7 years of secondary schooling. I have never thought about leaving school at 16.

**Pupils’ intended destinations**

Pupils in Years 10 and 11 were asked to indicate their current intended destinations at 16.

Figure 2.2 below summarizes pupils’ intended destinations as indicated in the focus groups.

The data in Figure 2.2 supports the following conclusions about the intended destinations of pupils who participated in the focus groups.

- About 94% of the pupils who indicated their destinations in Year 10 and 11 have the intention of staying on in some form of post compulsory education and training (PCET)
- Post-16 colleges are the preferred option for a majority of Y10 and 11 pupils across the schools in the study, with 59% indicating that they would prefer to move on to a post-16 college for further study or training
- Preferences for sixth form or post-16 college did not appear to be influenced by LEA type and gender. However, it was more common for pupils in schools with sixth forms to talk about sixth form than about post-16 colleges. The majority of those who indicated they were considering a post-16 college were from schools with no sixth form. For example, in one school with a sixth form, of the 44 pupils who took part in the focus groups, only 3 indicated that they
Figure 2.2  Pupils’ intended destinations post-16

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Destinations</th>
<th>Shire</th>
<th></th>
<th>Metropolitan</th>
<th></th>
<th>Urban</th>
<th></th>
<th>Totals</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Number</td>
<td>Percent</td>
<td>Number</td>
<td>Percent</td>
<td>Number</td>
<td>Percent</td>
<td></td>
<td>Percent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sixth form</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>32.3</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>23.2</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>26.2</td>
<td>204</td>
<td>27.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College</td>
<td>123</td>
<td>53.7</td>
<td>142</td>
<td>62.3</td>
<td>175</td>
<td>59.8</td>
<td>440</td>
<td>59.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>7.0</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>7.8</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>6.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College and Work</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>1.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apprenticeship</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>5.7</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>7.9</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>5.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>229</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>228</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>293</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>750</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
intended to study in a college. Similarly, in another school with no sixth form, 33 of the 39 who took part in the focus groups said they would be going to a post-16 college.

• The majority of those who indicated they were likely to choose work or an apprenticeship were boys. It appears that decisions to follow routes of progression beyond 16 outside full-time school/college based programmes are taken more frequently by boys.

• A major difference between Y10 and 11 pupils was in the extent to which they had made a choice of what exactly they would be doing in terms of subjects or courses post 16. Most Year 11 pupils were able to indicate the subjects they would be taking post-16, while a larger proportion of Y10 pupils were less sure about the actual subjects. This could imply that the choice of post 16 destinations takes place much earlier for most pupils than the decision about the actual subjects. It also implies that the decision about actual subjects to be studied post 16 seems to be taken by many pupils at Year 11.

The data obtained from pupils’ focus groups about destinations was corroborated by the staff who took part in interviews. Head teachers, Heads of Year 11 and careers teachers indicated that the majority of their pupils would proceed either to sixth form or to a post-16 college. Percentages cited by different interviewees in the same schools were not consistent in their accuracy but always reflected a similar pattern. From these interviews, staff in schools with no sixth form and in low SES environments sounded much less optimistic about the prospects of their pupils and tended to see their pupils as not utilizing the benefits of compulsory schooling to the best advantage. For example, the head teacher of one such school noted about the pattern of destinations of his pupils:

*It is a big- big worry that after 11 years of compulsory education, they can not see the value, so whereas elsewhere in the city something like 60-70% will stay on to some form of formal education, here the figure has been lower and ...our young people will tend to do much more in a vocational area, job training, NVQ type work than anything else. So the numbers that actually go on to AS and A level are fairly small... There is a big issue... in the sense of potentially wasted learning.*

A similar view was presented in another school in similar circumstances. Issues that were raised reflected on the pupils’ low aspirations and their inclination towards vocational track subjects. The Head of Year 11 in this school indicated that:

*We have a small group of students who take the A level direct university academic route, a larger group who go through more BTEC type, more vocational courses, GNVQ and a very small number who choose to go straight into work. We make sure that’s work with training and Connexions help enormously in this regard...Most of our students tend to be very insecure and need a lot of encouragement to move them out from low self esteem to a sufficient level of confidence to tackle the world outside this school.*
The choice process and the impact of school interventions

Key elements used to define the choice process in this research included: the timing of decisions, the perceived influences on choice, specific school strategies to influence choice, and the perceived impact of these interventions. Data relating to this analysis is consolidated in Figure 2.3. The issue of ‘timing’ includes both when pupils start thinking about their choices and when they make their final decisions. Views from both pupils and school staff were used to provide a broad characterisation for the different types of schools. ‘Perceived choice influences’ includes the extent to which the school was felt to be influential on pupils’ choices and decisions, and the range of people or other factors that were considered especially important in these decisions.

Figure 2.3 provides a summary of the findings about the choice process, and indicate the similarities and differences in chance between the four main groups of schools in the study.

Specific school strategies are the key explicit interventions that schools put in place to help pupils with their decision making. The ‘perceived impact on choice’ is an overall assessment of how pupils felt about the ways their schools were helping them in the process of choosing and making decisions. We shall examine each of these key elements here in turn

Timing of choices

Payne (2002:13) has argued that ‘for careers education and guidance to be effective, it needs to be offered before young people have fixed their minds on a particular post 16 path’. Although variations existed between schools and amongst pupils in different or even the same year groups, the data clearly showed that Year 9 was generally considered as the time the majority of pupils start thinking about post 16 options. Despite slight variations, most schools also reported that their career guidance and advice began in the same year. Year 9 also happens to be the end of Key Stage 3, with pupils beginning to think of Key Stage 4 and expected to make their subject selection at this stage. Although the timing appears to coincide, pupils probably need guidance for this earlier on to help them with the thinking required for making such important and lasting decisions in their lives.

Equally, there remains a significant number of pupils, particularly in high SES schools with sixth forms, followed by those in low SES with sixth forms, who claim to have begun the process of thinking about post 16 options long before they even started secondary schooling. Our analysis of responses from this group indicates that approximately 4% of pupils in the sample had given some consideration to their post 16 choices well before Year 9. This included those who said:

- *I have always wanted to do this.*
- *Ever since I was young, I have always wanted to go to sixth form.*
- *I do not remember when I started thinking about this; it must have been ages ago.*
- *I have never really thought about anything else apart from doing sixth form.*

This figure agrees with that found by Foskett and Hemsley Brown (2001) where 5% claimed to recall making their choices before they turned 13.
Figure 2.3  Modeling the choice process in school

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School Type</th>
<th>Start of choice</th>
<th>Final decision</th>
<th>Relative influence</th>
<th>Key interventions</th>
<th>Perceived impact of School</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(A) Low SES, No sixth form</td>
<td>Year 9</td>
<td>Year 11</td>
<td>School seen as most influential.</td>
<td>Subject choice at Y9 Connexions interviews Work experience PSHE School careers advice and guidance External visitors and visits to other institutions</td>
<td>Attitude to school generally poor particularly towards facilities and school’s handling of career guidance and advice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(B) Low SES, Sixth form</td>
<td>Year 9</td>
<td>Year 11</td>
<td>School and the sixth form seen as most influential</td>
<td>As above in A but with less emphasis on external visitors and visits</td>
<td>Slightly more moderate attitude towards school but strongly negative on schools’ handling of careers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(C) High SES, No sixth form</td>
<td>Year 9</td>
<td>Year 11</td>
<td>Parents and school seen as most influential</td>
<td>As in A but with a significant emphasis on influence of external visitors and visits</td>
<td>A lot more positive about schooling and the facilities of the school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(D) High SES, sixth form</td>
<td>Many claim to have always known</td>
<td>Decision made quite early but Year 11 seen by some as time for final decision</td>
<td>Parents and self seen as most influential</td>
<td>Pupils seem to be rather unaware of school interventions and tend to consider the school’s academic ethos as the most significant influence</td>
<td>School described as the best guarantor of success. Decisions have less to do with school but with self and parental expectations</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The majority of pupils and staff also indicated that final decisions were made in Year 11. Most of these Year 11 pupils recall having made their final decisions when they were completing forms for post compulsory phases of their learning. Some, particularly those still in Year 10, considered that they had come close to making final decisions when they attended work experience. There was however a sizeable number
of pupils in Year 11 and even more in Year 10 who indicated that they would only make their final decisions after the GCSE results were published. Decisions at this stage, however, were often more related to the finer details of subjects to be studied rather than the broad choices of routes to be followed.

Overall, there is evidence from this research that many pupils did not consider the timing of school intervention as suited to their needs. Of the recommendations pupils gave, timing of school interventions was among the most cited as an area for changes in practice, as noted in Chapter 5 of this report.

**Relative influence: the role of mediating agencies**

A wide range of mediating agencies influencing choice was identified by both pupils and staff in schools. These included:

1. **The influence of the school compared to the influence of parents.**

   The school was identified as an important influence mostly by pupils in schools in low SES localities and in particular by those in schools without sixth forms. Numerous studies have shown a relationship between parental levels of education, their socio-economic status measured specifically by type of occupation, and the attitude of pupils towards education, including their tendency to drop out after compulsory education (Kelly 1989; Mortimore 1991; Furlong 1993; Keys and Fernandes 1993; Payne 2002). It could also be related to the fact that schools with no sixth form find progression statistics from compulsory education as a more important criterion for school success than schools with sixth forms. The head teacher of one such school highlighted the significance of the school relative to the home while hinting also at the relative importance of issues of progression to post compulsory education:

   *These young people come from families where nobody has ever studied after 16 except on the job or whatever. So their experience of that world is very limited...I don’t have hard evidence for this but I am pretty certain that (for) a lot of our young people there isn’t encouragement at home. In fact for some of them there may well be discouragement from staying on...Compared to some schools particularly those with their own sixth form, we do more here to encourage pupils to stay on. We measure the success of the school principally by the numbers we succeed in getting to post compulsory schooling.*

   While schools with sixth forms could be said to have a latent influence on pupils’ decisions to participate in post compulsory education, those with no sixth form and particularly those in difficult circumstances tend to view this as a direct challenge requiring their concerted effort in influencing the choices pupils make at 16.

   On the other hand, parents and other home related influences assume greater significance for pupils in schools in high SES localities, particularly those with sixth forms. Here the school appears to have less influence on decisions, either because pupils claim to have made their own decisions or more frequently because their parents have influenced them more significantly. A girl from one such school related how her parents have been the main driving force in her educational ambitions:
Both my parents are medical doctors and they have greatly influenced me to study science subjects which I find very enjoyable and I do well in them. They helped me get a place for my work experience in the hospital and most of the books they buy for me including videos in the home are to do with medical dramas and science fiction. I already know which medical school I am likely to go to after my A levels.

Pupils generally tended to be very wary about their own role in the decision process. While the example above could be said to have some element of parental pressure in decision making (Vincent and Dean 1977), it is clear that the pupil herself enjoys doing the subjects that will lead her to an occupation similar to that of her parents. While parents are seen by many as highly influential in choices and decisions, pupils often emphasized the point that the final decision was theirs rather than their parents’. However, as Ball, Maguire and Macrae (2000) concluded in their study, most young people operate within a framed field of reference, loose or tight, where the tightness of the frame depends on a variety of factors, the most significant of which is parental level of education. However, pupils frequently claim to resist or ignore this frame and ascribe the decisions and choices they make to themselves.

2. The influence of teachers: subject teachers and group tutors

In a number of schools teachers and class tutors were viewed as having little or nothing to do with the post 16 choices pupils were making. Criticism was often quite severe by pupils in schools with sixth forms and those in schools with no sixth form in low SES localities. Standard responses were:

_The teachers here do not care. They just come to teach their subjects and don’t even bother finding out whether we are getting anywhere with the subject._

_Tutors do not deal with this. They just mark the register and make us fill an endless number of forms._

In some schools it became clear that relationships between some pupils and teachers were not congenial, and this generated undesirable distance between the two parties. Despite these negative sentiments, teachers were sometimes seen also as being influential in the choices of pupils, particularly if they were perceived as inspirational. The distribution of such teachers appeared to be fairly evenly though thinly spread across the school types. Such teachers tended to be ones who:

_Teach with enthusiasm for their subjects, make learning fun, provide loads of examples and jokes and make learning relevant to everyday experience. They are open- minded and allow you to make mistakes_  

(Aspects identified from several descriptions of inspirational teachers given by pupils).

Teachers were also seen to promote their own subjects and thus influence the choices pupils make post 16. Using both subtle encouragement and sometimes more direct advice teachers were noted to, for example…
...make it clear to us when we are doing well in their subjects and encouraging us to take their subjects at A-level
(pupil from a school with no sixth form in a high SES locality)

...influence us through our parents at parents’ evening. They convince the parents that we are doing so well and that their subjects will be the best option for us
(pupil from a school with a sixth form in a low SES locality)

3. The influence of other interventions

Other key interventions in the choice processes of pupils are summarized in Figure 2.4 below. The table shows the relative importance attached to a range of other mediating agencies connected to school characteristics. The relative importance ascribed to different schools was measured by the number of times the issue was identified as important in the focus groups. The ranking of importance ranged from:

- very important (VI) (mentioned by more than 70% of respondents in the school category),
- important (I) (mentioned by between 50 and 69% of the respondents,
- moderately important (MI) (mentioned by between 20 and 49% of the respondents)
- not important (NI) (mentioned by less than 20% of the respondents).

Interpreting Figure 2.4 permits us to make the following observations about the relative importance of school based interventions influencing the post 16 choices and choice processes of pupils.

Work experience was the single most important intervening agency organized by schools in the choice processes of the majority of pupils across all schools. Many pupils acknowledged the fact that work experience was important both in affirming their post 16 decisions and also in gaining experience of the world of work. This should however not overshadow the negative experiences some of these pupils reported in relation to work experience. A sizeable number talked of ‘unmet expectations’, the boring and routine nature of work, and having to work long hours for little or no reward. Work experience made a significant contribution in enabling pupils to make more informed decisions about both what careers they wanted and did not want to pursue.

Connexions services were the second most important intervening agency for the majority of pupils. However, Connexions were only regarded as moderately important by pupils in schools with sixth forms, but were considered very important by pupils in schools with no sixth form. The relative importance of Connexions was highest in schools in low SES localities without sixth forms and with falling or stable participation rates. The value pupils in these schools associated with Connexions was captured frequently through sentiments such as:
Mrs. (name supplied) is the only person who has helped us here. She really cares and helps you to deal with difficult decisions. She also helped a lot with my placement for work experience. I will also be taking a summer job through her efforts.

Figure 2.4 The relative importance of other intervening agencies across school types

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key interventions on post 16 choice</th>
<th>School type</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Low SES No Sixth Form</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Range of subject courses on offer</td>
<td>MI</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching groups</td>
<td>VI</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work experience</td>
<td>VI</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connexions</td>
<td>VI</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Careers advice and guidance in school</td>
<td>NI</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internal information provision</td>
<td>I</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>External information provision</td>
<td>VI</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visits to other post 16 providers</td>
<td>VI</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Open evenings</td>
<td>I</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specialist facilities</td>
<td>I</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General school facilities</td>
<td>NI</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Key:** VI= very important; I= important; MI= moderately important; NI= not important

The provision of external information and of visits to other post 16 providers were considered quite important by many pupils, especially those in schools with no sixth form. Pupils in schools with sixth forms generally did not consider these interventions as significantly influencing their decisions. This may be due to the low profile these activities have in such schools, where, as many pupils in these schools said,

...we do not get much information from other sixth form providers or colleges. If we need that information, we have to find it ourselves. The school would rather we stayed here for sixth form (school with a sixth form, rising post-16 participation, and in a high SES locality)

Some pupils in such schools emphasized the school ethos and highlighted the importance attached to hard work and good grades, a focus which tended to remove from the framework of choice any consideration of other options in the post 16 markets

The decision to come to this school was made ages ago by my parents. My sisters have been to this school as well. The school is the best in the region and we are almost assured of good grades if we work hard. The school provides an assured route to universities... and that's where we
are going most of us. That message comes strongly to you as soon as you enrol here and very few leave the school for other places. For example this year, only one or two will be leaving and that is because her parents are moving to the North. Otherwise all of us are staying.

On the other hand, pupils from schools with no sixth form often saw the provision of external information and visits to post 16 providers of education and training as having been of tremendous benefit during their choice and decision processes.

Our school arranges for us to visit ...colleges when they have their open evenings and we find this very useful... (it) helps us to make up our minds about what to do next and we can also compare what different colleges offer before we make up our minds
(pupil at a school with no sixth form, stable post-16 participation rates, in a high SES locality)

The range of courses and teaching groups was generally seen as moderately important in the choice processes of most pupils. Pupils nevertheless highlighted the issue of access to what schools generally saw as a wide curriculum provision, for they perceived in many schools that the choice was severely restricted by administrative and organizational constraints. Timetable and subject grouping, an issue that has come to be referred to as ‘blocking the choices’, appears to restrict choice for many pupils both pre and post 16. In most schools in the study the timetable was constructed prior to discussion with pupils about their choices. Only in one school did we experience the latter in operation. In this school, with no sixth form and in low SES locality, the timetable is made only after the pupils have selected their subjects.

Pupils’ views about mixed ability and ability based grouping and their impact on choice were divided. Many saw ability grouping as a good thing as long as one was in the higher groups as this ensured that pupils would be working at the pace of those with similar ability to their own. The lower groups were seen as encouraging greater inequalities, as often teachers were noted to give less attention to them and their progression was noted to be restricted by curriculum and assessment contingencies.

I am in a low group for Maths. I can only hope to get a C for my GCSE in that subject since I will be writing the foundation paper. With a poor grade for the subject, it will be very difficult to pursue my dream to become an accountant. I will work hard to prove the school and Mr. ...wrong
(pupil in a school with a sixth form in a low SES locality)

The feeling that grouping did not always provide sufficient flexibility for pupil mobility across the groups was fairly widespread despite arrangements schools put in place to promote pupils doing well in their groups. It can be argued that grouping in schools is done for educational efficiency reasons (Lauder 1999) but the disengagement that sometimes occurs in the low streams indicates that inefficiencies remain pervasive in many of the schools. Oakes (1985) and Hacker (1991) have shown that the differentiated curriculum provision for able and less able students in schools results in differentiated outcomes some of which perpetuate social conflict in society. They argue that the first casualty of differentiated provision on the basis of ability is always the crippling of self worth and the concomitant lowering of
educational expectations (Smyth 1999). The impact that this has on pupil aspiration in relation to post-16 might be expected to be negative, and our data suggests that pupils perceive placement in a lower set for a particular subject as ruling out pathways and options that link to that subject in any way.

Pejorative terms such as ‘duffer’ and ‘boffin’ were frequently used by pupils and acknowledged by teachers.

*Male:* It depends what type of person you are. If you are a boffin they will ask you to stay on in the sixth form but if you are not really clever then they're not really interested.

*Head of Careers:* We have a fair number that will stay on and do things like AVCE’s. I certainly promote those, a lot of year 10 onwards trying to explain what they are. Because in the past when they were called GNVQ advanced they were seen as the duffers option, and I have always been very against that, and always try to promote that and the fact that it makes people into very good students.

The school where these labels were most evident split the cohort into two broad based ability bands. There was no suggestion that the banding groups were open and flexible or evidence of on going transfer between the groups based on academic achievement. It was clear that relatively closed systems of ability teaching had an impact on expectations and in themselves limited the perception f pathways available for pupils post-16. Students felt that they should have more say as to which group they should be placed within.

Student perception of mixed ability teaching appeared to be determined by the group they were placed in, those in the higher groups were more positive about streaming than those in the ‘low’ ability groups. There were frequent references to impact of setting on the expectations of teachers

*Male:* we get taught in sets I don’t like it, the top set seem to get everything and if you are in the lower set they don’t help.

*Female:* They seem to take the clever people and push them but if you’re not as clever they just don’t bother.

*Q:* Is that a general opinion?

*Students (rest of group):* Yes

It was evident in the focus groups that a pupil’s orientation to their post-16 pathway was moulded by their perception of their capability and teachers expectations. Their position in a hierarchy of ability groupings had a fundamental influence on their expectations and consideration of post-16 options. These expectations limited the choices pupils thought were open to them and framed their decision-making. For example, students with low GCSE expectations did not appear to consider the possibility re-taking GCSE’s at college and progressing to A’ Level, they tended to rule out any form of academic rather than vocational pathway.
School facilities, both general and specialist, were largely seen as not important in the post 16 decisions and choices pupils were making. Rather than talk about how facilities were an influence one way or the other, pupils tended to express opinions regarding the general standard of these for their schools. As expected, pupils in low SES locality schools, and in particular those with no sixth form, had scathing remarks to make about facilities in their schools. Overall the complaints related to inadequacy, the poor state of maintenance, and sometimes to inadequate utilisation of available resources. However, some pupils in specialist schools indicated how facilities in areas such as music or sports technology had been an influence in their decisions to take the subjects beyond GCSE. Staff were equally divided on the significance of facilities in the choice process. However pupils were generally considered to enjoy working in well maintained buildings and being somewhat put off by shabby buildings and structures. The head teacher of a school with a sixth form in a high SES locality captured the positive side of the impact of facilities:

*We have excellent facilities and interestingly in subjects that are taught in these excellent facilities, the take up for post 16 is much higher. Modern languages are in a building built in the Second World War... a very sad building. The take up in those subjects is very low despite the fact that these subjects are compulsory. Subjects like Art, Design and ICT are very popular and are housed in a modern building that is only five years old. The take up in those subjects is very high and sometimes we cannot cope with the numbers. Facilities have to be a contributory factor.*

Where facilities were not considered as hugely significant in the choice processes of pupils, the role of teaching and teachers was usually given greater prominence as suggested in the following comment:

*I think most subjects you could teach perfectly well in a shed. If you have an inspiring motivated teacher, the accommodation pales into insignificance with the quality of the teacher. Our science always achieves the best results, but they have the most ordinary facilities. ICT, with state of the art facilities, 28 rooms all networked on XP have some of the worst results. So it’s down to the teachers.*

Internal information for supporting pupils’ choices and decisions was, surprisingly, considered as relatively unimportant by a majority of pupils in most schools. This was related to a number of issues. Staff in schools talked of a general decline in the reading culture of pupils. This was corroborated by the pupils themselves, who either described internal information as coming in unmanageably large chunks or, more directly, as something they had little interest in as long as it involved reading. This provides support to the claim made earlier that a simplistic ‘rational action’ decision making model of choice making does not characterise the choices of many of these young people. Didactic models of post-16 information transmission do not carry the same weight for pupils of direct experience of post-16 learning or dialogue with the post-16 experience of others. Pupils seek first hand experience and direct engagement with post-16 options. Informational models of leaflets, web pages and ‘teacher talk’ have less of an impact than experiential activity.
Perhaps the most surprising result of all was the perceived importance of the schools’
career guidance and support in the choice processes of these pupils. Only a very small
minority of pupils felt that school career guidance and support had helped them
sufficiently in their choices and post 16 decisions. Career guidance and support was
described variously, but mainly negatively, by pupils. A small sample of pupils’
comments about this issue will serve to illustrate the level of dissatisfaction pupils
have with this aspect of the schools management of post-16 choice and decisions.

Careers guidance in this school does not help a thing, we are always
asked to fill in targets every time we have PSHE lessons and the
teachers don’t seem to know much about anything else other than their
subjects

The careers interviews are useless because all they ask you what do
you want to be and when you tell them they say that’s fine and off you
go. That’s the end of the interview.

Most of the time we are asked to visit the library and read about
careers. We get tired of reading the same material every time and
some of the books are quite old

It’s all Kudos every time, which is a very good programme, but I think
it’s overdone.

The interviews are not compulsory and those who don’t need them
don’t have to go. But sometimes people don’t go there because they
have no clue what they will be doing and don’t want to embarrass
themselves. I think ways should be found to make everyone involved

Careers lessons are a complete waste of time as we are always asked
to do the same thing, filling in targets and our objectives. I had a one
on one interview and ended with much more done after only 20
minutes than I have done in a whole year.

Changing decisions

Choice is dynamic in that the precise nature of the preferences expressed by young
people will change over time as a range of factors influence their ideas about choice.
The decision that might be made at one point in the process might, therefore, change
by some later moment. The changes pupils could make occur at two broad levels. The
first involves changes in anticipated destination, while the second is change in the
choice of subjects/courses to be studied. Focus groups with students in Year 12
indicated that destinations tend to remain fixed for the majority of pupils but in a few
cases pupils make changes to the subjects they actually choose to study post 16. The
majority appeared to have stuck to the subjects they had anticipated in Year 11 that
they would study post-16. Subject changes were related to issues of curriculum
organisation within the schools
I discovered I could not do French and German because they belong to the same group despite my desire to become a linguist. So I have had to take Art....

Sometimes changes were also related to performance at GCSE, although this was quite rare.

**Reasons for choices**

A wide range of reasons for making choices was given by the pupils. The reasons were grouped and some indication of the prevalence of given reasons was determined by finding out the percentage of pupils in each of the four broad school types who gave those reasons. That way it was possible to estimate the key motives behind post 16 choices in the different school environments. The findings are summarized in Figure 2.5 below. Reasons given for choices were either highly prevalent (HP) (above 70% of pupils in the school category mentioning the reason), moderately prevalent (MP) (50-69%), low prevalence (LP) (20-49%) or not prevalent (below 20%). From the data in Figure 2.5 a number of important conclusions can be drawn.

Firstly, subject enjoyment, the influence of parents, and a perception of being good at subjects appear to exert the greatest influence on the choices pupils make. These choice drivers are however most strongly prevalent amongst pupils in high SES schools. The results also support those in the previous section summarized in Figure 5.4. Parents in high SES schools may exert more influence on their children, perhaps through stronger guidance, as role models, or because they are more economically able to provide the various types of support young people need at this stage. Pupils in high SES schools thus tend to have a greater ‘feel good factor’ about their schools, their subjects and their self confidence and abilities. Conversely there seems to be less enjoyment of schooling reported in low SES schools as this factor appears to have little influence on the choices pupils are making.

Secondly, in this study economic motives based on instrumental reasons for choice, such as a need to make ‘loads of money’ are largely a low key driver of post 16 choices. The influence is at best moderate amongst pupils in low SES schools without sixth forms.

Thirdly, friends and siblings tend to have only a moderate influence across the schools. Sibling influence is, however, slightly greater among pupils in high SES schools, where the tradition of FHE is likely to be greater than in families from low SES localities. Even there, the data supports findings which indicate that female students tend to be more influenced by, or at least recognise the influence they get from, their siblings than their male counterparts, confirming the findings of Lynch and Lodge (2002). Similarly, our analysis shows that boys tend to mention friendship influence more than girls.
Fourthly, pupils believe that teachers exert a moderate to low influence on their post-16 choices. Their influence is more strongly felt in low SES schools than it is in schools in high SES localities. Where their influence was noted as high, it was more often related to the importance of inspirational teachers as discussed earlier in this chapter.

Fifth, despite the finding made earlier that schools in low SES localities, and particularly those with no sixth form, tend to play a stronger career guidance and advice role, pupils in these schools appear to make fewer connections between their post 16 aspirations and the ultimate careers they want to pursue later in life. Choices
were seen as short-term and immediate rather than linked to a longer term view of a career pathway. In contrast, pupils in high SES schools tended to link their choices with the ultimate careers they wished to pursue.

Finally, we must note that there was a notably higher prevalence of pupils’ ignorance of the reasons for their choices in schools in low SES areas. This could reflect the low aspirations these pupils are usually associated with (Smyth 1999) and the consequent delay in the career decision they often demonstrate.

**Parental views of the post-16 choices of pupils**

A total 334 parents of pupils in Year 10 and 11 responded to the questionnaire. There was a very close matching of responses between those given by parents and those by pupils to broadly similar questions. This may suggest two important things. First, that parents probably play a more direct role in influencing the post 16 choices and decisions pupils make than the pupils themselves are prepared to acknowledge. Second, that the views expressed by pupils concerning the role of their schools in their choices and decisions can be largely considered a valid characterization of the influence of the schools.

Like the pupils, four in five parents (81.8%) thought that their children wished to do A levels, while only one in 10 (9.1%) considered their children to be contemplating a vocational route. Almost all of parents mentioning the vocational route for their children were from low SES environments. A smaller percentage (3.6%) indicated that their children wanted to do MA’s. All parents mentioning this route were parents of boys and were more commonly found in schools in Urban and Metropolitan areas. Only two parents (0.6%) indicated that their children were contemplating work with no training.

About 36% representing parents of pupils in schools with a sixth form indicated that their children would remain in the same schools after compulsory schooling. The majority of those who indicated FE colleges tended to be parents of children in schools with no sixth form.

More than two thirds of parents (66.7%) considered schools to place equal emphasis on all post 16 options available to pupils. This contrasted significantly with pupils, the majority of who considered that greater emphasis was placed in schools’ advice and guidance on the academic route. However, the majority of parents (6.1%) indicating that schools had a greater bias towards the vocational options were from low SES environments while those (21.2%) who indicated that schools had a bias towards the academic subjects tended to be from the more affluent high SES environments. Parents who suggested that schools were more academically inclined explained this in a number of ways. Some considered an academic orientation as being related to the type of school.

*My son goes to a grammar school. There are no non-academic subjects available (parent 447)*

*It is an academic school and there is (a) predominance towards continued academic study. Only a few subjects offered at post 16 are vocational (parent 803)*
Others considered school offerings as just being suited to the needs of their able children.

*Academic A levels have been emphasized as the best choice as they are the best for her (daughter) chosen career.* (parent 457)

Some parents were however unhappy about this academic orientation particularly when their children were not considered by them to be academically gifted.

*My son has languished in the bottom sets for most subjects since year 7. Emphasis has been put on taking A-levels, which seem to be beyond the reach at present of my son. Not much guidance as to alternatives. He may get a 20 minute careers interview.* (parent 852)

Like their children, parents also considered the information and guidance offered by schools as somewhat important and teachers were seen as of little consequence by more than two thirds of parents (67% including those who said teachers had little influence (48.5%) and those who said they had no influence at all (18.2%). Teachers are thus seen by both parents and pupils as not having much influence in the post 16 choices and decisions made. This underscores the discrete nature of the career guidance curriculum and its place in schools where teachers are considered as having little or no relevance to both its organisation and delivery. However, the minority of parents (12.7%) who considered teachers as having a strong influence explained their views in a number of ways reflecting closely what pupils and head teachers said on similar issues. The issue of inspirational teachers was often noted by parents who saw teachers as having an important role to play in the post 16 choices and decisions of pupils.

*The ways in which she has been taught is not affecting whether or where she will do her A-levels. Some teachers teach in a way that has knocked all her enthusiasm for a subject whereas others have taught in a more inspiring way, encouraging her to continue with the subject* (parent 598)

*Good teachers make their subjects more interesting to pupils and pupils respond accordingly* (parent 735)

*If a teacher has a genuine passion for a subject they are teaching it can only pass on to the student positive feelings on that subject* (parent 646)

Similarly, parents were generally sceptical about the influence of facilities, both general and specific with only minority percentages (around 15%) considering them as having a strong influence. However a majority of those parents (73.8%) with children in schools with sixth form considered those schools as openly encouraging pupils to stay within the same schools.

Almost a quarter of parents (22.6%) considered that schools did not always help those who wanted to go away to other schools. This supports the notion that some schools, particularly those in high SES and with sixth forms tend to be considered as the least impartial and most focused on the academic pathway.

Overall, the findings in this research confirm those by Foskett and Hesketh (1997) who found that considerable differences existed in the types of courses chosen by
working and middle class students at 16 with the former more likely to opt for vocational courses while the later remained focused on academic options. Parental expectations in this research tended to confirm this great divide.

Conclusions

Choice models help us to understand how pupils in schools make their decisions during periods of transition. However none of the models discussed in Chapter 1 individually provides us with a comprehensive understanding of the intricacies of choice at 16 as demonstrated in the data within this study. Models of choice currently reported in the literature provide partial insights into the decisions and choices pupils make in the post 16 education and training markets. The extent to which structural constraints influence post 16 choices and decisions varies from one type of school to another. Some pupils from high SES environments, for example, have made up their minds about post 16 progression well before they even start secondary schooling, even though the majority drift into such decisions as a response to school based management and organizational imperatives. Equally while the point for final decisions coincides with yet another organizational and structural landmark in the calendar of schools for the majority (i.e. the necessity of making a choice towards the end of Year 11), those in high SES localities often report an earlier final decision point that has little or no relevance to key dates on the school programme. Thus structuralist models, highlighting the constraints imposed by the schools provide a sufficient explanation only for schools in more disadvantaged circumstances than they do in those under better socio-economic conditions.

The academic ethos of schools offers a very powerful influence on the post 16 choices and decisions of pupils. The usual interventions schools put in place to influence choices and decisions appear to have a greater impact in schools with a less robust academic vision. It was interesting to note that in schools where the academic tradition was a strong feature, usually those with a sixth form and in high SES localities, the influence of interventions paled into insignificance in comparison to the power of the notions of academic excellence, league table status and a curriculum driven by the demands of University entrance.

The economic and human capital models of school choice had little relevance in explaining the processes of choice and decisions in the majority of schools. The little mention there was about careers as a determinant of choice was confined very narrowly to those pupils in high SES schools. Thus, although many pupils know what they will be doing beyond Year 11, their commitment to specific careers was an issue to which not a great deal of attention had been paid. Incidences of pupils choosing combinations of subjects because they left them with very broad options at the end of schooling suggest that choices are not entirely economically driven. However the need to make ‘loads of money’ appears fairly pervasive across schools, more so among pupils in low SES schools and in particular those with no sixth form.

Models based on ideas of rational decision-making were particularly challenged by data from this research. Despite schools doing their best to provide post 16 pathways information in libraries, many pupils, while acknowledging its presence, indicated only a limited use being made of it. The tendency to place a greater premium on visits to post 16 providers and on concrete experience gained from interacting with outside visitors including the prominence given to work experience, highlight the need for an experiential careers curriculum rather than a text or information transmission based
guidance and advice programme as currently obtains in many schools. Pupils are not vigilant information collectors, although they are, equally, not information averse. They seem to be more efficient learners if the environment is experiential, accounting for the drift seen towards choice being strongly driven through notions of fashion and fashionability and the need to be seen as part of making ‘cool’ choices.

Key findings

Pupils’ knowledge of goals post 16
- Shire county schools recorded the highest percentage of pupils who had no idea what they would be doing post 16.
- More boys than girls at both Y10 and Y11 do not know what they are going to do.
- Schools in low SES environments tend to record higher numbers of pupils who do not know what they will be doing post 16 than those in high SES.
- Schools with sixth forms recorded a higher percentage of pupils who knew their goals than schools with no sixth form.

Pupils’ intended destinations
- About 94% of the pupils in Year 10 and 11 have the intention of staying on in some form of post compulsory education and training (PCET).
- Post-16 colleges are the preferred option for a majority of Y10 and 11 pupils across the schools in the study (59%).
- Boys were more likely than girls to indicate work or apprenticeship opportunities

Timing of choices
- Year 9 is the time the majority of pupils start thinking about post 16 options.
- A significant number of pupils, particularly in high SES schools with sixth forms, followed by low SES with sixth forms, claim to have begun the process of thinking about post 16 options before they started secondary schooling.
- Many pupils did not consider the timing of school interventions as suited to their needs.

Relative influence: the role of mediating agencies
- The school was identified as an important influence mostly by pupils in schools in low SES localities and in particular by those in schools without sixth forms.
- Parents and other home related influences assume greater significance for pupils in schools in high SES localities, particularly those with sixth forms.
- Teachers and class tutors were generally viewed as having little or nothing to do with the post 16 choices pupils were making.

Attitudes to and preferences in post 16 choices and decisions
- The academic pathway in the post 16 markets continues to hold sway. A clear majority of pupils consider the A-level route as the most preferred.
- The numbers of pupils considering work based training routes, particularly modern apprenticeships is low across all schools.
There is a strong imbalance between male and female pupils when it comes to opting for work based training routes.

Alongside the desire for academic careers is a growing tendency amongst pupils to opt for subjects combining vocational and academic learning.

Different schools continue to educate pupils for different destinations. High SES schools see themselves as developing pupils for academic university based careers, while low SES schools maintain a stronger commitment to vocational pathways.
Chapter 3

The Influence of School Organisation on Pupil Choice

Introduction

The attitudes to, and preferences of, educational professionals towards post-16 education will now be considered. The professionals interviewed in this study reveal a universal commitment to post-16 education and training, with a preference for academic post-16 pathways and an orientation towards university education as the predominant perspective. However, there are differences in the attitudes and preferences to post-16 education and training and these translate into schools adopting different strategies and educational interventions to support young people in their decision making about post-16 education and training. This chapter examines the organisation, structures and cultural aspects of the school, and how head teachers, teachers, and career teachers translate these into educational interventions related to post-16 education and training. The attitudes and preferences of educational professionals inevitably produce different structures and curricula activities. Educational practitioners acknowledge sources of tension between the values of the educational aspirations of the school and the cultural experiences and perceptions of some young people. Although there exists broad support for the government’s aims to increase participation in post-16 education and training in all the schools surveyed, the attitudes and preferences of individual schools are textured and broadly reflect the cultural contexts and situation of individual schools.

The discussion below draws out the emphasis given in responses during one to one interviews and focus groups. These emphases do not represent types of people or schools, they are not labels that suggest fixed qualities or absolutes that determine the influence of the school and actions of the school. The relationships between the individuals, institutions and the particularities of the social and economic context are more fluid and open to change than would be suggested by simple taxonomies of schooling. In social theory terms such an approach is consistent with the structuration theory of Giddens (1993). The discussion illustrates how individuals that make up the community of the schools interact with the social, economic and political context of the school and tend to produce different types of responses and emphasis in their approach to post-16 education and training pathways. These responses are open to change - they reflect the relationships between the community of staff and students of the school within a particular cultural, market, economic and geographic situation. Indeed, the teachers interviewed openly report different approaches to post-16 that they had experienced and participated in as members of staff in other schools. The following discussion teases out some key themes and points of emphasis provided by individuals as they respond to the circumstances of their school. The themes that emerge include: a focus on the needs of individual students; an orientation to the reputation, ethos and tradition of the particular school; an awareness and sensitivity to the external policy environment and strategic influences on schooling; and finally a more managerial focus on the internal functions, roles and systems within the school. Clearly all schools are concerned with all of these issues. The research conducted here suggests some schools are experiencing push and pull effects that locate the organisation closer to one or more of these particular issues. These orientations in turn construct different impacts by schools on student decisions to participate in post-16 education and training.
Supporting post-16 choice

The Head teachers’ perspective

When asked “Does the school seek to promote some sorts of choices at 16 rather than others?” nine of the 23 head teachers emphasised their aim to meet the individual needs of students. The following quotations from interviews are typical of a head in schools with no sixth form:

I think that we try to promote the choices that we feel are most suited to the individual pupil rather than promote a particular type of course or particular destination. We try to promote what we feel is best for the individual pupil or groups of pupils who has got the same aspirations and ambitions.

...so we have always taken the view that the most important thing is the students, the individual student and then getting a place at an institution which is going to serve their needs better, therefore, we have, we give all of the schools and organisations access to our students and give them a free choice and I think the students are actually going to be spread over five 6th forms in the area, because they offer the courses or the students felt that they liked the particular ethos or feel of a different 6th form.

Six of the nine head teachers with ‘student focused’ responses were in schools without a sixth form, and of the two heads of schools with a sixth form, one was head of a relatively remote school with no local competition for sixth form students. These eight Head Teachers were evenly split between schools with rising participation and stable / falling participation. Five were in schools with high SES and three in schools categorised as low SES.

Other head teachers were far more focused internally on the workings and operation of the school. They framed their answers very much in terms of what the school could offer and where the school saw itself in terms of post-16 provision. These ‘school centred’ heads were much more likely to express their ideas of what is best for the school and the students and are more inclined to direct the students. The following quotations are typical:

I think consciously and unconsciously we would support an academic education, because that’s the way we think and the way the school thinks. I think that’s probably what we would encourage. And then for individuals we would be supporting them in specific areas. Like we’d say, “I don’t think A’ Level is suitable for you, do Vocational, do the AVCE route, work related learning type route”

I would say that it promotes certain choices in terms of academic choices because we have fewer vocational courses, and we were described by an inspection that came round as being, “A very good school, for the average and the above average” because we do have a cut off post 16 that says to get into our sixth form you have to have a minimum of five GCSE passes to get in, so of course you will be disqualifying a number of students by having that. That’s for a combination of reasons - it’s about playing to your strength
When asked what post-16 options the school promotes seven head teachers answered this with primary references to the ethos and curriculum of the school. Of this seven, four were from schools with sixth forms in high SES localities.

Another group of head teachers tended to provide more strategic ‘policy orientated’ answers to the post-16 options promoted by the school. These heads were conscious of the policy agenda beyond the school, and talked about procedures they had introduced in order to meet the demands of these external drivers. These heads could be seen as taking a more strategic policy orientated position. They are conscious of what is expected of them by government agencies and positive about implementing the policy agenda.

_Inevitably we have got targets that we have got to meet for participation and I recently had a conversation with somebody from the DTI about youngsters who want to set up their own businesses, entrepreneurial kids who have got a brilliant idea and have got the understanding of business to be able to do it. I’m not sure we would encourage that because they wouldn’t help get kids into post 16 education because it doesn’t meet a target._

These more policy orientated responses occurred in a range of schools, though they were most likely to be found as a secondary characteristic in student centred schools. Three out of four head teachers that provided policy orientated responses led schools with rising participation in post-16 education and training. Schools that were school centred and proactive in their response to policy initiatives aimed explicitly at improving post-16 participation and were more likely to have rising participation.

The responses of head teachers discussed so far can be characterised as being centred on students, the school or the external policy agenda. A fourth group of heads were more focused on the management systems and functions within the school. In these more managerial or ‘functional’ schools, the task of careers related advice and support is demarcated through a small number of pathways, such as PSHE lessons or an interview conducted through the Connexions service. Students in these schools perceive their support coming from one or two key individual teachers or advisors linked to the school. The Connexions service has a high profile and is valued by staff and students. In these schools supporting decision making about post-16 does not appear to be a high priority, and it appears almost as if it has contracted out the responsibility of particular functional roles of selected staff. Given that all the schools that emphasised the functions and roles within school systems were characterised as low SES it could be that these schools receive a higher level of unit resource from the Connexions service that enables them to devolve some responsibility for post-16 guidance.

Teaching staff, other than specialist careers staff, were not reported by students to have influenced their decision-making in a significant way. The following quotations illustrate the head teachers emphasis on services and systems provided to support students:

_We do that in a number of ways, not only through the quality of the careers education and guidance work we do, but by having good links with the colleges and in particular the Connexions advisor in the school works extremely hard to raise aspirations and ensure that the pupils are on good courses and looking to improve to qualifications that they have._
We do seek to promote different choices through use of the Connexions service individual interviews, encouraging students to go on work experience, having access to the involvement of local businesses in their education for the last two years. We, I would say that there is some pressure on the school to encourage students to stay on in education and that would be pressure not just from the school but the Local Education Authority Government.

Four of the five head teachers who emphasised the functions and systems related to post-16 are in schools categorised as serving areas of low SES. These schools are less likely to have a sixth form and tend to be in urban or metropolitan areas. External mediating agencies, such as the marketing activities of post-16 colleges, were more likely to have an impact on student decision-making than the activities of the school. It is in these schools, where the approach to post-16 was more routine and low key, that students were most vociferous in their recommendations for improving the school’s support with their post-16 decision-making.

The perspective of heads of year and heads of careers

There was a widespread belief amongst teachers in schools without sixth forms that schools with sixth forms did not provide neutral advice, guidance and support about post-16 options. These teachers provided examples both from schools that they had previously worked in or as parents of children in schools with sixth forms. These same teachers tended to pride themselves and their schools on taking a student centred approach to post-16 that put the individual needs of the students to the fore. However, only seven Heads of Year emphasised the role of the school as promoting choices post-16 that were in the interests of the individual student, which is somewhat surprising given the pastoral role of Year 11 Heads. The following quotation from these student-focused Heads of Year 11 is typical:

We really make an all out effort to give them all the possibilities and to that end, in the autumn term, they all fill out a questionnaire for us. The careers advisor comes in, the Connections advisor comes in to explain all the possibilities. ... So we do have a very structured programme. So we try and balance it out. If anything, we've got very much better at balancing it out. We do our own sixth form evening in November. That's for anyone, anyone at all that wants to come to our school sixth form. But all schools do that that have a sixth form. But we do one that's balanced. Look at the different ones that are possible...

Similar quotations could be found from a variety of schools, including those with sixth forms, both rising and stable levels of participation, and the full range of LEA types. The only attribute that was skewed was that related to social economic status. Six of the seven Heads of Year whose comment emphasised the individual needs of students were in low SES schools.

There was explicit emphasis on the schools’ interests from a number of Heads of Year in schools with sixth forms. This supports the perception of teachers (reported above) that schools with sixth forms do not provide impartial advice. The following quotations demonstrate an acute awareness of the school as a market place. These teachers are very conscious of the varying issues of supply and demand.
I think this used to be the case but I think this is beginning to change. We are now over subscribed as a school, post 16, and we are also trying to make the sixth form bigger and more varied. So whereas we might have taken everybody in previous years, we are beginning to have to say “You have to get good results to come back here.” And this is new to them; it was really new for the first time this year.

The pupils’ perspectives

The preferences of educational professionals for students to engage in academic post-16 learning is recognised by the young people themselves. Many students perceive schools with their own sixth form as actively encouraging them into staying on at that sixth form rather than pursuing other options. It should, perhaps, be no surprise that teachers who are proud of their school and enthusiastic about their subject encourage students to stay on with them. However, the lack of available impartial advice, support and guidance is a recurring theme in the focus group discussions and one that is explored in other chapters. Students in schools with sixth forms frequently suggested that the school treated them as a potential customer as a source of income. There is a stark contrast between the liberal educational views common amongst individual teaching staff and the perceptions of students in some schools:

I think they would like us to stay here because they get more money if we stay on. They get paid for each A Level.

There is a clear geographic variation in the schools perceived to be promoting their own sixth form. Nearly all are schools in metropolitan or urban local authorities where there are other post-16 providers available to young people. This suggests a pattern of relationships between schools, market supply and demand and the impact on choice policies in post-16 advice guidance and support. Relationships in secondary schooling, between geography, markets and choice of schools have recently been noted (Gorard, Fitz and Taylor 2003). The interplay of socio-economic status, urban, metropolitan and shire locations seems to impact on the quality of the support schools provide about post-16 options.

Two thirds of the schools with sixth forms were perceived by students not to provide impartial advice on post-16 options. The schools perceived as providing impartial advice were those which either had no sixth form provision themselves or no significant local competition for their own sixth form. There is also a tendency (five out of eight schools) for schools in areas of low SES to be seen as promoting their own sixth forms.

Curriculum organisation and post-16 choice

The majority of teachers and head teachers were in favour of a broad based and balanced curriculum and would seem to have a preference for general education along the fairly traditional academic lines of the National Curriculum. Alongside such preferences for general education there is an acknowledgement of a need for more specialist vocational options, a recognition that the National Curriculum is failing to meet the needs of, or engaging, all their pupils. Teachers are wary of over specialisation from an early age and are keen for students to maintain a balanced, if
not academically biased, curriculum. The following view from a head teacher is typical:

That’s an interesting question because I personally believe that they should have a breadth. So when they’re choosing in Year 9 we emphasise breadth — don’t cut yourself off from doing Science, for example: don’t cut yourself off from doing the English. So we’d say when you’re doing, don’t do three technologies and leave out Music or Art; don’t leave out History or Geography. So the emphasis is on breadth. That’s a very definite course of action that we would advise and try, when students are choosing their options to make sure that no matter what happens to them, they can go down different routes and not to narrow their choices.

The preference for a broad and balanced general education sits alongside a reluctant acknowledgement that such a curriculum diet is not engaging all young people. This tension is captured in the concern expressed by one Head of Year who values a broad based general academic education but recognises it does not suit all of his students.

I am aware that I don’t think the curriculum suits quite a sizable minority and it is a growing minority that really should be out there with their hands covered in grease at the age of 15 rather than sitting learning a diluted version of the grammar school curriculum. I think I am just so aware of specific lads in my year group (and there are some in year 10), they are fantastic on work experience. There is one in year 10, he is a pain in the butt here but has a job waiting for him because of what he did on work experience a couple of weeks ago. Some of them just don’t belong here, they shouldn’t be here but things go in a full circle don’t they? We are back to 1972 again. I don’t think I have found the answer to the question properly yet.

There is strong desire amongst the teachers interviewed that young people should not specialise too early, and expressed concern about students making decisions that restrict their future options at too young an age. Teachers also question the quality of the information young people use to make such decisions and point to the role of the peer group and significant others. There is, perhaps, a conflict here with the aspirations of young people themselves, who believe they make decisions early in their schooling and would prefer to have greater freedom to specialise and choose their own subject combinations. As the discussion in other chapters illustrates, young people are recommending that they should receive impartial advice guidance and support earlier in their schooling and that they should be provided with more choice of subjects and specialisms.

Other teachers respond to the disengagement of some young people with reference to two key ingredients. Firstly, they identify the need for changes in the curriculum and, secondly, they emphasise the need for young people to experience ‘enjoyment’ in their learning. Schools need to find ways in which young people can take vocational options and engage in practical activities that enable them to enjoy their schooling. The following lengthy quotation draws out some of the common ideas:

What we have tended to do, I think, is we have just restructured our curriculum...... What we are trying to do, first and foremost for us, is to achieve success and enjoyment. We need the kids to be here and if they are going to come to school they
need to enjoy what they are doing and they need to be successful at it and that will then breed the culture of wanting to go on and take something else on. So what we have done is, we have created a curriculum where we offer every child in year 10… access to, and 95% of them do, do a vocational qualification, vocational GCSE. This is not because we are trying to train them but because the way of learning is more relevant to them. It’s, I think, a better way of training them in independent learning and that way of taking information and developing it. But also it’s our kids, because they don’t generally come from families with high academic expectations themselves. It’s practical and practical is important – if they can see a purpose and a point to what they are doing. You know learning – if it’s in its own sense – is not something which is culturally significant in this area.

Experience of a broad curriculum and post-16 learning is acknowledged as an important facet in supporting choice at post-16. However the impact of teachers and effective teaching is frequently referenced. This Head of Year 11 demonstrates how schools are providing pupils with experience of post-16 learning and the need to locate this in a positive experience of teaching:

Our curriculum has been developing for the last three years......when I came here the curriculum was very much the same for everybody. But now, of course, you can see that not everybody is going the same route and so the Curriculum had to widen over, I suppose. And I’ve got year 11’s that went down to college and did a sort of NVQ’s in Electrical Engineering and they have, of course, got that bit under their belt and that’s going to influence where they go from here. We’ve also got things like additional subjects being done by pupils after school, which actually can have quite an influence on whether they go. French for instance; quite a few people do French after school, because they couldn’t fit it in to their options. I think we are getting there with the Curriculum now. I think, it’s not always, but I think there’s an awful lot to be said about certain teachers having a massive influence on where a child goes. It doesn’t work for all but we’ve got a fantastic History teacher and they love History, they absolutely love it, and we had a Year 11, come back from last year and she went on to do History at college, and she comes back and she says, “Its so boring History at college, it’s not like Mr. D.’s lessons which were exciting.” So he clearly influenced her to go on and do History, and yet she’s actually quite disappointed. ....... So I think teachers and the way that they teach a subject can have an influence. Well that’s their job, isn’t it? At the end of the day, we try to influence them to love the subject the way that we do.

The need for experience of post-16 learning is a key and recurring theme in feedback from the young people themselves. Students need to know what it is like and what it means to study a particular vocational or academic specialism. Leaflets, teachers’ talks and websites simply do not provide them with sufficient information on which they can make informed decisions. What the above quotation points to is the need for those post-16 learning experiences to be positive. The 14-19 curriculum needs to be carefully planned with college providers delivering high quality teaching and learning experiences. Young people in focus groups reported being put off by college visits where they were placed in options they did not want take, One can imagine the Head of School in a college, at short notice, trying to accommodate a group of Year 11s. The Head places them in the only available classrooms with the only available member of staff. The result is the Year 11 students receive a negative experience of
the college; the resources in least demand. Paradoxically they are able to make a relatively informed decision, albeit that this particular college is not for them.

14-19 initiatives

The timing of the research project coincided with a rising of awareness, amongst head teachers and other teachers of the growing concept of a 14-19 phase of education that would span the arena of choice that we are examining here. Across the schools within the study there was some curriculum innovation that reflected the demands from students for more opportunities to pursue specialist subjects and vocational education across the 14-19 phase. As noted above the students would appear to prefer more direct experience of post-16 learning, they want to get closer to what it means to study in a specialist programme of study in a particular institution. They are negative about transmission modes of information, such as leaflets, web sites, libraries and talks from their own teachers, and value direct experience of post-16 as part of their choice process.

Ten of the case study schools were explicitly addressing 14-19 issues, seven in metropolitan or urban settings and six in locations with low SES. There was an equal number of schools with and without sixth forms and an equal number of schools with rising and with stable / falling levels of post-16 participation. The predominance of metropolitan and low SES schools looking towards curriculum change and 14-19 options reflects a concern expressed by teachers about sectors of the student population who do not respond to the academic bias of the National Curriculum. In schools with 14-19 programmes teaching staff were enthusiastic about the developments. The following quotation is typical of those welcoming 14-19 developments:

So there are really significant choices for young people to make in year 9 about what they are going to do in year 10 and 11. Far more choice than there has been for a lot of years actually. We’re offering some quite different routes for young people that involve learning at colleges, the 6th Form College to do things like critical thinking skills, most commonly the FE College where they do vocational courses. I’m sure from FE College’s point of view that those young people that go to them for taster skills are much more likely to continue with them because of that experience and it does concern me that we may well be giving young people too much of a steer in one direction rather than another.

There is an acknowledgement that schools are not adequately geared up themselves to delivery a broader 14-19 curriculum.

But that’s where I think we come into; we get into difficulties as they’re very expensive courses to run. We need well-trained staff to run them and we need better facilities than this school has. … That’s when we’re looking to other providers because they’re experienced, they have lots of expertise in doing this and that would be the best place to do it.

Travel to study times are a recurring theme in these interviews and seen as a central factor in decision making by both staff and students. The need for local post-16 provision was continuously emphasised even in areas with a relatively comprehensive
public transport infrastructure. Clearly local schools with sixth forms present a considerable benefit to students concerned with the costs in terms of time and money of travel. The ability of schools with sixth forms to offer a broader curriculum, specialist study and impartial advice and guidance about the full range of post-16 education and training pathways is a potential weakness in their market position. A number of head teachers, in schools without sixth forms, were particularly positive about recent developments where colleges could be seen to be working together to serve their local community. This was juxtaposed with concerns about the competitive nature of many post-16 providers where there is a tendency to focus on students:

“as objects that you have got to get rather than people that you have to serve”.

Conclusion

It is clear from the evidence considered here that all schools are concerned with four key elements: the needs of students; the school as an institution; management functions; and the policy environment. Schools experience different pressures in each of these areas, and for some extending their gaze too much beyond the school gates is seen as a luxury they cannot afford. For others, curriculum change and responding to a changing environment represent key ways that they can engage with school improvement. Figure 3.1 summarises the dominant perspective amongst these four elements reported in the schools (in **bold**), and where appropriate strong secondary themes are also included (in plain text). The classification of each school is determined by the analytical coding of the one to one interviews with staff, the focus groups with students, and the research notes of each researcher. It is therefore possible to have an individual member of staff interviewed whose primary emphasis and focus are different to that which characterises the school as a whole.

As noted above these perspectives, or orientations, are open to change; policy that alters the operational environment does appear to enable schools to shift their focus. Teachers readily contrast the ‘here and now’ of their practice with the working practices they have experienced in different times or other schools. These perspectives found in the schools are therefore not fixed typologies but represent how a school in a particular context respond to their situation. As Chapter 5 suggests these dominant perspectives in schools produce very different networks of influences on post-16 education and training.

Rising participation is achievable in both those schools focused on the needs of individual students and those focused on the school as an institution. There are few strong patterns to emerge from this mapping of school attributes to rising or stable / falling levels of participation. Different levels of participation are possible across the range of schools and strong differences in the pattern of post-16 participation are not discernable in terms of the type of LEAs, socio–economic status of pupils, and the orientation of the school in this small sample of twenty-three schools. The differences are generally more textured, subtle and revealed in the quotations used throughout the text.

It is not appropriate to search for statistical trends within such a small sample for schools in a qualitative study such of this. The strengths of the data are within
commentaries and voices of the participants in the focus groups and interviews discussed. However, the overall mapping of school attributes and orientation are summarised in the tables in Appendix 1. These tables reveal a complex array of school attributes, orientation and relationships with participation post-16. The most striking pattern here would appear to be that schools coded as orientated primarily towards the needs of the school as an institution (school centred), rather than the needs of individuals (student centred), are schools with their own sixth forms. It is in such schools that students are most likely to perceive the school as not providing impartial advice guidance and support about post-16 education and training. It is also in such schools that staff talked in terms of the institution’s needs, pressures and position. These school centred organisations are the least likely to have a rich network of mediating agencies that provide students with direct experience and knowledge of the options available to them post-sixteen. Seven out of eight school centred schools have their own sixth form and nine out of thirteen student centred schools do not have a sixth form.

Key findings

The Influence of School Organisation on Pupil Choice

- Schools emphasised their aim to meet the individual needs of students.
- The lack of available impartial advice, support and guidance is a recurring theme in the focus group discussions and one that is explored in other chapters. Students in schools with sixth forms frequently suggested that the school treated them as a potential customer as a source of income.
- There is a clear geographic variation in the schools perceived to be promoting their own sixth form. Nearly all are schools in metropolitan or urban local authorities where there are other post-16 providers available to young people.
- The preference for a broad and balanced general education sits alongside a reluctant acknowledgement that such a curriculum diet is not engaging all young people. Teachers respond to the disengagement of some young people with reference to two key ingredients. Firstly, they identify the need for changes in the curriculum and, secondly, they emphasise the need for young people to experience ‘enjoyment’ in their learning. Schools need to find ways in which young people can take vocational options and engage in practical activities that enable them to enjoy their schooling.
- Experience of a broad curriculum and post-16 learning is acknowledged as an important facet in supporting choice at post-16.
- The need for experience of post-16 learning is a key and recurring theme in feedback from the young people themselves. Students need to know what it is like and what it means to study a particular vocational or academic specialism.
- Leaflets, teachers’ talks and websites simply do not provide them with sufficient information on which they can make informed decisions.
Figure 3.1 The overall orientation of each case study school

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Metropolitan LEA</th>
<th>Urban Unitary LEA</th>
<th>Shire County LEA</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>High SES</td>
<td>Low SES</td>
<td>High SES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>With Sixth Form</td>
<td>Rising Participation</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Student Centred Functional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Stable/Falling Participation</td>
<td>School Centred Policy</td>
<td>School Centred School Centred</td>
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<tr>
<td>Without Sixth Form</td>
<td>Rising Participation</td>
<td>Student Centred Policy</td>
<td>Student Centred School Centred</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Stable/Falling Participation</td>
<td>Functional</td>
<td>Functional School</td>
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Primary focus in bold text secondary focus in plain text
Chapter 4

Modelling the Influence of the School on Post-16 Choice

Introduction

This study began from the recognition that there has been little research which explores how schools influence the decisions and choices pupils make in post 16 markets. The data from the research has enabled the development of some new perspectives on schools’ influence, and this chapter models the influence of four key aspects which have been found to have some significant influence on pupils’ decisions in the post 16 markets. These aspects are:

- The presence or absence of a sixth form in the school
- The socio-economic environment of the school
- The school’s leadership, culture and ethos
- Organisational aspects of the school

Although these influences will be explored here individually, their influences interact and are in part dependent upon each other, and these interactions will be explored to develop a composite model.

The influence of sixth form provision within schools

The provision of a sixth form within a school is an important influence on the decision of young people to stay on and participate in post 16 education and training. This influence operates in a number of ways, in relation to careers education and guidance, the impact on the potential frictions of change, the prioritization of academic pathways and the importance of university as a priority destination. These will be explored below.

Careers advice in schools with a sixth form is qualitatively different from that in 11-16 schools, with pupils attending the latter more positively inclined towards the careers education they had received (Brooks 1998). This research has confirmed this observation. Pupils in schools with a sixth form expressed more negative sentiments towards aspects of their careers education than those in schools with no sixth form. In some schools with sixth forms, it was more common to hear pupils openly criticising aspects of their careers education, while those in schools with no sixth form recorded more positive comments. This could be related to the fact that schools with no sixth form place greater emphasis on careers guidance and provide their pupils with greater support, recognising that all pupils must move on to a new situation at 16.

Pupils in schools without a sixth form tended to judge the advice and guidance functions of their schools as being more impartial than those in schools with a sixth form. This confirms findings by Witherspoon (1995), Hagell and Shaw (1996) Morris et al. 1995,
Shaw and Bloomer (1993) and Taylor (1992). There is a greater tendency in schools with a sixth form to provide post 16 advice and guidance which is more closely related to sixth form provision than that for which the broader FE would require. The majority of pupils in these schools attest to the fact that they are ‘exposed to little else apart from information which prepares us for sixth form study’. In addition, claims of ignorance about provision in the training sector and, in particular, about apprenticeships, are more frequent in schools with a sixth form than in schools with no sixth form. Our analysis indicates that knowledge of and about apprenticeships, while generally scant in comparison to other post 16 pathways, is weakest in schools with a sixth form and strongest in schools with no sixth form. Metropolitan schools with no sixth form recorded the highest number of pupil references about apprenticeships. On the whole, pupils had a much better knowledge of post 16 courses in schools and colleges than they had of other training opportunities and of labour markets. On a comparative basis, knowledge about post-16 provision in schools and colleges tended to be strongest amongst pupils in schools with sixth forms and weakest in schools with no sixth form. The converse was true about knowledge of post-16 training and labour markets.

Schools with a sixth form generally seek to influence their pupils to stay in the same institution for their post 16 education. This could be related to pupils wish to ‘stay somewhere familiar’ (Keys 1998), or to an economic decision to limit transport, switching, and search costs or indeed as this research has highlighted, to a decision related to the academic benefits associated with staying on in a school perceived to better guarantee success. On the other hand, pupils in schools with no sixth form show a greater preference to pursue education in post-16 colleges. These decisions are partly circumstantial, in that the pupils have to go somewhere following their GCSEs, but they are also highly influenced by social factors such as peer group pressure (affecting boys more than girls), friendship influence (affecting boys more than girls), parental advice and intervention (more felt in high SES environments), and careers advisers, who as this research has determined, exert greater influence in schools in low SES localities and particularly in those with no sixth form. As post-16 colleges tend to offer a wider selection of courses suited to a broader range of pupils’ interests and aptitudes, we can conclude that pupils in schools with no sixth form are exposed to, and hence more disposed towards, a broader selection of post-16 options than their counterparts in schools with sixth forms.

There is a greater tendency for pupils in schools with sixth forms to choose academic subjects in the post 16 phase than those in schools with no sixth form. The subject choices showed that 50 % more pupils in schools with sixth forms chose science and mathematics as A-level subjects than those in schools with no sixth form. Equally, pupils in schools with no sixth form had a 50% greater chance of choosing vocationally oriented subjects in their post 16 phase than their counterparts in schools with sixth forms. This suggests that schools with a sixth form have a more academically oriented thrust while those with no sixth form tend to have greater inclination towards the vocational strand. Such inclinations appear to have a most powerful influence in shaping pupils choices in the post 16 markets.
This academic prioritisation is illustrated additionally in the contrasts in attitudes towards university between pupils in schools with sixth forms and those in schools without a sixth form. University appears to be the most favoured ultimate destination for the majority of pupils in most schools. This vindicates governments’ intention of increasing university participation and shows that the message has been carried to the appropriate market segments in the school sector. However, this research has clearly shown that pupils in schools with sixth forms have the idea of university more deeply ingrained in their future perspective than their counterparts in schools with no sixth form. University was mentioned as a planned destination 40% more frequently in schools with sixth forms than in schools with no sixth form.

The influence of the socio-economic environment of schools

There is a wide body of research that establishes relationships between the socio-economic environment and indicators of education performance, including participation in post-16 education, training and employment (see for example Mizen 1995, Hodgson and Spours 1997, Connor et al.1996, Roberts and Chadwick 1991 and Unwin 1997). The multiplicity of socio-economic indicators used by different researchers has sometimes led to conflicting findings in this area. In this research we used the percentage of free school meals as an indicator of the socio-economic status of a school. As such, we only had two broad categories representing low and high SES schools. The findings outlined below provide sufficient evidence that SES has a significant influence on the choices and decisions pupils make in post 16 education and training markets.

Based on career trajectories of pupils in these two broad environments, our data clearly shows that pupils in low SES environments exhibit a greater preference for vocational trajectories, while those in schools in high SES localities are more inclined towards the academic trajectory. The findings confirm those of Wallace et al. (1993), which showed that urban pupils had a 53% chance of proceeding to academic programmes while their rural counterparts only had a 24% chance. In our study, pupils in schools in low SES areas mentioned vocational courses approximately three times as frequently as those in high SES schools. This compares to a ratio of 4:1 found by Foskett and Hesketh (1997).

When sixth form schools were considered separately, it was also clear form the evidence that pupils in high SES schools with a sixth form had a stronger inclination towards the academic curriculum than those in low SES environments. For example, of 119 pupils from high SES schools with sixth forms, 101 (85%) indicated a preference in their choice for academic oriented subjects (with a few combining academic and vocational). The remainder (15%) had more vocational subjects amongst the subject combinations they had selected. In contrast, of 126 pupils in schools with a sixth form in low SES localities, the percentage of those with a strong academic intent was slightly smaller at 74%. Thus, on balance, despite the overwhelming power of the academic curriculum in schools with sixth forms, it remains clear that socio economic factors exert a powerful influence on the choices made by pupils in such schools. A similar pattern was evident among schools with no sixth form, where the percentage of pupils indicating a choice of vocational
pathways was higher for schools in low SES areas (79%) than that of similar pupils in higher SES environments (68%).

The influence of the school’s culture, ethos and leadership

Despite the general feeling of indifference expressed by pupils about the role of their head teachers in the post 16 choice and decision processes, it was clear from the data that the different schools that took part in the research could be grouped into four broad categories. The categories are not discrete entities but represent a quadrant of school leadership styles at whose extremes can be identified typical characteristics that distinguish them from others. However, the styles can also be seen as representing a ‘field of forces’ interacting with each other at all points within the field to differing degrees, with the centre representing an exact balance of the influence of the different styles. The four leadership types are shown in Figure 4.1 below followed by a brief description of each type using illustrative quotations from the interviews and focus groups.

Figure 4.1: Quadrant of school culture, ethos and leadership perspectives
1. School/Image focused culture, ethos and leadership

Schools with a school/image orientation tended to be schools with sixth forms in high SES localities with a strong academic tradition and a focus on university entrance. In these schools, success is measured by the number and quality of A-level passes, often displayed at accessible points in the school. In one such school, the names of pupils who have progressed to Oxford and Cambridge since 1974 are displayed on two large notice boards just as one enters the main reception area of the school. The essence of this school is clear – it is a school which expects the highest possible academic standards and which prides itself in its pupils progressing to enter leading universities. What was interesting about this school was the convergence of expectations and perceptions between teachers, the head teacher, and pupils. The head teacher summed up the aims of her school this way:

*The school expects all its students to go to university and we always have a large percentage doing law, medicine, engineering and dentistry in some of our best universities. So this has ceased to be a priority for us. What drives us at this school is the idea of excelling in everything we do. Although there is ongoing debate among pupils and parents about the Oxbridge focus and the two boards outside, we will only stop the practice when the boards have no more space to write more names.*

Pupils in this school echoed similar sentiments while emphasizing the very academic nature of their school.

*The option of leaving school at 15 does not exist in this school. It is an unsaid expectation that we proceed to sixth form. We are one happy family here and we are all confident that the school will do their best to achieve success. This year everyone is coming back. There is no point going elsewhere. Our concern is to do well and we are hated in this whole town for that.*

Such schools offer very few alternatives to pupils at 16 and their curricula are often entirely academic. Lately, responses to learners’ needs have been addressed through consortia arrangements with other providers, but the numbers of pupils opting for these subjects remains very low. School/Image focused institutions channel choice very narrowly through guaranteeing academic success essential for university careers.

In summary these ‘*school/image-focused*’ organisations have a strong culture or ethos focused on high academic achievement that permeates all its activity. It may be that the parents and students share this goal, but it is not in any sense negotiated. A typical school in this category draws from a ‘catchment’ of parents and pupils of high socio-economic status, and has its own sixth form. There is an expectation that school includes years twelve and thirteen, and students will continue at the school post-16. In such a school there are minimal connections with mediating agencies or school inputs that provide information, advice or guidance on options other than staying on at the school. The
students acknowledge and largely accept that the school has expectations of them to stay on in the sixth form and recognize that their school’s advice is not impartial. These schools have high participation rates post-16 and large numbers of students looking towards higher education.

2. Student-centered orientation

Schools driven by pupils’ needs and post 16 markets tend to place great emphasis on ‘taking pupils along the lines of their natural disposition’. In such schools, there was usually a very emphatic denial of the fact that the purposes of the school were more paramount than those of its pupils. Reacting to the question about whether the needs of the school superceded those of pupils in aspects of post 16 educational choice, many of the staff in these schools were very assertive in their denials and emphasised the unethical nature of such practice. The nature of response to this question, however, varied between schools, from strong denial by staff in schools in low SES localities, and particularly those with no sixth form, to mild and almost apologetic denial from staff in high SES schools. A typical response reflecting the school’s sensitivity towards post 16 market diversity came from the head teacher of a Shire county low SES school with rising participation:

In terms of career pathways, I don’t think that (the school pushes its agenda ahead of pupils’ wishes). We try to provide the best information and the best support for the pupils to achieve their ambitions and aspirations. We obviously will guide them...We don’t particularly gain one or the other from the ultimate destinations that they pursue. Therefore it’s not particularly in our interest to push them in a particular direction. There isn’t any great reward or kudos for the school to actually push them in a particular direction.

However, it was sometimes felt that smaller schools with a limited curriculum could be perceived by pupils as exerting an influence towards specific choices.

The comment could arise with regard to option choices because the pupils may not understand the complexities of the option choices, and that being a small school, we can only run a certain number of courses and it is not possible to provide for every individual combination.

Some staff felt that the situation had changed over the years as a result of changes in funding policies. While in the past funding was directly related to numbers of pupils enrolled, the formula today allows not only for retention but for outcome as well. Thus schools no longer see it vitally important to ‘push’ pupils into enrolling at all costs. The head of careers in a school with sixth form in a low SES locality and with rising participation had this to say:

Seven to ten years ago, when the funding depended on the number of bums on seats, we had no choice other than to actively influence pupils to remain in the school. But with changes in funding, we have nothing not much to benefit. The
head has a business to run and I feel for him, but we don’t benefit a thing recruiting pupils who will drop out because they have not been matched to their abilities.

Staff in schools with no sixth form emphasized the need for making information as widely available to pupils as possible, and some of these schools contributed towards meeting the search costs by bussing pupils to open days/evenings at post 16 provider institutions. In addition, pupils in these schools also reported much more positive support and guidance from their teachers and careers guidance staff during their decision times. Such schools, therefore, appear to have greater market sensitivity and operate more on the basis of the needs of their pupils. Consequently, they are seen, not just by the pupils, but by parents as well, as ‘emphasizing all choices equally’. In the parental questionnaire, the highest percentage of parents identifying that schools stressed all post-16 choices equally came from those in low SES environments.

This second category of school orientation can be described as ‘student-centred’. Typically these schools do not have their own sixth form and are not perceived to promote any other than some form of post-16 education and training. There are many mediating agencies, and students are exposed to a rich network of information, guidance and advice from diverse sources. These students report a wide range of events and activities introduced by the school to support the students in their decision-making. There would appear to be a structured whole-school commitment to supporting students in their decisions about post-16 pathways. The students perceive the school as impartial and focused on what is best for them as an individual. Students in these schools were very positive about their school and the learning activities, advice, guidance and support that is provided.

3. Functional/ administrative focused schools

In functional/administrative focused schools there is less mention of the strategic focus of the institution, with greater emphasis placed on day-to-day operational management, procedures, and the roles of specific groups or individuals. Frequently interviewees in such schools indicated that ‘I don’t deal with that aspect of the school and would find it inappropriate to make a meaningful comment on the issue” (Head of Year 11 in a school with no sixth form in a high SES locality). Apart from suggesting a streamlined management focus, such comments also imply that management in these schools is highly regimented and that only those directly dealing with certain aspects were qualified to comment on identified subjects. Thus such schools tended to have careers support and advice demarcated through a small number of pathways such as PSHE lessons or an interview conducted through the Connexions Service. Pupils in these schools tended to perceive their support coming from one or two key individual teachers or career advisers linked to the school. Invariably, the careers service enjoys a very high profile and is highly valued by the pupils. Conversely, pupils do not consider anyone else in the school as being particularly significant in their choices and decision making. In such schools, teachers, head teachers and class tutors were often seen as unimportant in influencing pupils post-16 decisions.
These schools generally have no sixth form and are more likely to be in low SES and metropolitan areas. Their strength lies in the utilisation of external mediating agencies, such as incorporating colleges’ marketing activities and materials into the corpus of post 16 agendas. Despite the low key involvement of the school, such schools are often seen as the most impartial when it comes to influencing pupils’ decisions and choices.

To summarize the third category, described as ‘functional/administrative’, the task of careers related advice and support are demarcated through a small number of pathways, such as PSHE lessons or an interview conducted through the Connexions service. Students in these schools perceive their support coming from one or two key individual teachers or advisors linked to the school. The Connexions service has a high profile and is subject to high expectations on the part of the students. Whether or not students have realistic expectations of the Connexions service is open to question, but what was clear was that the service did not meet the high expectations of students in these schools. In these schools, supporting decision making about post-16 does not appear to be a high priority, and it appears almost as if it has contracted out the responsibility of particular functional roles of selected staff. Teaching staff, other than specialist careers staff, were not reported by students to have influenced their decision-making. These schools generally do not have a sixth form and are more likely to be in low SES and metropolitan areas. External mediating agencies, such as the marketing activities of colleges, were more likely to have an impact on student decision-making than the activities of the school. It is in these schools, where the approach to post-16 was more routine and low key, that students were most vociferous in their recommendations for improving the school’s support with their post-16 decision-making.

4. Strategic/policy orientation

The strategic/policy orientation represents a secondary rather than primary orientation in the profile of schools, in that it is a distinctive characteristic found to some extent in schools in each of the other orientations, but particularly in those with a student-centred orientation. The key feature of this orientation is a responsiveness to changing external policy circumstances - when policy emerges from national or local government, the school is early and full in its adoption of the new or changed direction. The strong connection of this orientation to a student-centred orientation seems to reflect the motivation of such schools to optimise the opportunities and entitlements of their pupils. Policy developments and initiatives are responded to and scanned carefully to identify how the school can continually improve the students expense. Such engagement is often highly pro-active rather than re-active.

The influence of school organisation

The concern with school organisational issues focused entirely on how the careers function across the different school types was managed and administered. Sharp distinctions were found to exist between school types. While there was a wide range of organisational features in different schools, including differentiated structural networks, it
was clear that the bulk of careers guidance/education was delivered through a PSHE curriculum strategy. It was for this reason that careers guidance/education was often seen as valueless by many pupils. Across the schools, the general feeling amongst pupils about PSHE was that it was a wasted lesson characterised by a ‘lack of structure, form and purpose’ and used by pupils and staff as a curriculum filler. The overall feeling about PSHE (and so careers by association) was captured by this pupil who said:

All we do in PSHE is fill in endless forms and targets and we always get sent to the library to have a go at the computers. Nothing ever comes out of PSHE.

Despite the prevalence of PSHE as the vehicle for delivering careers guidance/education in schools, a multitude of networks exists whose nature and complexity vary from one school type to another. The figures below summarize the nature and complexity of these networks within the four broad groupings of schools identified above.

Organisational networks in student centred schools

Figure 4.2 shows a network of structures and communication pathways typically found in schools with a pupil centred/market oriented leadership. In these schools, most of which have been found to be schools with no sixth form in low SES environments, key distinguishing characteristics are:

- Connexions carries the greatest burden of the careers guidance/education
- Work experience, together with friends, constitute the second greatest influence in the decisions and post 16 choices of pupils
- Though their influence is weak, subject teachers and form tutors are perceived by pupils in these schools as being very supportive in their career decisions
- Family is often the weakest link in these schools, together with institutional facilities such as library and IT
- The use of external marketing information is very strong and may contribute to the overall strong preference for post-16 colleges rather than any other types of destination.
- Modern Apprenticeships are more strongly preferred (mainly by boys) in these schools compared to any other school type.
- The highest percentage of pupils who opt for work with no training is to be found amongst this group of schools
- These schools record the highest percentage of pupils who indicated ignorance of post 16 destinations at both Year 10 and 11.
- There is greater congruence between pupils and staff in relation to the schools focus on the interests and needs of the learners. Alongside the reported support these schools give to pupils to ameliorate their search costs and the observed greater use of external marketing material to aid pupils’ choice, it is fair to describe these schools as pupil/market oriented institutions
- The main difference between these schools and similar ones in high SES localities is that family tends to assume a greater influence in the post 16 choices of pupils.
Figure 4.2 Organisational networks in student-centred schools

**Student Centred & Policy Focused**
- No sixth form
- Strong relationships
- Two way relationships
- Student centred
- Many active agencies
- Rich network
Organizational networks in school / image focused schools

In these schools, the institution and its image are the main focus of attention. Typically results oriented, such schools place a high premium on issues of excellence and have formidable academic orientations. The pathway that makes sense for the majority of pupils and indeed parents, and to which all staff appear to have a strong adherence, is one leading to university entrance. Careers organisation is characterised by weakness, and low visibility, existing mainly in the sub consciousness of both staff and pupils. The great expectation of following a university pathway holds sway in the consciousness of all involved and everything else plays a distant second fiddle. The school’s image and status is as a reliable conduit for entrance to ‘prestigious universities’. Consequently the networks characterizing the organisation of careers are few and weakly connected as Figure 4.3 shows. Key organizational features include:

- Temporary on-off structures for career advice and guidance with Connexions having a flying-stop presence
- Careers interviews are often not compulsory and are reserved for those needing them
- Pupils have the strongest negative feelings about the role of careers guidance and do not consider their schools as having an interest in anything else but academic performance
- Key careers events usually include assemblies at which university application and entrance procedures are carefully explained. Visits from university academic staff and admissions tutors are fairly common
- School success is overtly measured by the number of pupils enrolling into high status universities
- Parental involvement in the decisions and choices of pupils is highest in these schools while teachers and tutors are often noted for strongly encouraging pupils to pursue their own subjects beyond 16
- Pupils in these schools have the weakest knowledge and understanding of modern apprenticeships and conversely the strongest understanding and knowledge of post 16 academic pathways particularly that which relates to their own school
Figure 4.3 Organisational networks in school / image oriented schools

**School centred**
Has sixth form
School expects HE progression & participation in School for 6th Form
School centred
Strong ethos - high expectations
Overtly bias information and guidance
Organisational networks in functional/administrative oriented schools

These schools are characterized by a proliferation of structures that are meant to act almost independently from each other. They represent what the leadership literature refers to as bureaucratic organizations where boundaries between units are not as porous as one would find in a more democratically run organisation. In these schools, it is difficult to verify the influence of mediating agencies unless you seek the information from a part of the school which directly deals with those particular issues. Such schools tend to be found in high SES localities, and have no sixth form but rising post-16 participation. The schools exhibit the following general characteristics:

- Family/parental influence is generally quite high and almost equal numbers of pupils choose sixth form and FE colleges as their post 16 destinations
- Fewer pupils from these schools elect to join modern apprenticeships when compared to schools with no sixth form but in low SES areas
- Like other high SES schools, very few pupils (none in some schools) opt for work without training
- Connexions does not have a permanent presence in many of these schools but visits were reported to be more frequent than in comparable schools with sixth forms. It was not clear from the data whether interviews were compulsory or voluntary but many pupils from these schools reported not having had their interviews or having had their interviews late, after they had already made up their minds about post 16 directions
- None of the mediating agencies is particularly identified as having the greatest influence, although parental influence appears significantly higher than amongst comparable pupils in schools in low SES areas.
- Mediating agencies have a tendency to carry out their responsibilities in isolation from each other
- University as an ultimate destination appears to have the strongest attraction to most pupils in this group of schools
- Both a market orientation in terms of relating with external providers of FE and utilization of external marketing material and issues of school image and institution centeredness appear be equally strong
Figure 4.4 Organisational networks in functional/administrative oriented schools

**Functional**

Heavy reliance on Connexions and Specialist staff
Weak network relationships
Direct impact of school minimal
Organisational networks in strategic/policy oriented schools

To a very large extent the networks in these schools tend to reflect those in student-centered schools (Figure 4.2). Five of the seven policy orientated schools within the study are primarily student centered in their orientation. In policy orientated schools staff are keenly aware of policy initiatives and enthusiastic about policy driven curriculum reform. These schools are proactive, quick to respond, to innovate and to develop new strategies. These policy orientated schools were more likely to be piloting 14-19 initiatives and be enhancing the curriculum in imaginative ways. Some of the richest experiential post-16 careers education was taking place in policy orientated schools. These schools developed rich networks of information, guidance support and direct experience of post-16 learning opportunities. These schools have a very strong emphasis on new developments in the broader context of current and ongoing policy debates. Being innovative and proactive in improving participation post-16 these schools logically develop rich networks of support for individual students. The majority of policy orientated schools have post-16 participation rates that are above the national average.

Conclusion - modelling the influence of the school

At the start of this chapter we emphasized that the broad factors and categorisation of schools explored should not be seen as isolated entities. Together they represent fields of forces acting differentially upon pupils within the schools and influencing them to make one or other choice or decision in the post 16 market. For schools in England, the fields of forces acting upon pupils’ post 16 choices and decisions can be represented as illustrated in Figure 4.5 below. The extent to which these six broad influences contribute towards post 16 choice and decision-making vary, of course from school to school, with pupils perceiving distinct patterns of intervention and differences in the balance of inputs. Some of these influences, such as school type and the SES environment of schools are difficult to alter in both the short and long term while others, through hard bargaining, negotiation and continuous professional development provide windows of opportunity through which issues of participation and post 16 engagement can be meaningfully addressed, albeit with difficulty and imminent contradiction. What is clear however is that for the first time, it is possible to isolate school based factors which this research has identified and which can form a basis for interrogating issues of post 16 choice and decision-making.
The model of the schools’ influence on pupils’ choice in the post 16 markets illustrates clearly the complexity of choice and decision processes. The relative influence of different aspects of the school could not be determined accurately on the basis of data obtained through this research. However, as has been demonstrated in this research our data suggests that having a sixth form is more closely associated with deficiency and impartiality in the advice and guidance related to post 16 choices. Equally the socioeconomic environment offers a bed-rock for the reproduction of conditions that force schools to educate pupils for differentiated destinations. The ethos and leadership culture of schools, which exist in dynamic equilibrium with other forces acting on and within the schools point to a system of a school typology in England representing an unequal emphasis on the needs of pupils, school image, managerial expedience and a policy oriented strategic focus. This has contributed to the creation of differentiated response to and the organisation of career advice and guidance giving rise to an equally differentiated experience of the school curriculum resulting in varying choice and decision making in the post 16 markets.
Key findings

The provision of a sixth form within a school is an important influence on the decision of young people to stay on and participate in post-16 education and training. The influence operates in a number of ways, in relation to careers education and guidance, the impact of the potential frictions of change, the prioritisation of academic pathways and the importance of university as a priority destination.

From the analysis, a model of the influence of school culture, ethos and leadership emerges representing a field of forces interfacing with each other at all points to differing degrees was developed. Within the model, four main school orientations were identified:

a) School/Image focused culture, ethos and leadership. Schools with a school/image orientation tended to be schools with sixth forms in high SES localities with a strong academic tradition and a focus on university entrance. In these schools, success is measured by the number and quality of A-level passes, often displayed at accessible points in the school. These ‘school/image-focused’ organisations have a strong culture or ethos focused on high academic achievement that permeates all its activity.

b) Student-centred orientation. Schools driven by pupils’ needs and post 16 markets tend to place great emphasis on ‘taking pupils along the lines of their natural disposition’ equally came from those in low SES environments.

c) Functional/administrative focused schools. In functional/administrative focused schools there is less mention of the strategic focus of the institution, with greater emphasis placed on day-to-day operational management, procedures, and the roles of specific groups or individuals as being particularly significant in their choices and decision making. In ‘Functional/administrative’ schools, the task of careers related advice and support are demarcated through a small number of pathways, such as PSHE lessons or an interview conducted through the Connexions service.

d) Strategic/policy orientation. These schools were predominantly student centred in their primary orientation, and policy orientation was very much a secondary focus for the school. However in such schools head teachers and staff tended to focus on policy issues related to issues they were asked to respond to in interview.
Chapter 5

Conclusions and Recommendations

This chapter provides a summary of the key findings of the research, highlighting what we believe to be major distinctions between schools in the light of their distinct approaches to influencing pupils’ choices and decisions in post 16 education and training markets. It reflects our recognition that the key ‘voice’ within an analysis of choice at 16 is that of the young people themselves, and we seek to provide here a brief summary of that ‘pupil voice’. This focuses in particular on significant issues such as the timing of schools’ guidance and advice, the impartiality of careers programmes, the perceived role of teachers, views about ability group teaching and learning, knowledge of alternative career paths, and the issue of information versus experience led career guidance in schools. The chapter concludes with a synthesis of recommendations aimed at interrogating the current status-quo characterising post 16 choice and decisions in schools in England. We begin, however, by highlighting some limitations experienced during the conduct of the research within which the overall conclusions need to be interpreted.

Research purpose, approaches and limitations

The research addresses three aims. First was the primary aim to identify the nature and influence of school based factors in the choices of young people about their post 16 education, training and career pathways. The second aim was to identify the implications for the development of careers education and guidance and decision making awareness amongst pupils in schools. Thirdly, the research sought to enhance further the modelling of pupil decision-making in education, training and labour markets.

The research was designed as a qualitative study based in a sample of case study schools chosen to represent a broad picture of school settings across England. Operating strictly within the brief of the sponsoring organisation, the DfES, and constrained by time and funding limitations, we chose a sample of 24 schools representing schools with rising and stable/falling participation rates, schools with and without a sixth form, high and low SES catchment schools, and schools from urban unitary, shire county and metropolitan LEAs.

During the conduct of the research we experienced some degree of sample erosion. One school opted out at the last minute leaving us with 23 schools in which Year 11 focus groups were conducted. During the second stage of data collection, three more schools dropped out and we were thus only able to carry out Year 10 focus groups and staff interviews in 20 schools. In the final stage of data collection, involving Year 12 students, we were only able to visit 9 of the targeted 12 schools with sixth forms. Nevertheless, for a study of this magnitude, we ended with a large volume of data from across a wide range of schools, 8 of which remained within the study throughout the whole project. We are confident that this provides a robust and extensive evidence base from which we are able to make valid conclusions and deductions. As a study which is principally qualitative in its approach we seek to make no claims about the statistical validity or generalisability of the conclusions. Nevertheless, the picture the data provides of the influence of schools on
young people’s decisions at 16 is rich and wide ranging, and provides a number of clear and consistent patterns that would give us confidence that the conclusions are a real portrayal of the relevant processes in schools in England.

Key findings and conclusions

Attitudes to and preferences in post 16 choices and decisions

The academic pathway in the post 16 markets continues to hold sway. A clear majority of pupils consider the A-level route as the most preferred, across all school types. This could be linked to a clear anticipation by the majority of our pupils in schools of progressing to university, which itself suggests that the long term government desire to increase HE participation is certainly reflected in the long term goals of pupils in schools. Although the levels of desire for an academic pathway vary between school types, its prevalence is so widespread as to constitute a threat to other routes, which could be even more suited and relevant to the needs of a sizeable proportion of pupils. In addition, the findings suggest that apart from disparities reflecting different school types, there is a strong imbalance between male and female pupils when it comes to opting for work based training routes in the post 16 education, training and labour markets. If the trend persists over time, there is a danger that the work based and training labour market will maintain existing gender skewedness in employment patterns.

Alongside the desire for academic pathways is a growing tendency amongst pupils to opt for subjects combining vocational and academic learning. This could reflect ambivalence on the part of choosers in the post 16 markets but equally could be symptomatic of an underlying recognition by pupils of the value of vocational learning. There appears to be an increasing, albeit gradual, acceptance of vocational learning in schools which needs to be cultivated, but which all the same augurs well for the 14-19 curriculum currently being debated.

Different schools continue to educate pupils for different destinations. There is a clear distinction existing between schools in high SES environments and those in low SES localities. High SES schools see themselves as developing pupils for academic university based careers in the main, while low SES schools maintain a rather stronger commitment to vocational pathways. Reflecting the rewards the labour market is prepared to offer to graduates coming from different tracks, there is a sense in which it could be argued that schools in England help to reproduce societal inequities (Bowles and Gintis 1976).

Staff in schools generally give the impression of impartiality when it comes to influencing pupils’ choices and decisions in the post 16 markets. However on closer examination of the data it remains clear that their preferences reflect those of their pupils, and we would conclude that the pupils’ perceptions are significantly influenced by the preferences of their teachers. On the whole, as the data has shown, staff do not consider the option of work with no training as a viable choice for pupils. They are less sceptical of work based training but usually associate this option with those pupils with lower ability. The option they desire most for their pupils is for them to continue in some form of post 16 education.
There were no significant differences in attitudes and preferences to post 16 choices between pupils in Year 11 and those in Year 10. Even though this research found that final decisions are rarely made before sometime in Year 11, the majority of pupils appeared to have well developed ideas for choices and decisions about post 16 pathways during Year 10. In order to capture differences, it may be more useful to trace the decision-making of pupils from the time they begin secondary schooling at Year 7 to the time they complete the first phase of post compulsory education or training. Differences however existed in the subtlety and detail of decisions, especially the extent of their finality, between Year 11 and Year 10 pupils.

The nature and influence of school-based factors

Four key school based factors were found to have a very strong influence in the choices and decisions of young people about their post-16 education, training and career pathways. These were:

- Whether the school has a sixth form or not
- The characteristics of school leadership, ethos and values
- The SES of the school’s catchment
- The organisation and delivery of careers education and guidance at the school level

The impact of the school sixth form

Consistent with earlier findings (see Keys 1998, Gewirtz et al. 1995, Foskett and Hesketh 1997, Hemsley-Brown and Foskett 1999) this research further establishes that schools with sixth forms provide the most limited scope for pupils to participate in a broader range of post 16 choices. In contrast, schools with no sixth form and particularly those in low SES environments tended to expose pupils to a broader range of options. This exposure to a broader spectrum of post 16 choices contributes to the widely held perception by pupils and staff that schools without sixth forms are the least partial when it comes to providing guidance and advice to pupils. Insulated from the influence of post 16 markets due to their very nature of being part of that market themselves, schools with sixth forms could be seen as having less permeable boundaries, thereby inhibiting the establishment of relationships with other competing providers. This has created an unequal market of schools in which some pupils (those in schools with no sixth form) find it rather difficult to further their studies in schools with sixth forms. Schools with sixth forms employ subtle strategies to keep their own pupils through mechanisms which make it easier for current pupils to remain in those schools. Only the highest achieving pupils from schools with no sixth form find their way into such schools.

The impact of school leadership, culture and ethos

In considering the influence of school leadership, ethos and values, our research has identified four distinct but interrelated types operating in a field of forces and orientations, interacting with each other at many levels but clearly distinguishable at the extremes. The four broad school types are:
- pupil-centred schools
- school/image focused schools
- strategic and policy oriented schools
- managerial/administrative focused schools

While all schools have elements of each of these orientations within their profile, some were found located closer to one or more of the above orientations. The orientations in turn construct different impacts on the choices pupils make in post 16 education training and labour markets.

Pupil-centred schools tend to be predominantly those with no sixth form and in low SES environments whose success is largely measured by the record achieved in post 16 participation. The quality, scope and breadth of support given to pupils is generally of a high standard. Pupils, staff and parents also generally view these schools as emphasizing all choices equally, based specifically on the needs on individual pupils.

School/image focused schools tend to be predominantly those with sixth forms and in high SES environments. Typically results oriented, in these schools success is measured primarily by the number of pupils proceeding to university to pursue academic careers. These schools are typically insulated from other elements of post-16 choice and offer few opportunities for establishing relationships with others. Consequently pupils in these schools, despite enjoying the privilege of status and almost guaranteed progression and success, their understanding of the training and labour markets is often rather limited as they are offered the narrowest of options in the post 16 markets.

Functional/administrative or managerial schools tend to be in low SES environments where the task of advice and support is found to be demarcated through a limited range of structures, chiefly the Connexions Service. It is in these schools where Connexions is highly valued by pupils but where other school staff are seen as somewhat distanced from the real concerns of the pupils. Pupils in these schools tend to perceive the support for post 16 choices as coming from one or two individuals in the school while teachers and tutors are generally seen as unimportant in the choice process. It is perhaps due to this low involvement of staff and the generally impartial approach to guidance offered by Connexions that these schools are usually seen as having an impartial approach to career advice and guidance. However the low involvement of staff also implies that careers is severely distanced from day to day learning and could be considered to be piecemeal and based on models of sporadic guidance rather than those embracing careers education.

Finally, strategic/policy oriented schools tend to exhibit a heightened sensitivity and awareness to the external policy environment and strategic influences. Typically the 14-19 policy framework is emphasized in the context of pupils who are perceived as not sufficiently benefitting from the current provision of the National Curriculum framework, particularly its academic bias. Such schools tend to embrace the concept of learning networks through the establishment of consortia with partners in the Learning and Skills sector, thus providing a more extensive experience and opportunities for pupils to pursue subjects of interest. Choice was thus being managed in a manner reflecting more closely
the needs of learners, despite being severely constrained by factors such as resources, funding, staff experience/expertise and transport logistics.

**The influence of the socio-economic environment of schools**

Although socio-economic environment is a broad concept embracing several issues such as the dynamics of the labour market, the poverty status of the area, parental levels of education and occupational status, in this study its relevance to the school situation was measured on the basis of percentage of pupils receiving free school meals. This measure is generally considered as the most reliable amongst others and is routinely referred to in school inspections by OFSTED.

On the whole, schools in low SES environments tended to have more pupils expressing a preference for vocationally orientated progression routes and subjects while those in high SES environments expressed a preference for academic trajectories. Qualitatively, schools in low SES tended to have poorer resources and facilities. Some of these were also poorly maintained and in bad state of disrepair. Pupils often expressed displeasure at the state and quality of these facilities and appeared to have been less positively inclined towards learning and teaching. Under such conditions, it is likely that pupils become minimally motivated towards learning and it was no coincidence that the majority of pupils who had no clue about their post 16 progression and those who opted for work without training were in these schools. Thus the socio-economic environment impacts on post 16 choice by reproducing conditions that depress pupils’ motivation to learning and engendering a culture of lowered aspirations.

**The impact of the organisation and delivery of careers education and guidance**

The dominant model for the organisation and delivery of the careers curriculum in schools is through PSHE. In the view of pupils, PSHE is seen as providing little value due to poor resources, poor teaching, and its use as the ‘ultimate curriculum gap filler’. Staff who teach it and thus who also teach on the careers programme are often seen as non specialists with little or no interest in the subject. It role is often associated with ‘endless form filling and target setting’ which many pupils appear to consider as their most significant experience of the careers curriculum.

The Connexions model seems to be working where it has been properly established. However, its role has often been reported to be piecemeal, where staff make flying visits in and out of schools. Where Connexions has a permanent residential status in schools, pupils express satisfaction with its role. It appears that where careers organisation continues to be driven through an information-based approach, pupils do not sufficiently benefit and tend to be less positively inclined towards the impact this support has for their decisions and choices.

Some schools have established working networks with other post-16 providers and training organizations, and where this is happening pupils have usually expressed great satisfaction with the support they get from such organisations. On the other hand, schools which emphasize strong networks with FE providers, providing ample opportunities for
an experience led careers curriculum tend to have more positively inclined pupils who report positively on the impact of this kind of support.

**Patterns of school influence**

The table in Figure 5.1 draws together these findings and provides a mapping of the schools’ influence on choice, broadly indicating the general patterns observed during the research. It does not suggest in any way that pupils in the types of schools will always behave in the manner identified in this research nor does it purport to be a deterministic model for predicting the influence schools have on the choices pupils make in post 16 markets. Despite the inadequacies of the data occasioned by sampling problems, what this table provides is a snapshot view of what could be expected in different school types across England. Two important issues clearly stand out on the basis of information summarized in this table, which serve to highlight the significant findings of this research.

The first is that different schools control and manage post 16 choices and decisions in different ways. There is greater funnelling of choices and decisions in schools with sixth forms, controlled through processes aimed at maintaining a position, image and status consistent with excellence and the highest standards. In schools with no sixth form, there is a greater democratisation of choice and decisions aimed more generally at providing pupils with opportunities that more adequately address their needs.

The second is that the socio economic environment of schools influences schools to reproduce inequalities of inputs and experiences which directly influence pupils’ ultimate destinations in life. It is also clear from the data that issues of careers and learning organisation have a significant role in the decisions and choices pupils make in post 16 markets.
## Figure 5.1 Mapping pupils’ voices about post-16 choices across different school types

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aspect of choice</th>
<th>With sixth form, low SES</th>
<th>With sixth form high SES</th>
<th>With no sixth form, low SES</th>
<th>With no sixth form, high SES</th>
<th>Boys</th>
<th>Girls</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Knowledge of goals</strong></td>
<td>Majority know their goals</td>
<td>Majority know their goals</td>
<td>Have the biggest percentage of those not knowing goals</td>
<td>Majority know their goals</td>
<td>A bigger percentage did not know their goals</td>
<td>A smaller percentage than boys did not know their goals</td>
<td>No clear picture emerged from the data</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Timing of decisions</strong></td>
<td>Year 9 start year 11 final but with some early decisions</td>
<td>Decisions made early and finalized early too</td>
<td>Year 9 start year 11 final with greatest prevalence of late decision makers</td>
<td>Year 9 start year 11 final</td>
<td>No clear picture emerged from the data</td>
<td>No clear picture emerged from the data</td>
<td>A greater tendency among ethnic minority pupils to take late decisions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Key influences of choice identified as very important</strong></td>
<td>Most factors were considered as less important except work experience</td>
<td>Most factors were considered as less important except work experience</td>
<td>Work experience, Connexions, external information and visits to FE providers</td>
<td>Work experience, Connexions, and visits to other FE providers</td>
<td>Boys tend to mention friendship influence more than girls</td>
<td>Girls tend to consider sibling influence as more important than boys</td>
<td>No clear pattern emerged from the data</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vocational/Academic thrust</td>
<td>A clear academic thrust but with some vocational sprinkling</td>
<td>Strongly academic with some discernible resentment of vocational tracks</td>
<td>Broadly academic with a strong vocational element</td>
<td>Broadly academic with a fairly strong vocational element</td>
<td>A higher percentage of boys chose the vocational subjects</td>
<td>A higher percentage of girls chose academic tracked subjects</td>
<td>No clear pattern emerged but respondents of Asian origin tended to prefer the more academic professions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------------------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impartiality in career guidance</td>
<td>Career guidance largely perceived as partial</td>
<td>Career guidance largely perceived as impartial</td>
<td>Career guidance largely perceived as impartial</td>
<td>Career guidance largely perceived as impartial</td>
<td>Boys in most schools tended to be most critical about school careers guidance</td>
<td>Girls in girls schools were more critical about the impartiality of careers guidance</td>
<td>No clear picture emerged</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived role of teachers and tutors</td>
<td>Tutors generally seen as not useful in career guidance</td>
<td>Subject teachers generally seen as influential in career decisions</td>
<td>Tutors and teachers not seen as important in career decisions</td>
<td>Tutors and teachers generally not seen as important in career decisions</td>
<td>No clear pattern emerged</td>
<td>No clear pattern emerged</td>
<td>No clear pattern emerged</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived influence of careers guidance</td>
<td>Largely seen as coming rather too late and hence minimal influence</td>
<td>Largely seen as coming too late and hence minimal influence</td>
<td>Considered vital for decision making particularly the role of Connexions</td>
<td>Minimally seen as vital to decision making though Connexions were considered useful</td>
<td>Boys tended to prefer careers lessons and advice in friendship groups</td>
<td>Girls tended to consider one to one interviews as most beneficial to them</td>
<td>No clear pattern emerged from the data</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived influence of range of courses</td>
<td>Range seen as wide but constrained by subject blocking</td>
<td>Range seen as wide but constrained by subject blocking</td>
<td>Range seen as wide but constrained by subject blocking</td>
<td>Range seen as wide but constrained by subject blocking</td>
<td>Mostly mechanical, plumbing, drawing and design subjects considered influential</td>
<td>Mostly health and care related subjects considered influential</td>
<td>Ethnic minority boys show same pattern as boys in general</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived influence of ability grouping</td>
<td>Grouping generally considered as inflexible</td>
<td>Grouping generally considered as inflexible</td>
<td>Learning in low ability groups considered demotivating</td>
<td>Groups seen as inflexible and demotivating</td>
<td>No discernible patterns emerged</td>
<td>No patterns emerged from the data</td>
<td>No pattern emerged form the data</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Role of facilities</td>
<td>Facilities largely seen as unimportant in decisions but generally described as poor</td>
<td>Facilities seen as unimportant but generally described as good</td>
<td>Facilities seen as unimportant and generally described as poor and poorly maintained</td>
<td>Facilities generally seen as unimportant</td>
<td>Boys tended to make greater reference to sporting facilities</td>
<td>Girls were not as concerned with sporting facilities as those based in their class rooms</td>
<td>Impressions generally same as other pupils</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------------------------------------------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Role of internal marketing information</td>
<td>Considered as relatively unimportant</td>
<td>Considered as relatively unimportant</td>
<td>Considered relatively important but came in unmanageable chunks and at the wrong time</td>
<td>Considered relatively important but poor timing and amount frequently cited as constraining</td>
<td>Boys tended to be very positive about the computer based information sources</td>
<td>Girls were equally happy but complained more about not being able to find time and space and the frequent computer breakdowns</td>
<td>No discernible patterns emerged from the data</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Role of external marketing information</td>
<td>Considered as relatively unimportant</td>
<td>Considered as relatively unimportant</td>
<td>Highly regarded especially external visits to FE providers</td>
<td>Highly regarded especially visits by external providers</td>
<td>Boys tended to refer more to visits to external providers</td>
<td>Girls tended to talk more about visits made by external providers</td>
<td>Similar patterns as rest of pupils</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge of alternate post 16 routes e.g. MAs</td>
<td>Knowledge limited to academic routes particularly A level in the same school</td>
<td>Knowledge limited to academic routes particularly that provided in same school</td>
<td>Broader understanding of other routes</td>
<td>Broad understanding of other routes</td>
<td>More boys knew about modern apprenticeships than girls</td>
<td>Girls tended to admit ignorance of MAs more frequently than boys</td>
<td>No clear pattern emerged from the data</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Recommendations**

The recommendations that emanate from the findings of this study are presented for consideration in the development of policy and practice relating to post-16 choice.

1. The timing of careers guidance and advice in schools coincides with what the majority of pupils consider when they start thinking about post 16 options. However, there remain a sizeable proportion of pupils particularly in schools with sixth form and more specifically those in high SES environments who make early decisions and are less likely to benefit from school interventions in the careers area. There is therefore a good case for schools to consider starting careers education and guidance much earlier, perhaps as early as Year 7.

2. The prevalence of the view that careers guidance in schools is not impartial, particularly in schools with sixth forms, is a cause for concern. This could be a direct result of the predominance of the academic curriculum and its perceived relevance to participation in HE. The curriculum for schools requires greater diversity so as to serve the needs of a broader range of pupils and prepare them more adequately for a diverse range of occupations and professions. The opportunities offered by the 14-19 curriculum should be seriously considered as the guiding philosophy for schools in the coming decades.

3. Teachers and tutors are generally perceived in many schools as having little or nothing to do with choices and decisions pupils make in the post 16 markets. Those who have something to do with it are often described as lacking in qualifications and experience to deliver a meaningful careers curriculum to the pupils. There is need for on-going staff development of careers staff alongside a complete overhaul of the careers curriculum. We propose a careers curriculum that is subject based and taught as part of the subject itself bringing in greater relevance to the content of teaching. That way careers becomes properly embedded within the subjects. This has implications for curriculum revision and teacher training and continuous professional development. This however does not negate the important role that guidance and advice can play in the decisions and choices of these pupils. What this does is to place a greater responsibility for understanding the nature of careers and the options that can be pursued to trained subject staff but leave the issues of guidance and advice to those trained in this way e.g. Connexions.

5. An information led careers curriculum should give way as far as practicable to an experience based one which incorporates the full variety of activities that engage the minds of young people more meaningfully and productively. It may be prudent to divert resources into less traditional forms of advice and guidance such as drama and theatre and interactive website support.

6. Pupils are not always clear about their entitlement in the careers curriculum. In some schools interviews are compulsory while in others they are voluntary. In conjunction with Connexions, schools should work out pupils’ entitlements so that all are clear of their expectations and responsibilities in this area of their work.
Further research

The present study has provided rich insights into the influence of schools on pupils' decisions to progress into post-16 education. It has also highlighted a number of areas where further research would be useful in extending that understanding. We would identify three priorities for further research:

1. The need for a longitudinal study of pupils from the time they start Year 7 to the time they enter the labour market to investigate the connections between early perceptions, changing and emerging choices, the influences of a wide range of factors in choice, and final labour market destinations.

2. A project investigating more closely the influence of gender and ethnicity on post-16 choices and decisions.

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### Appendix 1

**Sample Summary Data**

#### Figure A1.1  School Attributes and Orientations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>School Centred</th>
<th>Functional</th>
<th>Student Centred</th>
<th>Policy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total Primary Orientation</strong></td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total Secondary Orientation</strong></td>
<td>(3)</td>
<td>(3)</td>
<td>(3)</td>
<td>(7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Rising Participation</strong></td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0)</td>
<td>(3)</td>
<td>(2)</td>
<td>(4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Stable / Falling Participation</strong></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(3)</td>
<td>(0)</td>
<td>(1)</td>
<td>(3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>High SES</strong></td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1)</td>
<td>(0)</td>
<td>(2)</td>
<td>(3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Low SES</strong></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(2)</td>
<td>(3)</td>
<td>(1)</td>
<td>(4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>With Sixth</strong></td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1)</td>
<td>(2)</td>
<td>(1)</td>
<td>(3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>No Sixth</strong></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(2)</td>
<td>(1)</td>
<td>(2)</td>
<td>(4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Metropolitan</strong></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1)</td>
<td>(1)</td>
<td>(1)</td>
<td>(3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Urban</strong></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(2)</td>
<td>(0)</td>
<td>(0)</td>
<td>(1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Shire County</strong></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0)</td>
<td>(2)</td>
<td>(2)</td>
<td>(3)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Note:**
Primary Focus
Secondary

Bold

94
Figure A1.2  Intersection of Secondary and Primary Orientations of Schools

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Figure A1.3  School Attributes and Participation Rates

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