

Sociology Factsheet



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Parentocracy

The term 'parentocracy' refers to parental rights and choice in education. In the last 50 years the relationship between home and school has changed enormously, where it is now the expectation that parents be fully involved in their children's schooling and achievements. Since the 1988 Education Reform Act, social policy has created a relationship between parents and schools, which is characterised by the principles of marketisation. Parents are now primarily seen as consumers within education, whose choices determine the type of education their child receives.



Exam Hint: You will pick up AO1 marks for knowledge and understanding if you use and define the concept of parentocracy in your exam answer.

History

Phillip Brown (1990) has focussed on the socio-historical development of education since the beginning of state schooling in Britain. He suggests that education reflects three 'waves' in terms of basic organising principles.



The 'first wave' represents the introduction of **mass schooling** in the nineteenth century, where schooling was introduced to provide the masses with basic instruction in literacy and numeracy, which industry needed at that time.

Brown (1990) argues that the post war years reflect the 'second wave' in the provision of schooling, where the guiding principle was one of '**meritocracy**' and individual achievement. Using this principle, every child would have an equal chance of success, depending on intellect and talent. A child's ability could then be exchanged in the world of work with a job that would reflect their ability. Above all, educationalists believed that meritocracy would foster 'equality of opportunity' in education, breaking down some of the social class barriers that remained an inherent feature in British society.



Brown (1990) suggests that we are now entering a 'third wave' in the history of schooling, which is moving away from the '**ideology of meritocracy**' to a new 'ideology of parentocracy'. This is driven by a belief in parental rights, and strongly favours the philosophy of market principles in education.



Exam Hint: You could mention that parentocracy is a sociological concept that reflects political ideology, which has influenced how schools are organised since the 1988. This will demonstrate your sociological imagination.

New Right Policy

In 1979 the Conservative New Right introduced some of the most radical political changes in British society since the post war years. This revolution is closely associated with Thatcherism, referring to Margaret Thatcher who was the Conservative Prime Minister from 1979—1990. Above all, New Right theorists promote a philosophy that combines the key themes of 'choice' and 'control'.



Fundamentally, New Right thinkers strongly advocate the superiority of free market principles as the most efficient way to organise the economy. The emphasis is therefore on competition and freedom of choice, which is seen as the driving force for a healthy economy. Overall, the New Right believe that a customer-focussed ethos would 'improve standards' through a system of self-regulation. In other words, if a school did not reach the grade it would be deemed a 'failing school' and subsequently become an unpopular choice for parents. Schools are therefore increasingly judged on the basis of desirability, like a product we choose to endorse.

The New Right introduced the Education Reform Act (1988), which actively encouraged schools to operate in a quasi market (like a market). Through restructuring, the government firstly offered schools funding incentives to 'opt out' of local authority control, to receive funding from central government. These changes meant that power would shift gradually away from Local Education Authorities, creating an education market where schools could compete with each other for 'customers'. This has dramatically changed the role of Head Teachers (some of whom now employ business managers) and has given enhanced powers to school governing boards to manage the finances with increasing focus on 'cost effectiveness', 'efficiency', 'value for money' and targets which are the key concerns of a free-market (Jones 1996).

Exam Hint: to demonstrate your understanding of New Right philosophy you will need to define what is meant by 'free-market'. You can do this by identifying the key concerns of the free-market in relation to consumer choice (the activity below may help you achieve this).

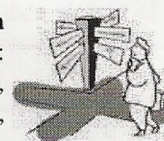
Activity

What features would you look for when choosing a mobile phone?



Parental concerns: choosing a school

What would parents look for when choosing a school? You may consider some of the following: Location, Cost, Size, Ofsted Report, SATS results, Subject Specialism, Ethos, Image, Diversity, Religion/Faith, Gender, Private/State, Success



As the free-market or 'consumer' philosophy has become the norm, schools have increasingly defined themselves in the marketplace alongside their competitors.

1. Like a product, schools have had to become more conscious of identity, which is strongly endorsed by things like logo, school uniform, subject specialism and school websites.
2. The Education Reform Act (1988) clearly reinforced the importance of academic success, as schools were required to provide information about the academic achievement of every child. League tables are currently published nationally in newspapers and the internet, publicising the results from standardised testing (SATs) for every school in the country. The publication of league tables gave parents the ultimate tool to exercise their choice(s) for their child. 'Good schools' are now strongly associated with output/results.
3. As the structure of schooling has changed since 1988, the demand for information about a school has increased. Schools are now required to publish their own school policies on things like behaviour, health and safety, bullying, anti racism/sexism which are now included in most school prospectuses and school websites.
4. Schools are also inspected regularly by OFSTED who grade a school on all aspects of performance including 'achievement and standards', 'teaching and learning', 'overall effectiveness' and 'quality of provision'.
5. The consumer-orientated perspective was further endorsed in 1991 with the introduction of the Parent's Charter. This legislation clearly identified 'parental rights and responsibilities' as the key factor to drive school improvement and effectiveness. Information about schools and performance became mandatory and by 1994 every school had to foster parental involvement as the way forward to improving standards.

With all this information a parent can judge how effectively a school is reaching its targets, and importantly, whether a particular school is the right place for their child.

Exam Hint: Make sure you can explain what information is now available to parents to help them make their choices

New Labour policy

When Labour were voted into office in 1997, all aspects of New Labour policy expanded upon the theme of parental choice in education. As Reay (2008) suggests, Labour policy under Tony Blair (Labour Leader at the time) was clearly driven by three aims; developing school improvement initiatives, standards agenda and performance (attainment targets), and breaking the 'one fits all' comprehensive system in favour of differentiation (diversity) of secondary schooling system. In 1999 home-school agreements were introduced, which outlined the roles of the parent, pupil and school that were needed to raise standards.



www.labour.org.uk



Specialist Schools
and Academies Trust
EXCELLENCE AND DIVERSITY

In the white paper 'Schools Achieving Success' (2001) the drive for increasing diversity in school provision was encouraged with the expansion of secondary schools with specialist status. By 2008, nearly 90% of secondary schools in England became specialist schools providing a range of specialist options from business, engineering or maths to humanities, music and art.

Activity

Visit the website www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/specialistschools/logos. Find out about the specialisms of schools in your local area.

In 'Higher Standards, Better Schools for All' (2005) choice again was a primary theme, with a belief that parents should be offered a broad range of options, encouraging even more diversity of school provision. This would involve school expansion and school closure schemes, to further encourage greater competition between schools.

Do parents really have a choice?

Exam Hint: In order to gain AO2 marks in the exam you need to develop an argument about whether parents really do have choice. The use of evidence/studies will help you gain marks here

Since the post war years sociologists have focussed on the key theme of 'equality of opportunity' in education, questioning whether the British schooling system has provided equal chances for all learners. This has generated a vast body of educational research that has focussed on two themes:

- social mobility
- social/cultural reproduction.

It is possible to structure a critique of the 'ideology of parentocracy' with these sociological themes in mind.

Various studies have been conducted to investigate this:

Diane Reay (2008) has conducted a number of studies on parental choice in education and largely argues that marketisation in education has created growing inequalities between parents, specifically in relation to class, gender and ethnicity. She argues that the politics of 'choice' in education relies upon a notion of an 'ideal parent' and doesn't account for parental difference and experience of the education system.

Reay suggests that the system of choice in education is inherently flawed and justifies inequality in society. Reay has applied Bourdieu's theory of 'cultural capital' to explain how working class parents are subject to increasing governance in education under New Labour policy. This is apparent in increasing legislation that gives parents advice and guidance on 'how to parent'.

With the introduction of Parent Contracts in 2002, home/school contracts made parents responsible for their child's truancy and subject to prosecution/prison/fines if the contract is broken. Working class parents are more often treated as 'failing parents' and people that make the 'wrong choices' rather than victims of structural inequality, which has remained an inherent feature of contemporary British society.

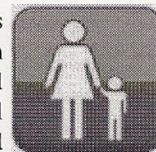
Ball, Bowe and Gerwitz (1994) have studied the impact of parental choice and education reform suggesting that cultural and material factors largely determine who gets what in the education system. For example, they found that middle class parents were more confident interacting with staff in schools, including meeting with the Head to discuss applications, appeals and general business relating to their child's needs.



Ball et al (1995) suggest that wealth largely determines the extent to which choice can be truly exercised. For example, middle class parents are more likely to relocate to secure a place in a 'good school' or have the ability to pay for travelling expenses to ensure their choice of school.

Ball et al (1995) found that middle class parents are also more likely to pay for any additional services such as coaching to pass entrance exams for selective schools. In contrast, working class parents showed interest in their child's education but did not have the resources to make the same decisions as their middle class counterparts.

Machin et al (2006) suggest that middle class parents are more comfortable making choices for their child and have benefited most from gaining places/experience on new educational schemes. This is demonstrated by official statistics, where take-up of places on 'Gifted and Talented' programmes has been dominated by white middle-class pupils. In summary, working class parents are less inclined to 'play the market' due to lack of resources whereas middle class parents are more comfortable in the role of 'chooser' and 'parent educator' (Reay 2008).



Crozier and Reay (2004,2005) suggest that alongside social class, other factors such as gender role and ethnicity make the issue of parental choice a more complex issue than first considered. They studied middle class mothers living in two London localities and found that there is a gendered division of labour in relation to parental responsibility and education. They identified that mothers are the most involved parent whereas fathers are more likely to be 'helping hands'. In terms of ethnicity, they suggest that minority ethnic parents often found themselves protecting their child from a system they perceived as racist.

In summary, it is a political assumption that all parents exercise choice in education in an equal way. Sociological analysis of 'parentocracy' identifies the continuing inequalities of class, gender and ethnicity that lie at the heart of this analysis, identifying equality of opportunity as an elusive concept in an increasingly competitive market.

Exam Questions

1. Assess the extent to which policies of encouraging competition between schools and increasing parental choice have improved the achievement of working-class pupils.

Examiners comments for this question included:

Many candidates seemed to think that a question about policy could be appropriately answered by going back to the tripartite system and, in some cases, even the Forster Education Act. Such an approach did not provide a focused response to this question. Other answers tended to be focused mostly on how the policies did not support the working class and there was little development of the New Right theory.

Better answers outlined the New Right perspective, linking elements such as league tables to competition and Ofsted reports and school brochures to parental choice. Many good candidates discussed issues such as the middle class being more adept with cultural, economic and social capital. Candidates often gave examples such as middle-class parents having connections to schools, being more familiar with the appeals process, etc. Better answers also evaluated the policies in terms of the persistence of other contributing factors to working class underachievement such as material and cultural deprivation.

2. 'Outline some of the policies introduced by governments to create an education market in the United Kingdom'

Examiners Comments for this question included

Some candidates appeared to have little understanding of marketisation and presented accounts of non-marketisation policies such as the tri partite system or comprehensivisation. Answers of this quality scored in the bottom mark band. Some candidates offered a basic account of one or more appropriate policies but without linking them clearly to the creation of an education market. Typically, candidates offered the ERA, league tables, national testing, or Ofsted.

Test yourself questions

1. What does the term parentocracy mean?
2. Define the term marketisation.
3. What does Brown (1990) mean when he refers to education as a 'third wave'?
4. Explain how the New Right introduced market forces into the field of education and schooling in Britain.
5. What initiatives did New Labour introduce to expand parental choice and responsibility?
6. What key themes have sociologists focussed on when discussing parentocracy?
7. Name at least three sociological concepts that can be used in a sociological critique of parental choice.
8. Summarise the work of Reay (2008) on parental choice in education.
9. Describe the key factor that Ball et al (1995) use to demonstrate inequality in relation to parental choice?
10. What factors other than social class could be considered in the critique on parentocracy?

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