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Summary

The School Admissions Process: Experiences of Parents and Carers of Children from Vulnerable Groups

National Foundation for Educational
Research (NFER)



The School Admissions Process: Experiences of Parents and Carers of Children from Vulnerable Groups

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Research summary

The Office of the Children’s Commissioner (OCC) undertook a review of school admissions activity in England to investigate if certain state secondary schools are adopting potentially unlawful practices in order to manipulate or ‘socially select’ their intake. As part of their review, the OCC commissioned the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) to undertake a small-scale qualitative data collection exercise to gather experiential information from parents and carers of children from particular vulnerable groups¹.

A recruitment campaign was devised to identify parents and carers of vulnerable children with recent experience of the secondary school admissions process, who felt that certain schools had discouraged them from applying for a place for their child. Prospective participants were recruited via social media, including NFER’s Facebook page and Twitter accounts, as well as two online parenting forums. Key intermediary organisations working with children and families were also asked to share the project details via their practitioner networks, and where possible, directly with parents and carers. Additional proactive recruitment was undertaken in order to increase the response rate. This included emails and phone calls to a total of 78 local authority and third sector services (e.g. school admission teams, family information services, school choice advice services, and ethnic minority and Traveller achievement services).

We received responses from a total of 41 individuals, 24 parents and carers and 17 practitioners, including those that did not meet the selection criteria. A total of 16 participants (including ten parents and carers and six practitioners) took part². The data collection took place between November 2013 and January 2014. Telephone interviews were used to elicit the views and perspectives of parents, carers, and practitioners working with families in relation to school admissions to inform the OCC’s wider investigation. Interviews focussed on the interactions and conversations parents and carers have with school staff prior to, or around the time of, primary to secondary transfer, that might lead them to feel discouraged from applying for a place for their child. This summary outlines the key findings that emerged.

It is important to emphasise that the findings presented reflect the individual perspectives of small number of parents, carers and practitioners. Furthermore, no control group or counter perspectives (for example, from school staff) were sought. As participants’ views and experiences have not been triangulated or verified, it is not appropriate for the findings to be taken as being more widely representative.

¹ Specified by the OCC as those: with Special Educational Needs (SEN); from minority ethnic groups; with English as an Additional Language (EAL); from families on a low income and; who have been excluded from primary school.

² The methodology follows that suggested by the OCC in their research specification and is based on the requirement for a small-scale data collection exercise, to be undertaken over a short time period.

Attempts by secondary schools to discourage the admission of vulnerable children: what is the evidence?

- The issue of state secondary schools attempting to discourage certain families from applying for a school place in order to ‘socially select’ their intake either appears not to be a widespread problem or, it typically goes un-reported. It was difficult to identify parents, carers and practitioners to provide feedback on their experiences of this issue.
- The experiences of the small number of parents, carers and practitioners we spoke to suggests that cases of planned and direct unlawful admissions discrimination are rare. However, there does appear to be some variation in the extent to which secondary schools actively encourage and promote an inclusive ethos to prospective families, which has an influence on parents’ and carers’ school choices.
- Parents and carers can interpret conversations and interactions with school staff in different ways. Some secondary schools may be acting with the explicit intention to deter particular families from applying for a school place, alternatively, they could be acting in the interests of the child where they feel the choice of school is inappropriate.
- Among the small number of cases where parents and carers reported instances of secondary schools discouraging them from applying for a place for their child, these examples mostly related to those with children who have SEN.
- Discriminatory practices are considered to be (potentially) more prevalent in situations where admissions occur outside of the usual primary to secondary transition period³. In-year admissions applications are made on an individual basis which means that a child’s needs and characteristics are more easily identifiable.

How do certain secondary schools attempt to ‘game’ the admissions process?

- We did not identify evidence to suggest that secondary schools strategically set out with an agenda to directly target and unlawfully discriminate vulnerable children by discouraging their admission. However, from discussions with interviewees, there appears to be varying levels of unfair practices in operation and different motivations behind the approaches adopted by some schools and

³ At the request of the OCC, in-year admission was not the focus of this small data collection exercise.

staff to encourage or discourage particular groups of children from applying for a school place.

- It would seem that there is not a universal message that secondary schools give out to parents and carers in order to attempt to 'socially select' their intake. In the few examples provided, schools appear to be reactive, discouraging the parents and carers of vulnerable children (often with additional needs) who present themselves to the school prior to submitting their school choice application.
- Secondary schools can adopt two levels of influence in order to discourage:
 - Subtle and coded messages through actions and behaviours that can be interpreted by parents and carers as the school not wanting to admit their child.
 - Directly relayed information, which might include telling parents and carers their child will not be offered a place prior to their application being submitted, or informing parents that the school is unable to support their child's needs (in the guise of being in the interest of the child).
- The more overt and direct the schools' message or action to discourage particular parents and carers is, the more likely that it will be hidden, informal and 'off the record'. This is one explanation for why this situation might go unreported by parents and carers due to a lack of witnesses to corroborate their version of events.

What are the impacts and implications for parents, carers and children?

- In the few cases identified where parents and carers perceive that secondary schools have been discouraging of their child's admission, the majority change their decision and apply to other schools.
- Families who feel that they have been discouraged from applying to a particular secondary school can feel limited by the alternative school options available to them. Some apply for places at other schools that they consider inferior in terms of standards and facilities, while others choose to home educate.
- Perceived attempts by secondary schools to discourage particular families from applying for a school place can have a negative effect on the social and emotional well-being of parents, carers and children. Some families report the limited availability of advice and support during this time.
- For some children, the prospect of not being able to go to the same secondary school as their primary peers and siblings can make them feel different and isolated. This may have an impact on the extent to which they successfully transfer into the secondary phase of their education.

Conclusions and recommendations

- This research has uncovered some cases where parents and carers feel that particular secondary schools have discriminated against their child in order to 'socially select' their intake. This may be the extent of the situation. However, it is possible that the few reported cases of perceived attempts by schools to discourage the admission of particular vulnerable children are just the 'tip of the iceberg'. **Further large-scale, qualitative research is required in order to understand the specific nature and scale of the problem across the country.**
- It is possible that this issue could go unreported due to the uncertainty among some parents and carers about what constitutes as discrimination and how they go about reporting secondary schools when they think they have been the subject of unlawful admissions practices. As a result, the problem may remain hidden. **There could be a need to raise awareness among practitioners with responsibility for school admissions and/or vulnerable families to be vigilant and provide parents and carers with appropriate advice and support to challenge a school identified as operating in a discriminatory way.**
- Feedback from the small number parents, carers and practitioners we spoke to suggests there is variation in the extent to which secondary schools actively encourage and promote an inclusive ethos to prospective families. This can influence school choices and can have a negative impact on the social and emotional wellbeing of some children and families. **Some schools could do more to make vulnerable families feel wanted and included during the lead up to secondary transfer.**
- It has been suggested that, on occasion, certain secondary schools either deliberately or unintentionally dissuade parents and carers of vulnerable children from applying for a school place for their child through their actions and behaviours. This may not be planned or representative of the entire school ethos; it could be the attitude, approach or demeanour of a single member of school staff. It is equally likely that schools could be acting in the interests of the child. **Some schools may need to be made more aware of the unintended consequences of the ways in which they interact with parents and carers during the admissions process, particularly those of vulnerable children. This could include a requirement for more universal staff training on equality legislation and the school admissions code of practice.**
- In the few cases identified where secondary schools appeared to attempt to discourage parents and carers of vulnerable children from applying for a place, they mostly involved children with SEN. This could be due to the increased likelihood that such families make direct links with schools prior to transfer in order to assess their ability to meet their child's particular, and sometimes complex, needs. This highlights a much wider issue around the role and capacity of mainstream schools to include pupils with SEN. **There may be a need for**

increased clarity of understanding about what schools should and should not be required to do to support the admission of pupils with a range of complex needs, and how they convey those messages to families.

NFER provides evidence for excellence through its independence and insights, the breadth of its work, its connections, and a focus on outcomes.

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- insights
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