

UNIVERSITY OF
BIRMINGHAM



U School choice and social justice B

Tom Bisschoff, School of Education
2009/9

Aim of this presentation

This presentation provides an overview of the findings of a recent study of school choice and Christian schooling in South Africa. It argues that school choice could contribute to achieving social justice in a developing democracy such as South Africa.

Wider framework

- The presentation is theoretically framed within two seminal works, albeit one more fundamental than the other, namely John Rawls' *A Theory of Justice* and Harry Brighouse's *School Choice and Social Justice*.

South African context

- Presently in South Africa there is a surge in the establishment of independent schools, albeit not all faith-based but those that are, are mostly Christian. The reason for the current growth in Christian schooling can be mainly contributed to the fact that until 1994 the education system of the country was broadly based on Christian principles and Christian parents felt relatively comfortable with the education their children received in state schools. However, since democracy, post 1994, Christian parents have been confronted with the teaching of various religions in state schools as well as people from different faiths teaching their children. For the first time since democracy Christian parents now exercise school choice regarding their children's education to ensure Christian schooling for their children.

Methodology and method

- Focus group interviews were conducted with parents who have enrolled their children in Christian schools. The authors argue that if one could understand the reasons why parents enrol their children in Christian Schools rather than government schools one could establish whether social justice could be served by allowing this choice.

Finding 1

- One can easily make the mistake to assume that the reasons why parents choose Christian Schools for their children are all related to the faith they believe in. It did come out as one category of reasons but the other two categories were of a more general nature that affects social justice in one way or the other.

Finding 2

- For completeness sake the reasons of faith will however be discussed. From the parents comments it is clear that they regard Christian teachers as more committed and compassionate towards the children.
- *In government schools teachers are not motivated or committed because of large classes.*

Finding 3

- *The current education system is failing my child. My child's previous school in a township was poorly run, I was never provided with feedback on my child's performance. The department identified the school as a dysfunctional school and it still a dysfunctional school.*
- *Children from non-Christian backgrounds are benefiting from the discipline and safe learning environment in this school. It is chaotic in neighbouring schools.*

Finding 4

- It seems that parents also see the Christian school as place where their children will have a better chance of securing a job. The work ethic of Christians is about doing everything as though you are doing it for God. This assists children to give there best in any endeavour they undertake. Over and above this it also demonstrate honesty and trustworthiness from the pupil. One parent compared a Christian schooling with the badge a local traditional church expects their members to wear at all time.
- *If I see somebody with the Zionist badge on I know he does not drink or smoke and is honest and hardworking. Boys and girls from Christian schools also wear these characteristics not in a badge but in their actions.*The more complex the change the less you can force it

Choice and social justice

- However for social justice to be served this choice must be available to as many parents as possible:
- It must be an autonomy-facilitating schooling that equips and empowers children with a realistic opportunity to become autonomous adults (Brighouse, 2000: 65);
- It must provide for equality of opportunity among all citizens for the packages of burdens and benefits distribute by the labour market (Brighouse, 2000: 122);
- It must mean that the resources devote to a child's schooling should not depend on the ability of their parents to pay for, or the restrictions of choice among schooling experiences (Brighouse, 2000: 123).

Debate in the UK

- *I think standards will rise when schools are allowed to develop their own identity and purpose and to compete one with another.*
- *Some will offer an education that is different from that which I would choose for my children and grandchildren. That is fine ... I want choice (Woodhead, 2009: 134-135)*

Conclusion

- Parents with children in Christian schools were asked why they send their children to these schools. Their reasons fall into three categories, reasons of faith; reasons of learning and reasons of economic well being. Parents enrol their children in schools that they believe offer better quality in teaching and learning than other schools in the area. Individual school choice in South Africa greatly gravitates towards social justice. With the choice of social justice pupils often forfeit other rights, for example being thought in their mother tongue, freedom of religion, belief, opinion and other rights stipulated in the Constitution (RSA, 1996a: Section 2). Parents prioritise and make their choices according to the benefits derived from that choice.