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The Times (London)

February 21, 2008, Thursday

Privileged children excel, even at low-performing comprehensives

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* Parents' choice of state education pays off

* Bright pupils form own group and thrive

Middle-class parents obsessed with getting their children into the best schools may be wasting their time and money, academics say today.

They found that children from privileged backgrounds excelled when they were deliberately sent to inner-city comprehensives by parents opposed to private schooling.

Most of the children "performed brilliantly" at GCSE and A level and 15 per cent of those who went on to university took places at Oxford or Cambridge.

To give their children "the best start in life", many parents choose to live in catchment areas of high-performing schools, "find God" to gain their child a place at a faith establishment or make financial sacrifices to pay for their child's independent schooling.

However the researchers decided to analyse the progress of the offspring of "those white, urban, middle-class parents who consciously choose for their children to be educated at their local state secondary, whatever the league table positioning".

This group attended average or poorly performing schools in working class or racially mixed areas. Here they thrived academically and were often given special attention by teachers keen to improve the school's results, according to the study by professors in education from the universities of Cambridge, Sunderland and West of England (UWE).

The only failure was in social integration, which had been the very reason most parents sent their child to the school. Most children from middle-class families mixed only with pupils from identical backgrounds.

The research found "segregation within schools, with white middle-class children clustered in top sets, with little interaction with children from other backgrounds".

Professor David James, from UWE, said: "But we wanted to discover what motivates parents who instead choose to send their children to local comprehensives that appear to be performing poorly.

"Most children who had this choice made for them have gone on to perform brilliantly in GCSEs, A levels and then on to university entrance, including a much higher-than-average entry to Oxbridge."

The researchers interviewed 124 families from London and two other cities. Eighty-three per cent of the parents had degrees and a quarter were educated to postgraduate level.

They included three Labour Party activists and two who worked in a social exclusion research unit. In 70 per cent of families, one or both parents worked in the public sector. Most described themselves as left-wing or liberal.

The report found: "Some parents were motivated by a commitment to state-funded education and egalitarian ideals and many had an active dislike for privileged educational routes on the grounds that they were socially divisive. Many wanted their children to have an educational experience that would prepare them for a globalised, socially diverse world.

"These parents positioned themselves in a way we termed 'a darker shade of pale', as part of a more culturally tolerant and even anti-racist white middle class.

"They felt strongly that higher-achieving schools would not provide the kind of experience of the 'real world' that their children needed."

However the researchers said such parents did not consider that they were sacrificing their children's education, with many seeing it as a worthwhile, if risky, strategy.

"Many parents said they could and would pull out if things did not go well," the report said. Some parents who attended privileged schools made the choice as a "conscious reaction to their own schooling". Others wanted their children "to compete in ordinary circumstances".

It added: "Anxiety was not absent, especially when their children were attending schools that were pathologised - or even demonised - by other white middle-class parents."

But even though those sending their children to comprehensives were open and tolerant of other backgrounds, in some cases researchers noted "elitism and a sense of intellectual and social superiority - a sense that would be confirmed by their own child's relative success".

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83% of parents choosing state secondary schools are educated to degree level

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