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The characteristics of the school organization and the constraints on market ideology in education: an institutional view

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The paper raises theoretical insights against central premises underlying the policy of parental choice and educational market from the standpoint of the institutional theory of organization. It discusses how the institutional theory may explain the barriers to diversity, responsiveness, and improvement, all of which are assumed to be driven by the implementation of parental choice reform at the school level, and it looks at what this perspective says about rational decision-making. In general, institutional elements such as conformity to institutional rules, isomorphism, decoupling, and loose coupling argued to prevail in schools seem to be obstacles for many educational processes and outcomes 'promised' by advocates of parental choice and market in education. Implications for the study of parental choice and educational marketing are suggested.

Keywords: Parental choice; Educational market; Institutional theory; Structural barriers

Introduction

Market forces, especially in the form of school choice, have been introduced in many Western countries during the past two decades, becoming a significant and controversial policy issue in educational discourse (Cookson, 1994; Gewirtz *et al.*, 1995; Levin, 2001; Taylor, 2001; Oplatka, 2002; Fowler, 2003). Educational policies and legislations worldwide introduced a wide range of ideas designed to hasten market processes within education by, for example, encouraging competition among

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schools through the introduction of new types of schools or by increasing the powers of parents to make choices among schools (e.g., voucher plans, open enrolment, charter schools).

The market itself is taken to be neutral, simply a mechanism, an unplanned outcome of myriad choices. In terms of education, it is commonly claimed by market advocates (e.g., Elmore, 1987; Chubb & Moe, 1990; Coleman, 1990; Witte, 1990; Tooley, 1992) that market pressures will bring about an improved system of provision. They argue that the exigencies of competition will make public school systems more efficient, more productive, and more responsive to the demands of students, parents, and communities (Peterson & Hassel, 1998). Greater use of free market institutions, it is held, will more effectively provide the range and quality of education demanded by parents and students and will lead to upward pressure on standards of outcome (Chubb & Moe, 1990; Coleman, 1990; Finn, 1990).

Market theory rests upon a set of relatively straightforward premises which connect market elements, and particularly competition, to individual choice. Thus, markets are characterized by the presence of a supply and a demand side in education: the suppliers are the educational institutions and their competent authorities, and the demand side is the parents and students. The market elements consist, by and large, of four elements:

- (1) choice, that is a rather amorphous term describing a situation in which parents can choose the schools their children attend regardless of where they live. It is assumed that parents have full information on which to base their choice of school and the option to send their children to the school of their choice;
- (2) diversity and active differentiation between 'providers', demonstrating differences among schools that enable choice to be made by parents. Schools are assumed to become more diverse as they accommodate to parental demands;
- (3) competition, i.e., schools striving to entice parents to choose their service instead of those of other educational providers, thereby giving impetus to their performance; and
- (4) responsiveness to the parents' and pupils' needs and preferences (Elmore, 1987; Liberman, 1989; Witte, 1990; Bondi, 1991; Tooley, 1992).

The extension of market forces into education has not been without criticism, and there has been considerable debate about the effect and desirability of this reform. Many of the detailed studies of school responses to market competition have taken a sociological perspective, in that they have focused on social class disparities in the way parents go about choosing a school, often seen in their drive for positional advantage (Cookson, 1994; Adler, 1997; Gorard, 1997; Lauder *et al.*, 1999; Taylor, 2001). Ball (1993, p. 13) presents the introduction of market forces to education as a 'mechanism of class reproduction', legitimating and reinforcing the 'relative advantages of the middle and upper classes within state education'. The strategic processes of choice systematically disadvantage working class families, but rather benefit middle class groups (Gewirtz *et al.*, 1995).

However, alongside the empirically-based critique of the educational market, theoretically-oriented objections to the introduction of markets in education have emerged. They share the idea that education is fundamentally different from other human exchanges, and that, as a result, the natural checks and balances of the market would fail to operate as they normally do (Cookson, 1994; Grace, 1994; Henig, 1994). Education, it is held, should be viewed as a public good, not as a marketable commodity (Grace, 1994), and a school is not like a mainstream business and cannot necessarily expand to meet demand. More specifically, as McMurtry (1991) has argued, there is deep contradiction between the aims and processes of education on the one hand, and those of the market on the other.

The current paper aims to take the theoretical arguments against educational markets one step further. It tries to challenge the basic premises underlying the reform of parental choice and educational market from the standpoint of the institutional theory of organization originating in sociology. Using the institutional theory of organization as a theoretical frame for examining the claims for the introduction of this reform in education, it is argued here, questions the ability to apply the 'promises' made by its advocates, in practice. In developing my argument, I examine how the institutional theory may explain the barriers to diversity, responsiveness, and improvement, all of which are assumed to be driven by the implementation of parental choice reform at school level, look at what this perspective says about rational decision-making, and explore its implications for the study of parental choice and educational marketing. I believe that the critical institutional elements that construct the school organization, as conformist to external rules, ignored by proponents of parental choice and market in education, will operate against this reform in any educational system that attempts to translate its elements into practice, regardless of the characteristics of the policy adopted in a particular educational system.

The review of previous research on schooling undertaken by institutional writers, coupled with studies about the education marketplace conducted in a variety of Western countries, will be provided to illustrate this argument (but I am aware that the ideology of the education market may be mediated by policy processes, therefore research findings should be considered as a reflection of the market ideology, as well as policy interpretation of this ideology). At the outset, I discuss elements of the institutional theory of organization as the theoretical framework of this analysis. Then, the elements of this frame are used to explore major assumptions of parental choice and market reform. Finally, the implications of this analysis for further research are considered.

The institutional theory of organizations

The institutional perspective is becoming a dominant approach to understanding organizations and their environments (Hoy & Miskel, 1996). While institutional approaches were strong in economics, in political science, and in sociology early in the 20th century, the revival of the 'new institutionalism' in sociology is commonly attributed to the works of John W. Meyer and Richard Scott in the 1970s (Rowan &

Miskel, 1999). They, by and large, changed the way institutions were thought about by organizational sociologists.

Although many theoretical views (e.g., contingency theory, resource dependencies, etc.) have emphasized the impact of environment upon organization, only the institutional theory highlights the significance of the wider social and cultural environment as the ground in which organizations are rooted (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Scott, 1995a). In that sense, this theory reconceptualized the organizational environments emphasizing the role of ideational forces of knowledge systems, institutional beliefs, rules and roles in affecting organizational structures and operation independent of resource flows and technical requirements (Rowan & Miskel, 1999). DiMaggio and Powell (1991, p. 8) allude to the core nature of this theory:

The new institutionalism in organization theory and sociology comprises a rejection of rational actor models, and interest in institutions as independent variables, a turn toward cognition and cultural explanations and an interest in properties of supra-individual units of analysis that cannot be reduced to aggregations or direct consequences of individuals' attributes or motives

This theory is much more applicable to organizations that exist in weak technical but strong institutional environments such as schools and hospitals (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). For example, schools that do not possess clear technologies (i.e., instruction) are especially likely to conform to institutional rules, for, by doing so, they can gain legitimacy with stakeholders in their environments (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). In addition, although it was suggested by scholars of institutional theory that it is most appropriate to organizations in a non-market environment, Hoy and Miskel (1996, p. 232) have suggested that 'even if market-driven schools are established on a relatively widespread basis, forces in the institutional environment will likely counter the drive to enhance their technical environments'. This assertion, then, enables us to explore the market-like environment in education from an institutional point of view.

However, the institutional explanation of organizational phenomena is not without criticism. Hall (2001) suggested that structural characteristics that cannot be explained by other reasons are attributed to institutional forces, and that this perspective is potentially tautological reasoning. There is a tendency to apply institutional theory in an *ex-post facto* manner. Hoy and Miskel (1996) argued that its broad emphasis on processes of conformity downplayed the role of active agency and resistance in organization–environment relations. Other critics claim that the institutional perspective has almost become 'authoritarian' as it has swept the theoretical landscape (Hirsch, 1997), and has also become institutionalized (Tolbert & Zucker, 1996), as there is very little consensus on the definition of key concepts, measures, or methods. Nonetheless, this theory has become a major contributor to our understanding of organizational phenomena. It is another explanation of the ways by which organizations are structured, which is supported by a substantial body of research (Rowan & Miskel, 1999; Hall, 2001).

For this paper, I define four main elements of institutional theory of organizations which constitute the theoretical frame for the analysis of basic assumptions of parental choice and market reform in education.

- (1) *Conformity to institutional rules.* The focus here is on the organization's tendency to incorporate rationalized myth and societally-agreed rules in its structure, thereby promoting survival, social legitimacy, and apparent success without increasing efficiency or technical performance. To what extent, then, are school changes subsequent to competition fundamental rather than just image? Can schools be genuinely responsive to parents' needs/wants?
- (2) *Isomorphism.* Another central element of the institutional theory is that conformity of organizations to institutional rules, over time, leads organizations in the same institutional sector to resemble one another. This element raises questions about the extent to which diversity of provision of education in a local educational arena is expected; can we expect high levels of diversity among schools following the introduction of markets in education?
- (3) *Decoupling as a buffering strategy.* Organizations that depend for survival on conformity to institutionalized rules are assumed to engage in a process of 'decoupling' that buffers work in the technical core from the visible, conformed structure. This is highly appropriate for schools that are considered to be 'loosely coupled systems'. To what extent, then, are parents able to make choices based on clear and visible information on the school?
- (4) *Normatively-based decision-making.* The decision-making process is claimed to be strongly influenced by collective norms and values that impose social obligations on them and constrain their choices. Conformity to institutional rules and rationalized myth is likely to guide one's behaviour rather than self-interest and expedience. Consequently, one may ask to what extent parents are able to choose schools rationally, a sort of choice on which advocates of parental choice base their arguments.

Although I find this frame useful for analysing the reform of parental choice in practice, and although the elements are discussed separately in the sections to follow, they overlap and are inter-connected with one another.

Conformity to institutional rules: an emphasis on image building

A major theoretical assumption of market ideology is that parental choice will improve the quality of education and teaching, motivate change in schools, and increase efficiency of schooling, mainly through the introduction of competition among schools (Lieberman, 1989; Chubb & Moe, 1990; Coleman, 1990; Finn, 1990; Bondi, 1991; Tooley, 1992). Competition was initially defined as 'producers striving to attract consumers to choose their service or product instead of those of other providers' (Woods *et al.*, 1998, p. 138).

The international evidence regarding the consequences of school choice and improvement, however, points to uncertain links between both (Brown, 1992; Gorard, 1997; Whitty, 1997; Woods *et al.*, 1998; Plank & Sykes, 1999). Among the reasons indicated are parents' lack of information about teacher behaviours in class (Rapp, 2000), intake as a main factor affecting subsequent achievement (Gorard,

1997), methodological difficulties (Whitty, 1997), lack of real choice (Gorard, 1997), and policy restrictions (e.g., class size). I would like to propose an institutional explanation for this evidence.

Given the institutional theory view of conformity to institutional rules, the discussion to follow questions the premise that parental choice will necessarily result in fundamental changes in schools and in an increase in their effectiveness, their responsiveness to stakeholders, and their technical efficiency. In contrast, schools may rather adopt image-based changes which conform to institutional rules and, in turn, promote their survival and social legitimacy.

For institutional theorists, institutionalized norms, values, and technical lore play an extremely significant role in innovations and changes in educational organizations (Rowan, 1982). Educational innovations and activities tend to gain legitimacy and acceptance on the basis of social evaluations, such as generalized cultural beliefs and the endorsement of legislatures or professional agencies (Meyer & Rowan, 1978, Meyer *et al.*, 1992). Schools are under pressure of conformity to adopt changes and innovations that have the support and endorsement of key agencies in the institutional environment (Rowan & Miskel, 1999). For example, schools engaging in the marketplace are measured by their students' academic achievements (Woods *et al.*, 1998), and, thus, they may be urged to adopt any innovation which is publicly perceived as increasing these achievements, even if its contribution to higher achievements has not yet been proven.

One aspect of schools' conformity to socially legitimated changes and innovations is that their organizational structure and processes mirror the norms, values, and ideologies institutionalized in society (Hoy & Miskel, 1996). Their structure conforms with and is constrained by institutional rules of what society defines school to be (Meyer *et al.*, 1992). One can expect, therefore, that the cultural transition in Western countries from co-operative values (e.g., caring ethos, equality, mixed ability) to market values (e.g., student performance, academic ethos), suggested by Gewirtz *et al.* (1995), should be reflected, at least rhetorically, in the school's structure and marketing messages (e.g., new academic programmes).

Along the same line, schools are assumed in institutional theory to incorporate into their structure 'rationalized myths', a term coined by Meyer and Rowan (1977) to refer to rules specifying procedures to accomplish an outcome that is based on beliefs assumed to be true or just taken for granted. They are true because they are believed. Myths become rationalized when they take the form of bureaucratic or professional rules specifying procedures necessary to accomplish a given end (Scott, 1995b). Arising from this point, then, is that schools competing for students may choose to adopt rationalized myths that maximize their image as a good school whose structure and programmes are consistent with the deeply institutionalized, rule-like understandings about how best to organize to produce a given end. This raises the question, for example, whether the introduction of computer facilities by schools in England, reported by Woods *et al.* (1998), is simply a result of stakeholders' belief that it signals a good and modern image of schooling, although no consistent findings have ever proven this sort of belief.

In addition, from an institutional perspective, a most important aspect of conformity is the evolution of organizational language. Vocabularies of structure that conform to institutional rules provide rational and legitimate accounts (Scott, 1995b). Schools described in legitimated vocabularies are assumed to be compatible with defined, and often collectively rationalized myths and institutional rules. Thus, one can expect that the language used in many school brochures will conform to the dominant culture in a particular community (for example, the language of innovations, achievement, performance).

The discussion to this point suggested that the need for conformity to institutional elements might induce schools in competitive environments to implement changes and innovations which are, in fact, a mirror of their environment's values and beliefs; otherwise, they might be conceived of as failing schools. In doing so, schools are assumed to adopt image changes (i.e., such that do not necessarily contribute to their core technology but with a symbolic power to attract prospective students) rather than fundamental changes (in teaching methods, for instance). Parents may evaluate schools based on the beliefs, ideas, and impression they have of each school, image elements that are not necessarily the result of the school's efficiency, as institutional theorists may claim, but of the rationalized myths, language, and rules incorporated into the school structure. I will develop some aspects of this contention in the next section.

Increasing efficiency and effectiveness?

Combined with its emphasis upon the image aspect of organizational change, a basic premise of institutional theory is that conformity to institutionalized rules could promote the long-term survival of the organization without necessarily increasing its efficiency or technical performance (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; DiMaggio & Powell, 1991; Scott, 1995b), although no clear definition or measure is suggested for these concepts (Tolbert & Zucker, 1996). This argument stands in sharp contrast to rational system models, which hold that organizational performance is the crucial determinant of organizational success. However, despite it being controversial, it is particularly salient to schools conceived of as operating in domains characterized by high technical uncertainty where clear information about technical performance is missing or difficult to obtain (Rowan & Miskel, 1999).

In that sense, in order to survive the competition, schools in market-like environments are assumed to go to the greatest lengths, not to accomplish better instructional ends, but to maintain their legitimate status as successful schools. Meyer *et al.* (1992, p. 56) have suggested that 'a school succeeds if everyone agrees that it is a school; it fails if no one believes that it is a school, regardless of its success in instruction or socialization'. For example, Fitz *et al.* (1993) found that many schools became GM status (which are considered high status schools) to ensure their survival and prevent closure.

Similarly, allocating an increasing amount of time and resources to marketing and image-building, observed in many studies worldwide (e.g., James & Phillips, 1995;

Foskett, 1998; Levin, 2001; Oplatka, 2002; Oplatka *et al.*, 2002), seems to be more crucial for apparent school success than improving its core technology, i.e., the teaching domain. From the institutional theory standpoint, a failure to incorporate the proper elements of structure is negligent and irrational; the continued flow of support is threatened (Rowan & Miskel, 1999). It implies that failing schools in the competitive environment are those failing to conform to the socially legitimated elements, such as high results, sciences, or the existence of modern computers. This is not to say, however, that they fail necessarily in invisible schooling aspects which are not considered to be important or efficiency indicators in the community, such as the personal, social, and pastoral aspects of schooling which concerns children's personal development and the school's social environment, aspects less conceived as features of good schooling, according to Woods *et al.* (1998), in the market-like environment. This argument may, partially, explain the evidence suggested by Gorard *et al.* (2002) that the danger of sending schools into spirals of decline has not been observed in English secondary schools.

Furthermore, educational innovations tend to have high levels of technical uncertainty and, as a result, can seldom be justified on the basis of solid technical evidence. Instead, for example, schools are likely to adopt new and revised materials, such as curriculum materials or technologies, rather than focusing on changing teaching approaches and beliefs, two elements considered by Fullan (1991) to be an indispensable aspect of educational change. If parents can watch the 'visible, material changes', the school, then, is expected to gain legitimacy as an efficient school.

To this point, we have seen that advocates of school choice and market in education ignored the symbolic aspects of school success, which means that technical efficiency and effective teaching do not necessarily promote the school's competitive edge. School success in the competitive environment appears to be influenced by school capability to build an image of an organization which complies with institutional rules and expectations of how good schooling should be (e.g., increased range of courses available to students, reinforcement of the school as a caring institution). I shall return to this argument later in the discussion about the concept of 'decoupling'.

However, if school success is assumed to be connected to its capability to promote symbolic elements compatible with institutional rules in its community, then the issue of responsiveness receives a slightly different meaning. While advocates of parental choice assumed that schools, left to their own devices, will respond positively to parental preferences (Chubb & Moe, 1990), I would like to raise the idea that their responsiveness is symbolic in its essence. Put differently, their core technology, i.e., the teaching-learning process, is not to be basically changed in accordance with parental needs and wants (partially due to policy restrictions, lack of process for responding for changes from outside (Levin & Riffel, 1997)), but, to the contrary, only those symbolic school elements with high influence on apparent school success and survival would be changed (e.g., attention to uniform and safety of position). For institutional theories, by responding positively to this sort of parental desires, schools only conform with institutional rules, values, and ideologies, without changing their basic technology or increasing their technical efficiency. They adopt structural

changes which are of limited influence upon teaching, but of high significance to what Gewirtz *et al.* (1995) called 'symbolic and image production' of schools operating in the new market environment.

Before proceeding to the issue of inter-school diversity, it is important to note that the institutional analysis of parental choice ideology discussed above is limited by its lack of reference to de-institutionalization processes. For institutional theorists, once organizational activities are institutionalized, they are assumed to become relatively stable, enduring, reproducible, and sustainable over long periods of time. In contrast, Oliver (1992, p. 564) pointed to de-institutionalization which is 'the process by which the legitimacy of an established institutionalized organizational practice erodes or discontinues'. That means that some ideas or established organizational practices or procedures in schools may be rejected or replaced subsequent to changes of the education market at the policy level. Thus, it is possible that, in early days of marketization, schools adopt image-based innovation, competitive language, 'traditional image', and so forth that are replaced over time by new organizational practices in response to new institutional rules (e.g., less image-based changes, new curriculum). This sort of speculation received little attention in the institutional theory, yet is important for this analysis.

Isomorphism and myth making: any possibility for diversity of providers?

A major component of the market ideology refers to existing diversity of supply, which means the amount of difference between schools in terms of educational content and teaching methods (Elmore, 1987; Chubb & Moe, 1990; Bondi, 1991). Competition, it is held, will enable the flowering of diversity as schools seek niche markets which cater for the development of particular personalities (Finn, 1990).

This view is contested by a large body of research conducted in various Western countries, finding a lack of diversity among schools operating in educational markets and greater uniformity in the school system (e.g., Cookson, 1994; Hirsch, 1994; Blackmore, 1995; Gewirtz *et al.*, 1995; Gorard, 1999; Adnett & Davies, 2000). This situation is explained, at least in part, by the relatively low population density (Gorard, 1997), limited government funding (Lauder *et al.*, 1999), and top-down programmes of diversity (e.g., specialist schools). The institutional theory may suggest an alternative explanation for the low inter-school diversity in the market place.

The preceding section evidenced the issue of conformity to institutional rules which is a central idea in institutional theory. Organizational conformity, it is held, shapes the structure of organizations, and, over time, it leads organizations in the same institutional environment to resemble one another (Rowan & Miskel, 1999). DiMaggio and Powell's (1983, 1991) works are especially insightful in illustrating the link between organizational conformity and isomorphism among organizations in the same sector. They contend that there is great pressure on organizations to engage in the same types of activities to look and act alike. Organizations within the same institutional environments tend to become homogenized. In that sense, schools even in

competitive arenas are expected to resemble each other in respect to buildings, instruction and curriculum, classroom design, similar ways of engaging in teaching, and learning processes.

Let us expand this point and take this argument one stage further and consider how institutional theories may account for the barriers for diversity among schools in competitive educational areas. DiMaggio and Powell (1991) identify three mechanisms that promote institutional conformity: coercive conformity, imitative conformity, and normative conformity. Scott (1995b) adds another mechanism: cultural conformity. These conformities are conceived of as the forces leading to isomorphism among organizations in the same sector. In other words, they seem to lead to low levels of diversity among schools, either in competitive areas or in fixed enrolment zones.

Coercive conformity stems from political influence and problems of legitimacy (e.g., government mandate, regulations). British government legislation, for instance, leads schools to incorporate performance measurements in order to conform to government standards transmitted by OFSTED. Similarly, a mandatory national curriculum decreases the possibility of diversity among schools in the market.

Imitative conformity results from adopting standard responses from other sources to reduce uncertainty. When organizations such as schools have weak technologies and ambiguous goals, they may model themselves on other organizations that they perceive to be more legitimate and successful (Hoy & Miskel, 1996). It follows that a weak school may create programmes and engage in activities similar to those found in more successful schools, not because they necessarily improve its efficiency or quality of teaching, but because it may gain legitimacy with stakeholders by being perceived to be a successful school. A similar explanation was suggested by Ball (1994), who claims that the form of schooling is not so much a result of responsiveness to parental needs and desires, as it is part of the dynamic of the market that arises from emulation of a competitor school.

Normative conformity comes primarily from professionalization. Teachers receive the same formal education and cognitive knowledge. They learn standard methods of practice and normative rules about appropriate behaviour. Those expecting diversity to emerge, then, do not seem to take this aspect into account. Adler (1997) refers to these institutional elements by suggesting that diversity among schools depends, at least in part, on distinctive teaching and learning strategies. Normative conformity, however, is not likely to allow for distinctive and diverse teaching methods among schools, in spite of their need, as specified in market ideology, to devise a positioning strategy and unique image to survive the inter-school competition.

Finally, as Scott (1995b, p. 18) commented, 'cultural systems provide models for how to construct corporations, schools and hospitals. These entities are granted rights and assumed to have certain characteristics and capacities to the extent that they conform to these cultural templates'. This sort of conformity may account, at least in part, for schools' reluctance to appear to step outside the dominant model of good schooling, revealed in Woods *et al.*'s (1998) study and coined by Gewirtz *et al.* (1995), as a fear of exceptionalism. By being committed to cultural scripts defining what a good schooling is, schools refrain from non-societally agreed innovations,

thereby becoming more similar to each other. As parents in a local educational arena share, by and large, similar cultural beliefs about teaching and schooling, schools become more like other schools in the area.

Thus far, we have seen how institutional theory supports those who claim there is no diversity of provision in education, and explains the sources of isomorphism among schools, even in competitive environments. Advocates of parental choice and markets in education, it is suggested here, have ignored the potential impact of cultural, normative, imitative, and coercive conformity upon schools. Nevertheless, consistent with the criticism against the institutional perspective (Tolbert & Zucker, 1996; Hoy & Miskel, 1996), there is a need to bear in mind that the isomorphism process tends to be moderate rather than total, due to disagreements among organizational decision-makers concerning institutional influences, different responses to educational policies, and internal political arrangements that make schools more or less receptive to change processes.

Decoupling and parents' information gathering

A major assumption supporting parental choice reform is that parents, as rational choosers, will make informed choices in selecting schools for their children. Their choices will be informed because they will be based on the assessment of their children's interests and educational needs and on their evaluation of the capacity of schools to engage those interests and meet those needs (Lieberman, 1989; Witte, 1990; Gorard, 1997).

International evidence indicates that parents lack sufficient and clear information about schools (e.g., Ogawa & Dutton, 1994; Gorard, 1997; Lauder *et al.*, 1999; Rapp, 2000), due to complexity of the definition of effective schooling (Hirsch, 1994), limited access to the options available and unfamiliarity with present educational programmes (Gorard, 1997), quality of the educational services that is not easily measured (Bridge, 1978), and inability to gain information about teacher behaviours within the class (Rapp, 2000).

From the standpoint of institutional theory, institutional elements characterising schools, such as 'decoupling' and 'loosely coupled systems', may prevent parents from choosing schools based on accurate, profound, and clear information about schools. In light of the institutional theory, parents seem to have only partial information they need for choosing a school, mainly that related to the external structural elements of the school organization and to a lesser extent that related to teaching and learning processes in the classroom.

Organizations that depend for survival on conformity to institutionalized rules consistently are assumed to engage in a process of 'decoupling' that buffers work in the technical core from the consequences of institutional conformity (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Buffering creates a protective layer between the school and its environment, and consequently resolves the contradiction between pressures for technical efficiency and institutional rules. Had buffering strategy been ignored, schools might have publicly been perceived as inefficient and inconsistent. In other words, in order

to remain apparently conforming to institutional beliefs and myths (thus gaining legitimacy of a successful school), schools are likely to conceal their non-conformity (Oliver, 1991).

From this standpoint, schools attempt to decouple their institutional structures from their technical structures and activities, i.e., the teaching and learning processes taking place within them. Decoupling divides the school into two parts: one primarily links with the institutional environment and one produces technical activities (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Schools, for example, may be expected to adopt a certain policy or educational programme as a symbol of innovative schooling (and, thus, to increase their competitive advantage), but by doing so school headteachers may conceal the proliferation of traditional classroom practices. Parents will be satisfied not because they checked the quality of the teaching in a certain school, but because the school incorporated societally-agreed 'quality' mechanisms in its structure. The information about schools that prospective parents are able to gather, though, is limited to that which refers to the visible, image-based structures of the schools rather than to the information concerning the application of a certain educational innovation at classroom level. For example, parents, as Gewirtz *et al.* (1995) indicated, could be satisfied just because the school had introduced uniforms (in the belief that this is an indicator of 'discipline'). They could not evaluate, however, the validity of this indicator in the classroom reality, that is more complex and covert.

Let's take this argument one step further and connect it more profoundly to the issue of limited information in the school choice process on teaching and schooling. To begin with, I would like to combine the element of decoupling with that of 'loosely coupled system', a term coined by Weick (1976). By this term, Weick means that structure is disconnected from technical work activity, and activity is disconnected from its effects. Purposes and programmes are poorly and uncertainly linked to outcomes; rules and activities are disconnected and internal organizational sectors are unrelated (Weick, 1976; Meyer & Rowan, 1978).

In the case of loose coupling whose school management itself has limited control over and knowledge about instructional processes, then, can we expect parents to have available and clear information about the classroom activities? Can parents understand the complexity of process-output links in teaching? It seems that the answer to these questions is—to a lesser extent. Sources of information most frequently mentioned about parents' preferred school, such as visits to the school, friends, school brochures, and examination results (Woods *et al.*, 1998; Gorard, 1999; Bagley *et al.*, 2001; Foskett & Hemsley-Brown, 2001), seem to provide information about institutional elements in the school structure (e.g., educational aims and ideology, uniform policy) rather than on aspects of the teaching-learning process in practice. Put differently, when purposes and processes are disconnected in schools, and the links between processes and outcomes are unclear, the information parents receive in an open day appears to be of a 'declarative' nature, of the intentions and ideologies, of rationalized myths rather than of what is really going on within the classroom arena. Nevertheless, the limited information given to parents on teaching and schooling is not intentionally managed. In fact, this is more concerned

with institutional and structural elements of schools which make the control of school management over the classroom activities relatively weak.

Still, as mentioned before, schools need to conform with institutional rules and beliefs, and, therefore, they are expected to display an apparent technical efficiency. To this end, and because information about technical productivity is difficult to obtain objectively (Rowan & Miskel, 1999), measures of control and evaluation are developed on a symbolic basis. From an institutional perspective, then, league tables, introduced to control and evaluate school performances, are less likely to provide parents with information about teaching and schooling processes prior to their school choice, as assumed by policy makers (West & Pennell, 2000), but rather are ceremonial criteria of worth which legitimate schools with stakeholders and community. After all, a school's score in the league tables is not a function of its technical efficiency solely, but rather of its intake and other non-educational factors. Thus, the information provided to parents in this measure cannot be perceived of as an indicator of what is going on within the classroom and cannot necessarily help parents find out how the school is being run, as indicated in the Department for Education's (DfE) report from 1994.

The ceremonial and symbolic aspects of league tables are a good point to return to the process of 'decoupling' discussed earlier. As part of this process, logic of confidence and good faith develops in schools as principals deliberately ignore and discount information about technical activities and outcomes to maintain the appearance that things are working as they should be, even if they are not. In this way, schools continue to gain support simply by conforming to externally defined rules, even when such rules do not promote technical efficiency (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Parents cannot 'see' the internal inefficiency within schools, but rather only the structural elements that conform to institutionalized conventions, and still be satisfied.

Likewise, if there is not objective definition of success, the consensus of those most involved is obviously crucial. Thus, schools also need to keep their own members and stakeholders happy (Meyer *et al.*, 1992). For instance, parents of children with special educational needs reported that they had chosen a school following conversations at open evenings with specialist teachers who revealed an empathy and understanding of their child's needs (Bagley *et al.*, 2001). In other words, they chose a certain school not because of any objective measure and information on teaching, but due to their satisfaction with teachers' replies to their questions at a marketing event.

In sum, the discussion to this point suggests that sources of information about schools offered to parents (e.g., league tables, open evenings, brochures, and school visits) seem to provide parents with external-structural information about schools (e.g., uniform policy, equity, and excellence ideology) and, to a lesser extent, with clear information on teaching and learning processes in practice. It derives from schools' tendency, according to institutional theorists, to decouple their inefficient technology from their structure, in that stakeholders and parents will not be able to get accurate information about the malimplementation of innovative programmes in the classroom. Where the customer is unable to assess the value and quality of the

product, the result is that the premise that choice will lead educational providers to improvement is invalidated, as Wringe (1994) commented.

Institutional elements and limited rational choices

The preceding sections discussed major concepts and assumptions underlying the institutional theory, with high relevance for analysing the barriers to the application of parental choice reform in education. Combining these elements together points to the limitation of a rational school choice process, a core premise in the ideology of educational market and parental choice. Advocates of parental choice argue that, when families are given the right to choose their child's school, they will act rationally, in a goal-oriented fashion, to maximize their educational utility by finding the 'best' school for their children (Elmore, 1987; Chubb & Moe, 1990; Witte, 1990; Tooley, 1992; Cookson, 1994).

This assumption was criticized by opponents of education market ideology (e.g., Grace, 1994; Hirsch, 1994; Ogawa & Dutton, 1994), and was contested by findings indicating that emotional and intuitive criteria were dominant among parents choosing schools (Maddaus, 1990; Gewirtz *et al.*, 1995; Foskett & Hemsley-Brown, 2001). Among the potential reasons raised for the limited rationality of parents are 'bounded rationality' (Simon, 1983), lack of time, subjectivity, computational ability, distractions, existing values and commitments, and stress (Gorard, 1997). The institutional perspective may offer another elucidation of this reality.

From the institutional perspective, institutional elements (e.g., conformity, isomorphism, decoupling, and loose coupling) seem to be an obstacle for a rational choice process among parents choosing their child's school. Accordingly, parents are unlikely to choose rationally, but, on the contrary, ideologically and normatively. One aspect of the assumed rational choice process—vigilant information collection—has already been discussed here as difficult to apply due to the institutional features of the school organization. The discussion to follow points to a similar view regarding other elements of the rational choice process.

Rational models of choice are based on the view that choices and decisions in the marketplace are the result of rational calculations (Foskett & Hemsely-Brown, 2001). Two basic elements of this view are the focus of the forthcoming analysis: that individuals will seek to maximize the benefits they will gain from the choices they make, and that they will make choices that are entirely based on self-interest.

In essence, the institutional theory rejects rational actors models (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Abell, 1995; Scott, 1995b). As it emphasizes the normative aspects of institution, then, behaviour is assumed to be guided not primarily by self-interest, but by an awareness of one's role in a social situation and a concern to behave appropriately, in accordance with others' expectations and internalized standards of conduct (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Scott, 1995b). Institutional theorists claim that the power of social patterns to mould individual beliefs and behaviour and to conceive of individual actions is determined more by non-rational than by rational forces (Scott,

1995b). Individuals are strongly influenced by collective norms and values that impose social obligations on them and constrain their choices.

To put it simply, according to institutional theory, not only organizations are expected to be conformist with institutional rules, but also individuals, i.e., the parents. Their school choice is based more on normative and social elements than on utility maximization or self-interest solely. Schools are chosen not because they match the child's needs and desires, but rather because they are compatible with what Scott (1995b) calls the cognitive conceptions of institutions, that is, the schemata and ideological formulations, taken for granted, that define appropriate structures and lend meaning and order to practical action.

The view of a process of rational choice implies also the need to consider more than one alternative in a way that maximizes one's benefits (Cookson, 1994). However, the institutional element of isomorphism among organizations in the same sector makes schools resemble one another in a certain educational arena. That means that a basic premise of a process of rational choice—considering alternatives—is limited in education. In addition, a societally-agreed model of what is a good school is so rooted in our society that it is unlikely that parents have any strong desire to seek alternative kinds of organizational structure for schools.

In sum, whereas in the ideal concept of the consumer in market theory individuals choose goods according to their preferences and self-interest (Foskett & Hemsley-Brown, 2001), parental preferences, from an institutional view, are a mirror of institutional beliefs and ideologies. They base their school choice on criteria which are schemata taken for granted of what should be in schools, not necessarily on what is really going on in schools.

Concluding comments and implications

From the institutional analysis of the policy of parental choice and educational market set out above, a number of insights and empirical implications can be provided. Consistent with Sergiovanni (1998), deep change which involves changes in fundamental relationships, in understanding of subject matter, pedagogy and how students learn, in teachers' skills, in teaching behaviour, and in student performance will not to occur just because parents have the right to choose a certain school. Unless institutional rules, beliefs and ideologies of what is good schooling are changed, schools will remain conformist to the well-rooted rules that define their structure and technology. Institutional impetus prevents diversity among schools and increases schools' tendency to incorporate rationalized myths into their structure, while at the same time decoupling their core technology (i.e., teaching) from the external environment. In this situation, parents are unable to choose schools based on vigilant information, and, therefore, their utility maximization is impeded. Institutional elements (e.g., conformity, isomorphism, decoupling) seem to be barriers to fundamental change, non-symbolic improvement, rational choice processes, and diversity among educational providers.

The major implications of an institutional analysis for further research are three-fold: firstly, when examining schools' responses to the market forces with respect to improvement and change, it is recommended to identify the institutional rules and beliefs prevailing in their environments. The researchers are recommended to distinguish between changes that are in fact a reflection of the institutional beliefs and rules and those that are rather innovative and even different from the socially accepted model of good schooling in the community. For example, they may ask whether the introduction of a new educational programme is a function of school pursuit of efficiency and responsiveness or compliance with institutional rules/beliefs according to which this programme is a proof of effective and efficient schooling.

Secondly, the study of diversity in education should use concepts such as isomorphism, emulation, conformity, and the like in the data analysis. These concepts may assist the researcher in understanding the barriers to diversity and the level of similarity among schools. Understanding the school's need to conform to major institutional rules may provide insight into the process of isomorphism conducted among schools in a certain market-like educational environment.

And, finally, the issue of information collection and information revelation in the process of school choice should be explored also from the angle of institutional theory. It is interesting to identify the ways by which schools decouple their teaching from the parents engaging in information-collection and how the parents strive to attain more knowledge about the practical process within the classroom levels.

Notes on Contributor

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