

Primary to secondary school transitions in Lewisham:

Parental choices

Learning Evaluation Research Network

Background

Lewisham LA monitors primary secondary transition and this data has indicated that there are a number of pupils on the primary Gifted and Talented ('G&T') register who do not continue education in Lewisham secondary schools. There is a perception, backed up by analysis of post codes that in particular parents of high achievers choose to send their children to grammar schools or private schools in the surrounding area. To identify and understand the key factors influencing this trend the Local Authority enlisted the University of Greenwich LERN team to conduct research with parents of 'G&T' children who were at the decision making stage at the transition between primary to secondary school. The aim of the research is to make practical suggestions to the Lewisham Local Authority to improve recruitment and retention of 'G&T' children within comprehensive secondary schools.

Methodology

The LERN team distributed questionnaires to parents, identified by Lewisham Local Authority as having 'G&T' children in years 5 and 6, who were interested in sharing their views on the primary to secondary transition decision process, to understand the key factors influencing their choices.

Parents and Children

Participants for the project included eight parents / carers of gifted and talented children (Four of whom were in year 5 and four of whom were in year 6). Parents of children in year 5 were in the process of completing their CAF forms and establishing their secondary school choices, whereas parents of children in year 6 had already received their offer of the school their child would be attending.

Of the four respondents with children in year 6 only the child who had been offered a place at Dartford Grammar School obtained their first choice of secondary school. The remaining three parents had hoped to send their children to Haberdasher Askes, a private school. However, none of them were granted or able to send their children to their first choice school. Instead, two respondents had been offered and accepted second choice comprehensive secondary schools outside of the Lewisham area; one was offered St Martin-in-the-Fields School in Lambeth and the other was offered Crofton Secondary School in Lewisham. The third parent who had wanted their child to attend Haberdasher Askes was offered Wilson's Grammar School in Sutton and this place had not been accepted at the time of interviewing.

Due to the small sample of participants in this research the data was analysed qualitatively.

Key Factors Influencing Choice

For nearly all parents, location was considered when choosing an appropriate secondary school. However, although journey time was an influencing factor, most

parents did not consider distance as the most important factor in their choice. Similarly, although the school the sibling attends was considered, parents of 'G&T' children in this study looked for schools that catered for their child's individual needs. Reputation for academic rigour, achievement and league table ranking were felt to be the main factors that influenced parental choice. Interestingly pastoral care was also considered as an important factor. However, it is important to note that several of the primary schools participating in this study were Church of England, therefore it is unsurprising that these parents had these preferences.

"I would prefer to walk if possible, but location is secondary to what the school has to offer in terms of academic achievement and pastoral care." (Parent)

Other key factors considered by parents surrounded the holistic learning approach portrayed by the school; in terms of a good ethos for learning and stimulating the children, whether the school was mixed gender, extra-curricular activities available and an all encompassing curriculum. Friendship groups were not considered important by parents of the 'G&T' children who participated in the study.

Parents stated they rely more on recommendations about schools from others than media. Only one respondent in the study had read something by the media that affected their choice, which was referring to local school closures due to poor performance.

Provision for 'G&T' Children

Only half of parents considered it important to apply for a school that has G&T provisions. This was due to the assumption that a selective school would be 'geared up' for more able pupils. Poor knowledge that their child was considered 'G&T' is stated as the main reason why 'G&T' provision was not considered by many parents prior to submitting the CAF form.

"I had no idea my children were 'gifted and talented', the primary school didn't tell us until after we had been offered secondary schools." (Parent)

Most respondents were assured their children would be academically challenged at the school of their first choice. However, three children in the sample were not accepted to their preferred choice of secondary school. Of these, only one parent thought their child would also be academically challenged at the school actually offered to them.

The majority of parents felt it was easy to obtain information on secondary schools in Lewisham. One parent was aware the school made special provision for 'G&T' children, and another was aware there were no special provisions at the school. All other parents were not aware of school provision.

Obtaining Information

In general parents felt they had received at least some advice and information about secondary school transition from their primary school. This was mainly in the form of a meeting about the transition, an explanation about how to complete the CAF form and warnings that they may not get their first choice of secondary school. A sub-set of parents also received information about the grammar school and private school selection tests, the options for schooling outside of Lewisham Borough and others had individual meetings with parents. Three children had taken multiple selection tests for different boroughs and/or schools.

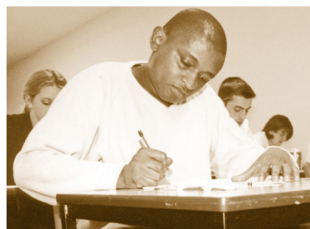
Extra-Curricular Activities

Attending a wide range of activities (not just academic) was considered very important for a child's development. However, parents did not feel that these activities must specifically take place within school. Most 'G&T' children attended extra activities after primary school, including sports, arts, academic and social clubs. In addition to this, all of the participants had experienced a school trip or journey and all but one of these had taken them away from home for an extended period (more than one night away). Four participants also had experience of attending activities, such as arts, academic and sports, at a secondary school.

Overall Feelings

In general, most of the parents who participated in the study felt 'let down' and disappointed by the choice of secondary schools available. Lewisham secondary schools were considered below average in terms of academic achievement compared to neighbouring boroughs.

"Only 4 out of 14 secondary schools in Lewisham attained or exceeded the national average for 5 GCSE ... Lewisham children who are bright have to sit a series of selection tests and have to travel to schools outside the borough. There isn't a single Lewisham school I feel I can put my CAF form." (Parent)



"We do not get a lot of choice....unless they pass the selection test. The choice in Lewisham is poor." (Parent)

As a result parents of 'G&T' children felt they needed to access selective schools or relocate / travel to other boroughs as secondary schools in Lewisham were felt unable to fulfil the potential of 'G&T' pupils.

"Many people relocate for better results, thus affecting Lewisham's SATS results and therefore league positions. Reputations are affected, a chicken and egg situation Lewisham has not resolved." (Parent)

"One does not really get a choice; it is all based on banding, distance and some case selection --- and luck!" (Parent)

There was also a feeling of frustration and disappointment regarding the information and feedback about 'G&T' pupils. Parents were unaware as to the identity of the 'G&T' co-ordinators. This increased the feeling that many pupils in Lewisham are not led to realise their potential.

Conclusions

Overall, this pilot project established that parents of 'G&T' children were disappointed with the choice of secondary schools in Lewisham due to perceptions of the lack of academic rigour and reputation of achievement at the schools.

Recommendations

This pilot study proposes that Lewisham secondary schools need to increase awareness and build reassurance in parents that there are provisions in place at comprehensive secondary schools in Lewisham for 'G&T' children. Secondary schools need to make parents feel comfortable that their child is receiving the best education possible.

Although this pilot study highlights the factors involved in the decision-making process for primary to secondary transition, the LERN team recommend a larger study to obtain a better understanding of how schools can improve resources, awareness and reassurance for parents of 'G&T' children.

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