Church Schools, Educational Markets and the Rural Idyll

Abstract

Researchers have begun to explore the role that faith schools play in contemporary educational markets but the emphasis to date has been on urban rather than rural contexts. This article approaches the issue of marketisation through a qualitative case-study comparison of two Anglican primary schools in contrasting rural localities in England and Wales. Engaging with a range of stakeholders, including parents and pupils, the article explores reasons why the schools were valued, drawing on wider constructions of childhood, religion and rurality. The consequences of the schools' popularity on factors such as traffic, parking, school ethos and local community ties are also considered. The findings of the study problematise some of the prevalent assumptions about marketisation, including the role of social class and geography in these processes. As such, the article makes an important contribution to the sociological literature on faith schools, rural schools and educational markets.

Introduction

Since the Education Reform Act (1988), schools in England and Wales have been subject to an unprecedented array of neo-liberal government policies aimed at fundamentally transforming the education system. The introduction of performativity and accountability measures, such as league tables and the inspection regime, have been integral to the promotion of marketisation and competition between schools in an attempt to raise standards (Allen et al. 2014). These initiatives have also contributed to the development of a choice agenda, where parents are encouraged to select schools for their children on the basis of their apparent strengths and achievements. Although control of Welsh education has been devolved since 1999, it still has much in common with the English system, with neo-liberal policies a significant feature of educational provision in both national contexts.

The place of faith-based schooling in the above landscape has been strengthened since the late 1990s, particularly in England, with an increase in Anglican secondary schools, the establishment of state-funded Islamic, Sikh and Hindu schools, and the development of faith-based free schools and academies (Patrikios and Curtice 2014). Researchers have begun to explore the role that faith schools play in contemporary educational markets but the emphasis to date has fallen primarily on urban environments, where the dynamics of school competition are often particularly intense. At the same time, academic interest in rural education and school choice is currently growing, but little attention has yet been paid to the role of faith schools in this regard. This omission is concerning, given that a large proportion of rural schools maintain an Anglican character, including over 50% of English rural schools, according to government figures from 2012.

In this article, we approach the issue of marketisation through a qualitative case-study comparison of two Anglican primary schools in contrasting rural localities in England and

Wales. We begin by exploring the reasons parents and pupils gave for why they valued or chose the schools and reflect on how these various views and experiences interact with wider constructions of childhood, religion and rurality. Next, we consider some of the consequences of these processes on factors such as traffic, parking, school ethos and the relationship of the schools with their surrounding villages, arguing that the various challenges encountered by the schools had the potential to undermine the very qualities that made them so appealing to families in the first place. Finally, we explore how the findings begin to problematise some of the common assumptions relating to school choice and marketisation processes. As such, the article makes an important contribution to the sociological literature on rural schools, faith schools and educational markets.

Educational Markets and Social Class

There is now a significant body of sociological research examining the dynamics and consequences of educational markets and school choice policies. A key strand of this work has explored the factors that feature in parents' decision-making processes. Researchers have found a preference for schools with a sound academic record, a good local reputation and close proximity or easy access to the family home (Burgess et al. 2014). Indeed, this latter factor may at times prove more important than academic record and reputation (Taylor 2002). However, parents tend to have a good knowledge of their child's needs and take this into account when judging school qualities and characteristics. As such, many opt for schools for reasons other than league tables and performance indicators, somewhat undermining the policy rationale for marketisation as a driver to improve standards (Burgess et al. 2011).

Research has also found variations between different groups of parents in terms of their school choices. Middle-class parents are reported to emphasise performativity and

accountability, whereas working-class parents may prefer accessibility, a friendly environment and solidarity with the community (Ball 2003; Wilkins 2010). Burgess et al. (2014) found that middle-class parents objected to sending their children to schools with a high proportion of pupils from deprived backgrounds, whereas working-class parents felt their child would receive additional support in these contexts. However, Vincent (2001) found differences within middle-class groups, with liberal and highly educated parents placing greater emphasis on caring student-teacher relations than parents from other middle-class groups who supported schools with a strict discipline and uniform policy, traditional values and streaming.

For many parents, school 'choice' is in reality quite limited because the most popular and high achieving schools are typically oversubscribed. Deciding on a school therefore becomes a competitive process amongst parents, with economic, cultural and social capital playing a role in privileging some families over others. Middle-class families tend to be particularly good at using these resources to gather information about potential schools and their admission processes (Lubienski 2008). They may even move home or buy property in a school catchment area several years before their children are due to start their education, to enable access to a popular primary school that also acts as a feeder for a desired secondary school (Butler et al. 2007). Middle-class parents are also quite adept at placing pressure on schools to improve their standards and respond to their parental expectations, in contrast to working-class parents who may worry about being 'overly pushy' (Reay 1996).

The middle-class strategies discussed above also tend to have an impact on other families and the system as a whole. Allen et al. (2014) argue that working-class parents may be less adept at utilising performance information, avoiding applying to high achieving schools out of a fear of rejection. Eligible children from more deprived backgrounds are therefore more likely to be sent to a lower achieving school even when there is a higher performing one with

spaces available nearby. This can have the consequence of driving down schools'
performance and reputation within less affluent areas, leading to a vicious cycle and the
development of 'sink schools' (see also Reay 2004). However, others have questioned the
notion that working-class parents are unable to navigate or understand the significance of
educational markets, characterising their school choices as different rather than deficient (e.g.
Coldron et al. 2010).

Faith Schools and Choice

Research shows that families choose faith-based schools for a variety of reasons, including
teaching and academic performance, strict discipline and uniform policies, religious values
and ethos, and, in the case of minority religious communities, to protect and reproduce
cultural identity (Patrikios and Curtice 2014; Levitt 1996). Davie (2007) has argued that
church schools remain popular in Britain as an expression of 'vicarious religion', whereby
parents are happy for their children to experience a certain amount of religious socialisation
undertaken by others on their behalf. The theory maintains that despite dwindling interest in
religious beliefs and practices, the wider public continues to approve of religious institutions,
particularly in terms of the role they play in the provision of public services and community
utilities, as well as their historical contribution to the nation's culture and heritage.

Opponents of faith schools have argued that that they use their faith-based selection
procedures to covertly 'cream off' the best pupils, and that this can lead to the exacerbation
of class-based inequalities in the schooling system (Jackson 2003). Allen and West (2009)
explored faith-based secondary school intakes in London using quantitative datasets and
confirmed that they were catering for particular religious and ethnic groups. For example,
Christian schools were able to attract a disproportionately higher number of Black Africans

and Black Caribbeans but very few Pakistanis or Bangladeshis. At a national level, Allen and West (2011) found evidence that parents of children in faith schools have a higher household income, higher social class and are more likely to have professional jobs than state schools in general.

Qualitative research has begun to shed light on the role that parents may play in these wider patterns. Butler and Hamnett (2012) showed how non-religious parents and those from minority ethnic groups were often keen to send their children to London faith schools, due to positive perceptions regarding school ethos, values and pupil behaviour. As a result of this, and the pressures to attract children of non-Christian backgrounds, church school selection processes became increasingly focused on middle-class values rather than religious factors. Butler and Hamnett (2012) also found that non-religious parents would move closer to these schools to ensure they fell within the catchment area and attend religious services in order to meet admissions requirements. However, there is little convincing evidence in the literature that faith schools are deliberately and systematically engaged in skewing their pupil intakes beyond that which results from religious selection where used.

Rural Schools and Markets

Burgess et al. (2011) have shown that many parents living in the countryside seemingly have less choice than their urban counterparts, as rural educational provision is spread over wider distances and fewer schools are located within a 3km radius of family homes. However, rural schools are more likely to be undersubscribed than city schools, meaning that parents in less densely populated areas may actually have more choice, providing they are willing and able to travel to schools that are further afield (Burgess et al. 2011). Previous research has emphasised the importance of teaching quality, exam results, discipline, reputation, pupil

support and provision for 'quieter' children as factors that feature in parental decision-making in favour of small and rural schools (Hammond and Dennison 1995; Flecknoe 2003).

Rural education is also increasingly viewed as attractive to families from towns and cities, leading to counter-urban migration. A move away from the noisy, stressful city often proves popular amongst affluent middle-class parents who wish to provide a safer, quieter and healthier upbringing for their children in a setting that offers good quality education, frequent encounters with nature and a strong sense of community (Phillips 1993; Smith and Higley 2012). Parents often draw explicitly on what is commonly termed the 'rural idyll' in explaining such actions, reflecting the longstanding association between childhood and nature, and the idea that the countryside is a more favourable environment in which to raise children (Valentine 1997; Woods 2005). Small village schools are often viewed as embodying these fundamental rural qualities through a safe and caring ethos (Walker and Clark 2010).

The popularity of rural education does, however, have consequences for village communities, particularly when outsiders bring different priorities. For example, studies have shown that whilst longstanding residents often harbour close allegiances to their local village school due to generations of family involvement and its perceived role in community relations, newcomers tend to be more concerned with the school's performances in league tables and inspections and hence offer more conditional support (Bagley and Hillyard 2015a; Walker and Clark 2010). Such differences may lead to deeper tensions, if newcomers and commuters are viewed as merely using the educational facilities without contributing to wider village life, reflecting concerns about loosening ties between rural schools and their surrounding communities (Walker and Clark 2010). An influx of newcomers can also fundamentally transform the social dynamics of rural villages, introducing new divisions based on social

class and rising house prices, and causing disputes over noise, bullying and use of community space (Bagley and Hillyard 2015b).

The Study

In this article, we approach the issue of rural church schools and educational markets through a focus on two qualitative case studies, engaging with a range of stakeholders and exploring the ways in which policy processes play out within specific school and community contexts. As such, this is not a traditional study about school choice, where a large number of parents are interviewed about the reasons for their initial selection of particular institutions. Rather we view school choice as a part of an on-going, dynamic process of 'valuing', involving pupils as well as parents, and with tangible consequences over time for local village communities. We also take seriously the significance of geography, both real and imagined, for these complex processes (e.g. see Taylor 2009).

The article draws on data from a wider research project on rural church schools, which involved fieldwork in two Anglican primary schools and their surrounding localities during the autumn term of 2014. 'Fringefield' was a Voluntary Controlled[1] Church in Wales school, located 2 miles from the edge of a large urban area in a small village in South Wales. The majority of its pupils (around 80%) commuted in from a working-class suburb of the nearby urban area by car or school minibus, although a small number came from more affluent families from the surrounding village (around 20%). In contrast, 'Woodington' was a Voluntary Aided Church of England School, located in a larger rural village in West England, situated 8 miles away from the nearest urban settlement. Its pupil intake consisted of local residents mainly from higher socio-economic groups (around 65%) and a proportion commuting from villages and towns more than 2 miles away with a more mixed social class

composition (around 35%). Both schools could be described as 'small' with fewer than 150 pupils on roll and both had been identified as high-performing in recent inspection reports, achieving good or excellent/outstanding[2]. Neither of the schools included religion as a criterion in their admissions procedures.

Fieldwork took place for approximately 12 weeks in each school, for at least 1 day a week. In both schools, the focus of the research was with pupils from Years 5 and 6 (aged 9-11). The project employed a range of qualitative methods, including participant observation, semi-structured interviews with senior staff members (2 for each school) and local villagers (4-5 for each school), focus groups with parents (3-5 members for each school), and paired interviews with pupils conducted away from the classroom (23-24 for each school). Quotations from participants are identified with pseudonyms, role, self-identified religion and other relevant markers. Pupils were also given the opportunity to participate in mapping and collaging activities, and data from the former is used here. The mapping task involved creating a mental map of pupils' journeys from home to school, including the actual route taken, mode of transport and key features passed on the way. Children were provided with a demonstration from the researcher, and were encouraged to include labels of items on the map to facilitate subsequent analysis. Appropriate procedures were put in place to ensure informed consent from all participants for direct data collection, including children, in line with the requirements of the university ethics committee.

The above methods were supplemented by a documentary analysis of SIAMS or GWELLA reports[3] for other Anglican schools in the surrounding district or local education authority, encompassing approximately 20 schools in both cases, many of which shared similar characteristics to the case-study schools. The reports were analysed using a qualitative thematic approach in order to place the case-study schools in a wider context concerning

issues such as school ethos, collective worship, religious education, approaches to religious diversity, pupil and parent participation, and links to the church and wider community.

Valuing Rural Church Schools

Despite the different geographical contexts within which the two case-study schools were located, participants told similar stories as to why they valued or had chosen the schools. Parents often referred to the role that educational performance or local reputation had played in their initial choice of institution, along with potential future access to sought-after secondary schools. However, of equal importance, and emphasised by both parents and pupils, was the character of the school communities. In line with research by Walker and Clark (2010), the small size of the institutions was frequently cited and credited with producing a close-knit collective that was 'like a family'. As such, both of the schools were described as safe, friendly and caring environments for children.

> *'It's a family school. It's really nice where the kids will just come in, they all know each other.'* (Mark, Fringefield Parent, Commuter, Male, Religion Not Given)

> *'We've always really loved the sort of small community feel and every child knowing every other child.'* (Sarah, Woodington Parent, Non-Commuter, Female, Christian)

Staff members and pupils in both of the schools reiterated similar qualities when explaining what they felt were particular strengths of their respective schools. The head teachers especially highlighted the importance of the relationships present for cultivating school ethos. SIAMS and GWELLA reports for other Anglican schools in the surrounding areas also emphasised the common theme of a close-knit school community that cared for children and felt like a family, illustrating its wider relevance.

'And we're all – and 'cos we're such a small school like we know everyone and it's just like – it's a really, really, nice school to be in.' (Emily, Fringefield Pupil, Female, Age 10, No Religion)

'The way that the children treat each other and the way that – that relationships within the school and relationships between the school and parents and the wider community, would show that the school lives – lives what it believes.' (Woodington Head Teacher, Male, Anglican)

Participants felt that the small size of the schools contributed to the development of pupil friendships, with fewer incidences of bullying than in larger schools and a warm welcome offered to new children. Both schools utilised an effective anti-bullying policy as well as buddy schemes, where older pupils were encouraged to take responsibility for younger children in their Reception year. Friendships and healthy relationships were further encouraged through the use of Personal and Social Education or 'Circle Time'. The relatively positive relations between children in both schools were also observed in playground fieldwork, where the atmospheres were noted as friendly and good-natured.

'[No bullying] in this school, but in another school they might. I think this school's caring and loving.' (Hannah, Woodington Pupil, Female, Age 9, Christian)

INTERVIEWER:
Have you noticed if they do anything about dealing with bullying or things like that?
MARK (Fringefield Parent, Commuter, Male, Religion Not Given):
Oh definitely.
LINDA (Fringefield Parent, Commuter, Female, Anglican):
Well that's established straight away I would say, yeah.

In addition to pupil-pupil relationships, interviewees also discussed relations between pupils and staff members. On the whole, teachers were reported to be caring and friendly, and were often compared favourably with those in other schools. Due to the small size of the institutions, it was easier for staff to know the names of all the children, contributing to the close-knit and 'family feel' of the schools. Observations in both schools revealed a real concern for pupil welfare, expressed through regular staff meetings at Fringefield and informal conversations at Woodington.

> *'They're such like, nice teachers and they're not nasty. They care for you and – we're all like a proper family.'* (Eric, Fringefield Pupil, Male, Age 10, Unsure of Religion)

> *'You know I think [the teachers] can be very positive with the children.'* (Sarah, Woodington Parent, Non-Commuter, Female, Christian)

The 'family feel' of the schools was further strengthened through close links with parents, many of whom were well known by the teachers. Parent interviewees felt that both schools were very approachable, and at Woodington, the head teacher was frequently seen greeting parents and pupils as they arrived at the school first thing in the morning. SIAMS and GWELLA reports for other Anglican schools in the surrounding areas often mentioned the close links forged between teachers and parents, so it seems that this was not unusual for schools in similar circumstances. Parents at Fringefield and Woodington were also invited to attend and engage with school events such as the summer fair or school shows and assemblies. However, Fringefield was less successful at attracting parents to events because many of them lived considerable distances away from the school.

> *'You haven't got to make an appointment to see a teacher. When they come like in the mornings and they're stood there in the line you can just run up and say "Oh by the*

way can you" - you know - or "Can I come in and see you?"' (Tracy, Fringefield Parent, Non-Commuter, Female, Religion Not Given)

'I think it's warm and friendly. I think you walk into the school and you think, you know, it is a friendly environment and welcoming.' (Patricia, Woodington Parent, Non-Commuter, Female, Anglican)

Whilst the features discussed above could well be associated with many small schools, participants often made an explicit link between these qualities and the fact they were church schools. The friendly, caring and 'family' feel of the school communities was said to be rooted in, and further enhanced by, their religious ethos, something that was valued by many parents. Religion was something that was regularly communicated through assemblies and collective worship, particularly via distinct Christian values (see Hemming 2017). SIAMS and GWELLA reports for other Anglican schools in the surrounding areas also typically emphasised the contribution of Christian values to the development of character and ethos, as well as relationships in school.

'The fact that there is, you know – underpinning ethos is that sort of – those Christian ideals, I think that […] it gives, you know, a very definitive, clear, easy to navigate kind of set of values basically. And they do actually – they are very positive.' (Sarah, Woodington Parent, Non-Commuter, Female, Christian)

Constructing Rural Education and Childhoods

The views of parents and pupils about the two schools often reached beyond general characteristics, drawing on wider constructions of childhood and its relationship with rurality. Children and staff members spoke favourably about the villages in which Fringefield and

Woodington were situated, noting their natural environment and wildlife, their small, peaceful and close-knit nature, and the feelings of safety they engendered. The qualities of the surrounding villages were often linked to the character and ethos of the schools, which were regarded as reflecting those same qualities (see also Phillips 1993).

> *'Yeah. It's not like cities and towns with cars beeping, with everyone screaming and shouting. This village is like really calm. So all the trees, the birds can go in. And like when they – sometimes at night when I wake up, all I can hear is the birds chirping.'* (Holly, Woodington Pupil, Female, Age 9, No Religion)

> *'Our location does help us a little bit because it is quite a calming, quiet sort of place.'* (Fringefield Head Teacher, Male, Christian)

There was a collective sense amongst children at both schools that they were free from the undesirable road traffic, congestion, pollution, noise and crime found in towns and cities, and that they enjoyed certain advantages to pupils at urban schools, who might have restricted access to the natural environment. Interviewees also felt that bullying was likely to be rife in urban schools compared to rural ones, with implicit references made to social class and urban 'undesirables'.

> *'If we were in [the city] – it'll be like proper noisy and it'll be like loads of police going past and that.'* (Tony, Fringefield Pupil, Male, Age 9, Christian)

> *'A lot more people [in town schools] who – who would brought up in the same way that the [town] children were. I'm not saying that's bad, but just different to us. So I don't think we'd get along.'* (Larry, Woodington Pupil, Male, Age 10, No Religion)

When it came to parents and villagers, some talked about why they had moved to the countryside from more urban environments, drawing on the seemingly idyllic qualities of

rural life, such as calmness and safety. As discussed earlier in the article, childhood has long been associated with rurality, particularly in literature and art, where 'country childhoods are seen powerfully in terms of a synthesis of innocence, contact with nature, wilderness, play, adventure, the companionship of other children, contact with nature, agricultural spaces and practices, healthiness, spatial freedom and freedom from adult surveillance' (Jones 1997, 162).

> *'We were thinking just, you know, we wanted a quieter lifestyle and just – just we thought we'd be safer for the kids.'* (Sophie, Fringefield Villager, Female, Religion Not Given)

> *'It's a safe environment. We're surrounded by woods, which they can walk in and play in. And many of the children walk to school.'* (Peter, Woodington Villager, Male, Buddhist)

Many parents felt that the school formed part of a broader rural lifestyle in this regard and explicitly linked the qualities of the countryside with childhood innocence, protection from crime and avoidance of a premature entry into adulthood. These discourses conjured up images of tradition, nostalgia and a simpler past, and were compared favourably with modern and urban influences.

> LINDSAY (Woodington Parent, Non-Commuter, Female, Anglican):
>
> *That's why we live here. I kind of think – hopefully [child's name] will be in a time capsule for a decade.*
>
> PATRICIA (Woodington Parent, Non-Commuter, Female, Anglican):
>
> *A protected childhood.*
>
> SARAH (Woodington Parent, Non-Commuter, Female, Christian):
>
> *I mean we don't have a television so we're so old fashioned.*

LINDSAY:

I don't think the kids get exposed to the same amount of peer pressure here […].

Having worked and taught in urban schools - all the designer stuff, and they've all

got these games, they've all got mobile phones, even in a primary school. You don't

see that so much here.

In the same way as Christian values seemed to enhance the small, friendly and 'family' feel

of the schools, religion also appeared to play a role in creating a more authentic rural

educational experience. Religion often features in wider constructions of the 'rural idyll',

with church buildings and Christianity at the centre of village life, representing a

romanticised, pastoral and moral view of the countryside (Jones and Heley 2016). Similarly,

constructions of childhood sometimes draw on religious imagery, for example in the angelic

portrayals of children found in many church statues and figurines (Jones 2012). As such,

some of the parents viewed church schools as part of a quintessential rural childhood,

particularly through the role of religion in the village communities.

> *'Its links to the church […] gives it more of an old-worldly, traditional feel, which is*
>
> *nice and not modern. […] The school and the church and the village and the castle*
>
> *are all old so they all fit well together in that context, giving a nice community village*
>
> *feel to the set-up.'* (Michael, Woodington Parent, Non-Commuter, Male, No Religion)

At Fringefield, where many of the parents commuted in to the school from a working-class

suburb of a nearby urban area, their main concern was for their children to avoid 'corrupting'

influences associated with their home neighbourhood environment such as crime and peer

pressure. For Linda, the qualities of the rural Anglican school were viewed as superior to the

experience that her children would have had in her local urban Catholic school. This finding

contrasts with previous research that has focused on urban-rural educational migration as a

middle-class strategy (e.g. Smith and Higley 2012), as the majority of parents involved in this practice at Fringefield could be described as aspirational members of the working-class.

> *'I didn't want my kids to go to an [town name] school. 'Cos I didn't want them to be hanging around the streets after school and - and most of the people where I live their kids do go out on the streets, but mine don't. And from that – from that - and I just want them then to go to a different high school so they're not hanging around with [town name]… [At] least I can give them the best opportunity as well then.'* (Linda, Fringefield Parent, Commuter, Female, Anglican)

Victims of their Own Success?

Whilst the two institutions were highly valued by both parents and pupils, their popularity led to a number of challenges for the schools and their local communities that threatened to undermine the very qualities that had originally attracted families to them. The particular issues that each school faced tended to vary depending on its geographical circumstances regarding levels of commuting and social class composition (see earlier) and also the relationship to its surrounding village.

The children's mapping work quite vividly illustrated some of the differences between the two schools referred to above (see Figures 1-4). At Fringefield, most of the journeys to school showed a similar commuting route following roads from the working-class suburb of the nearby urban area through to the village where the school was located, with the vast majority of children travelling by car or school minibus. The features drawn on the maps generally included shops, restaurants, other services, houses and road objects. Very few of the maps included any reference to the natural environment or the countryside, with the

exception of a few parks and trees, despite the fact there were plenty of farms and fields surrounding Fringefield, including on either side of the main road into the village. Based on these drawings it would be impossible to know that the children attended a rural school at all, even though much value was placed on these qualities in the parent and pupil interviews. In many ways, the maps highlight the separation between the school community and the village community, brought about by the large numbers of urban commuters.

In contrast, at Woodington, pupils travelled to school via a range of different routes either on foot or by car, with more pupils living much nearer the school and thus taking shorter journeys. In these maps, there were again a certain number of shops, restaurants and other houses included but also many more explicitly rural features. Farms, fields and woods maintained a conspicuous presence on the maps and many of the children passed them regularly on their way to school. The differences between the two sets of maps may have been partly due to the different locations of the two schools, with Woodington situated further away from urban settlements than Fringefield. Even pupils who commuted in to school were more likely to live in rural settlements and hence may have been more aware of rural features. However, the differences also seemed to represent the contrasting relationships between village and school communities due to different levels of commuting, with pupils from Woodington seemingly more embedded within their local environment.

INSERT FIGURES 1-4 ABOUT HERE

In terms of the specific challenges facing the schools, one significant issue was the traffic and parking problems that arose as a result of the many commuters travelling into the two

villages. Participants often highlighted the incompatibility of narrow roads and inadequate parking provision with large numbers of parents dropping off and collecting their children in cars at the start and end of school days. This had the potential to disrupt the peaceful atmosphere of the villages and increase fears about children's safety around the school gates, linking with previous research on rural childhoods where fears about road safety undermined parent's constructions of the 'rural idyll' (Valentine 1997).

> *'I suppose with a lot of people using the school from outside the area, and they – and they sort of like drive up. So I suppose traffic can be a bit of an issue, which is always a bit of a bug bear with some of the community.'* (Garth, Fringefield Villager, Male, Christian)

> *'There is traffic and there are car parking problems increasingly, which does cause friction between the school and the – the village.'* (Peter, Woodington Villager, Male, Buddhist)

As illustrated in the quotes above, the influx of traffic and concerns about parking had the potential to create tensions between the schools and their local village communities. This was particularly true at Fringefield, where staff and villagers recalled instances of commuting parents being rude to local residents. These disputes often tapped into wider disquiet about the working-class backgrounds of the families commuting in to the predominantly middle-class village.

> *'I think also we do have some interesting families and unfortunately I think they've sometimes been very rude to some of the local residents. If they've parked and they say "please can you not park there", they've not expressed it in very long sentences, shall we say. They've said it like it is - a two word sentence ending in "off".'*
> (Fringefield Head Teacher, Male, Christian)

Due to concerns about the influx of families commuting in from less advantaged areas, and related perceptions about pupils' behaviour and special educational needs, parents in Fringefield village often made the decision to avoid the school and send their children elsewhere. This situation was further exacerbated by the fact that Fringefield school did not offer any nursery provision, meaning that once local families had settled their children into nurseries attached to other schools, they were more likely to stay on at those other schools rather than risk a disruptive move.

> *'A lot of families in the – in the village who – who come here decide not to take their children to the school because there's so many people from – from outside the area coming in, and they don't want their children mixing with the people from [those areas] I suppose. […] You know there are people coming from deprived areas into the school who have special educational needs, and I think people have got a negative view of that […] even though they have very good standards in the school.'* (Garth, Fringefield Villager, Male, Christian)

The 'othering' of the working-class children commuting into Fringefield school adds an interesting dimension to previous research that shows how village residents often view outsiders such as walkers, tourists, and New Age travellers as 'undesirables' (Valentine 1997). In our research, villagers were effectively weakening the relationship between Fringefield school and the local village community by sending their children to other schools in order to avoid the urban working-class commuters. This also led to concerns about the impact on wider village life and cohesion, when the school was not able to act as a central community hub in the same way as it had reportedly done in the past.

> *'I think probably going back, the villagers knew one another a lot better because, as I say, there wasn't a school in [place name] and so families came here. So the mums*

and dads got to know one another, and things that were going on.' (Elsie, Fringefield Villager, Female, Anglican)

'There's a big problem with the school in that it used to be a very community-orientated school in that it's – a lot of the school kids used to go – a lot of the village kids used to go to the school. You won't find any there now really.' (Sophie, Fringefield Villager, Female, Religion Not Given)

At Woodington, despite a certain amount of irritation, there seemed to be a greater degree of tolerance from the local community when it came to traffic and parking. However, there were nevertheless other concerns about the increasing number of families commuting to the school, as well as those that had moved to the village as a result of the school's popularity. The increase in children attending was viewed by some participants as having an impact on the feel of the school, as well as of the village, with the potential to weaken the close-knit and traditional character of both communities.

'It was a very small school. It had a different feel. It feels now – you know - lots of people commute to this school, and that wasn't happening when we first came.' (Sarah, Woodington Parent, Non-Commuter, Female, Christian)

'And so people who came in from communities where the schools weren't quite as good, came here […] so we are getting an increase in – in children and families within the village. And that's changing - that's sort of changing the nature of the village quite a bit.' (Woodington Vicar, Male, Christian)

When it came to those families that settled in Woodington village because of the school, their arrival brought a mixture of positive and negative effects. Some of the participants talked about the increased vibrancy in an otherwise ageing village population, whilst others felt that

newcomers were often less involved in village life than longstanding residents and were worried about rising house prices due to the village's increasing popularity. For the new arrivals, there were concerns about a lack of community facilities for young people once they left the primary school. However, it was felt that providing space and resources for young people to socialise could potentially compromise the quiet and peaceful feel of the village, and hence the initial attraction.

> *'On the one hand there's, I suppose, a desire to – to provide for – for young people*
> *[…]– so that could involve, you know, new equipment in the park or whatever. On the*
> *other hand there's the impact to the people who live round the park and – and the*
> *noise that, you know, could be.'* (Gareth, Woodington Villager, Male, Christian)

Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of our study are significant in that they begin to challenge some of the prevalent assumptions in the policy and research literature about the nature and functioning of educational markets. Firstly, our research supports an existing strand of scholarship that has highlighted how, in practice, school choice is often about much more than official performance indicators and league tables (e.g. Burgess et al. 2011). In addition to the academic success and good reputation of Fringefield and Woodington, parents and pupils valued or had chosen the schools for a range of reasons, including their small, friendly and close-knit communities, and the positive relationships that were forged between stakeholders. Furthermore, these processes were often strongly imbued with idyllic constructions of rural education and childhoods. As has been documented in previous studies (e.g. Walker and Clark 2010), parents in our research felt that rural education compared favourably with urban alternatives, believing children would benefit from calmness, safety and a more traditional

and protected lifestyle. There was also tentative evidence to suggest that the religious character of the schools may have made them more attractive to some parents, in line with Davie's (2007) concept of 'vicarious religion'. Religion featured not only in accounts of the close-knit school community and caring ethos that participants so valued, but also in the way it enhanced constructions of the 'rural idyll' through the church's contribution to cultural heritage and nostalgia.

A second challenge to prevalent thinking on schools and markets concerns the issue of social class. Our findings question the assertion in much of the academic literature that only the middle-classes benefit from engagement with school marketisation policies and that working-class parents necessarily make markedly different decisions to their middle-class counterparts. The case of Fringefield is particularly significant here, where the majority of pupils were commuting in from a working-class suburb of the nearby urban area, a strategy that would usually be associated with middle-class families. The findings offer further support to those who have argued that working-class parents are capable of utilising school choice policies to their advantage when the conditions are favourable (e.g. Burgess et al. 2014). Our research is also a reminder that there are many examples of faith schools that cater for less privileged families, despite the emphasis in the existing literature on the role that faith schools can play in exacerbating class-based educational inequalities (e.g. Allen and West 2011). The dynamics of pupil intake is influenced by geographical context just as much as school admissions processes and this is particularly evident when researchers venture outside of the metropolitan centres. Neither of the schools in our study included religion on their selection criteria so their pupil profiles were a consequence of their differing locations and the decisions of families that attended them. Whilst Fringefield may well have drawn some pupils away from other schools located in the working-class suburb of the nearby urban

area, this could not be attributed solely to its religious character because the suburb was also served by other (urban) faith schools.

The third way in which our findings challenge established knowledge about educational markets is that they disrupt the simplistic binary between 'successful' and 'unsuccessful' schools through a focus on wider community contexts. In contrast to popular and political discourses on rural education, which often emphasise lack of resources and viability, our findings point to problems that can arise as a result of the popularity of rural church schools. Previous research has highlighted some of the impacts that educational processes can have on rural village communities (e.g. Bagley and Hillyard 2015b) and both of the schools in our research were experiencing challenges in this regard. Whilst some families had uprooted and moved home in order to gain admission to Fringefield and Woodington, many had chosen to commute to the schools from urban neighbourhoods, introducing a new dynamic to the processes of counter-urban migration previously explored in studies on rural educational markets (e.g. Smith and Higley 2012). This situation led to a number of problems for the schools and their surrounding villages, including increased traffic and parking issues, as well as perceptions about the changing character of the school and village communities and the relationship between them. Developments at both schools, made possible by their apparent 'success' within a marketised system, therefore threatened to undermine some of the qualities that had originally attracted families to them in the first place, particularly those idyllic constructions of rural education and childhoods.

In this article, we have approached the issue of marketisation through a focus on rural church schools, a topic that has been relatively neglected in previous research. The findings make an important contribution to the sociological literature on rural schools, faith schools and educational markets, particularly the way in which they problematise a number of taken-for-granted assumptions about school choice processes. We have shown these processes to be

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much more complex than often presented, intersecting with social class and geography in unexpected ways, and cascading out into wider social and community effects. Our findings disrupt the simple logic of market winners and losers and highlight the importance of viewing school choice processes as on-going and dynamic, embedded within wider contexts, rather than limited to one-off parental decisions made at a single point in time.

Notes

1. Voluntary Controlled schools refer to faith schools that are fully funded by the state, but maintain a distinctive religious ethos and character. Voluntary Aided schools raise 10% of their own capital funding costs but enjoy a greater degree of autonomy in relation to school governance, religious education, and admissions policies.

2. At the time of the relevant inspections, the school inspectorate in Wales – Estyn – used a four point scale consisting of excellent, good, adequate and unsatisfactory, whereas the school inspectorate in England – Ofsted – used a four point scale consisting of outstanding, good, satisfactory and inadequate.

3. These inspections are also referred to as Section 48 (England) or Section 50 (Wales) reports and deal exclusively with those aspects of school life that come under the religious remit of church schools.

Acknowledgements

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Church Schools, Educational Markets and the Rural Idyll: FIGURES 1-4
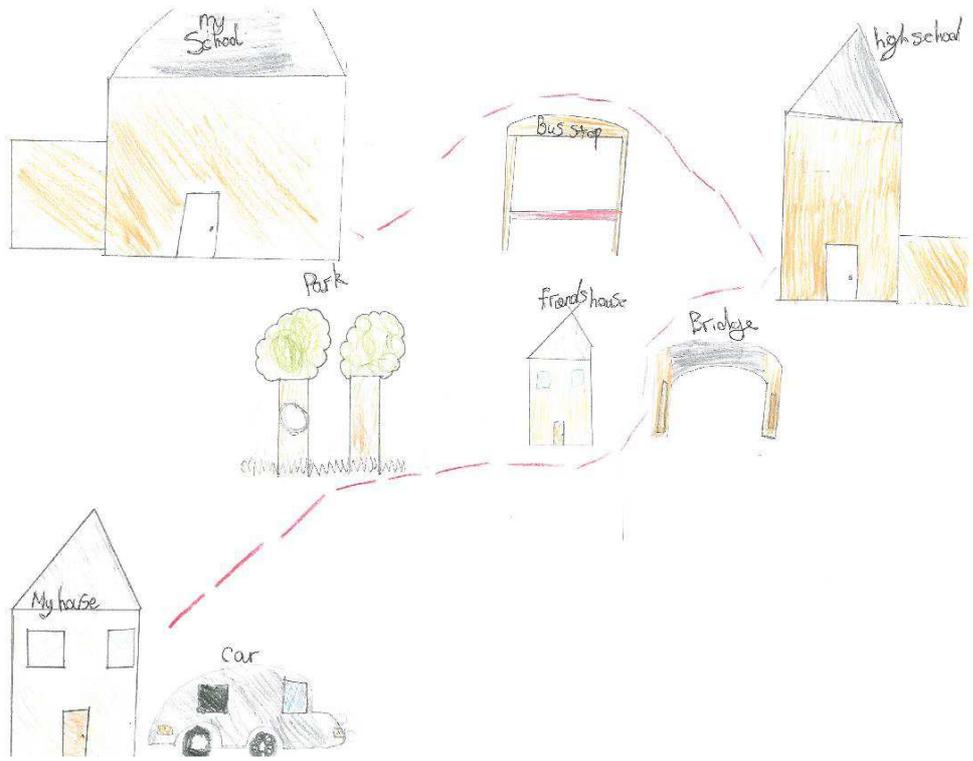

Figure 1: Map from Fringefield - Example A

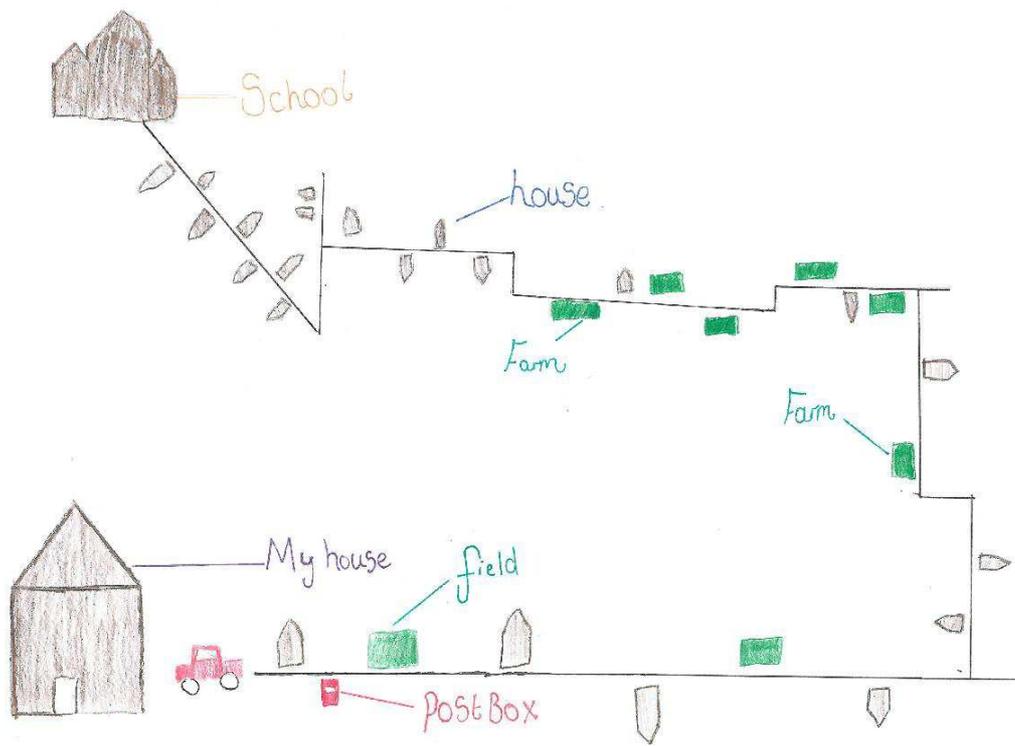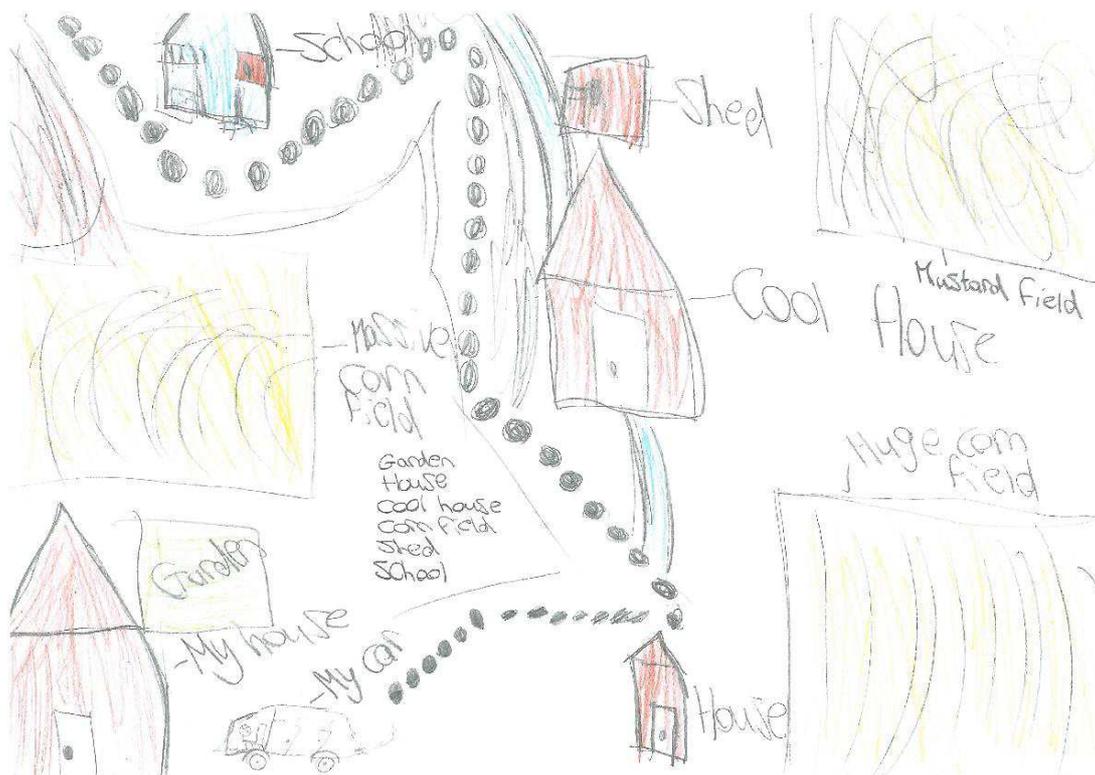*Figure 2: Map from Fringefield – Example B*

Figure 3: Map from Woodington – Example A

Figure 4: Map from Woodington – Example B