

Executive Summary

The concept of “demand” applied to education

Demand has quickly become an established part of the discourse on educational reform across the world. It is a controversial concept. For some, it is about rectifying an excessively bureaucratic approach to education (“supply-driven” systems), but this can quickly be associated with the precepts of New Public Management – an increased role for clients and markets, even privatisation, which for many is at odds with the traditional aims of education to promote equity, cultivate humanity, and sustain local communities.

Demand is also an important concept. It takes a prominent position in the reform debates in many OECD countries, whether to enhance participation and active forms of personalised teaching and learning or to improve public services through the pressures of quasi-markets. It is thus a broad concept, leaving it open to multiple interpretations in developing reform agendas. It is because demand is controversial and important but difficult to pin down that a systematic clarification is needed of both the concept and associated empirical evidence.

The launching point for the report is that demand is a multi-dimensional concept that needs to be unpacked. There is clarification of the ways in which it can be expressed (exit and voice) and the potential impacts a more demand-led system may have for such key aims as quality and equity. There are both collective and individual levels of demand (see table below). The levels and expressions of demand interact; for example, the demands for specific types of education from particular groups in society (collective voice) promote diversity which enhances individuals’ room to choose.

Better understanding the mechanisms for expressing demand and their interactions is not only an important means of understanding contemporary educational developments but it permits a focus on the outcomes resulting from applying these mechanisms in individual schools or systems.

	EXIT	VOICE
INDIVIDUAL	Individuals choosing and changing a school or programme, market choice mechanisms, or leaving altogether such as for home tuition.	Parents or students directly participating in decision-making in schools and having an important role in the learning process (personalisation).
COLLECTIVE	Groups establishing schools – purely private or publicly-funded private – based on particular religious, ethnic, linguistic or pedagogic grounds.	Interest group influence on schooling issues, such as through curriculum consultation, lobbying, pressure group politics.

Some key findings

This study is based on different national reports which synthesise research findings and datasets particular to their countries (the participating countries were Austria, the Czech Republic, Denmark, England, Finland, Hungary, Japan, Poland, the Slovak Republic and Spain, plus additional material from the United States). In practice this means that there are many blanks in the evidence base as countries do not collect systematic evidence on attitudes, expectations, or satisfaction, whether of parents, employers or the public at large. Though this limits the comparability of the findings, this review has shown the value of exploring this area and of making the evidence base more robust.

Public and parental perceptions of schooling

The evidence available on satisfaction shows a generally positive level of reported satisfaction by the public and parents: there is a stronger belief in the value and achievements of schooling than might be expected. In evidence reported for this study, education is a high public priority alongside health and higher than many other calls on the public purse.

Another generally positive endorsement is the “rule” that the *closer* people are to schooling provision or the education system – the more direct their experience of it – the more satisfied they tend to be about it. This manifests itself in several ways: parents with children going to school are on average more satisfied with schooling than other parents; those who are involved in school governance are more satisfied than other parents; women (who are more likely to participate in school life) tend to be more satisfied than men.

There are other differences related to satisfaction. Across different countries, for instance, the more educated express lower satisfaction with

schooling than less educated parents. They are more critical. Parents in urban areas are less satisfied than parents in rural areas, partly because they have higher educational attainment and are more critical, partly because of problems in urban areas.

Parental choice and diversity of provision

This report has prominently used the conceptual distinction between choice (exit) and participation in decision-making (voice) as different ways for parents to express their perceptions of schooling which influence the schooling their children receive. The study shows that countries are moving towards creating and permitting greater parental choice:

- In the countries studied, parents have acquired growing entitlements to choose the school they consider most appropriate for their children. Most often this takes the form of allowing parents to send children to a school outside their own school district. This tends not to be an absolute freedom, where schools can choose which children to accept and they often give preference to students from their own district.
- There is a parallel trend towards greater diversity in the schools on offer. Decentralisation and school autonomy encourage the development of specific school profiles which has been encouraged by policy in some countries. Greater competition supports this trend. Diversity goes further when it means a greater range of types of schools to choose from.
- The information available to parents to make their choices has improved as well. Policy has in general sought to make schooling systems more transparent. School profiles, sometimes including results on national tests, are more generally available to the public and parents.

Though the general trend is to expand the possibilities for choice, not all individuals are responding to this in the same way. The better-educated parents are more likely to exercise deliberate choice. There remain significant differences between urban and rural areas, in part for the simple reason of the greater number of schools to choose from in urban areas.

Parents and community “voice” in schools

There is also a trend from centralised state administration of schooling towards more autonomous schools and increased stakeholder, especially parental, participation in decision-making. These formal opportunities do not always translate in actual influence, however, for a number of reasons:

- Parents are not always aware of the possibilities they have to influence schools and some are simply not interested.
- Another barrier to parents raising their voice is the fear that if they raise critical issues about schooling this might negatively affect their child.
- With a trend towards greater consumerism, some parents will prefer to choose than to invest heavily in a given school.
- In some countries, establishing a school council requires initiative and active participation of parents rather than being set up automatically.

Limited parental participation in school decision-making is compounded by the fact that the parents who do tend not to be a representative sample of the parent body as a whole.

What do students say?

The patchy knowledge base on the demand dimension is particularly problematic regarding students. The basic information on students reveals several general tendencies on reported satisfaction:

- Students are fairly satisfied with school in general, although older students less than younger ones.
- Students in higher tracks are more positive than students in lower tracks.
- Girls tend to be more positive about school than boys.

Where there are complaints, they are most often that school is “boring”, or more particularly too many lessons are not interesting enough. According to what students say, the quality of the teaching, the personalisation of methods, and the interest of content make a critical difference. The evidence concerning how dislike of lessons, even a particular lesson, can be telling for the vulnerable to become more permanently detached warrants particular

attention: a relatively small but negative experience can have lasting consequences.

In terms of *choice*, in secondary education, most systems have created provisions allowing students to choose between different subjects taught in addition to the compulsory part of the school curriculum but the opportunities for students to raise their *voice* are limited in almost all countries. Formal opportunities for involvement in school decision-making are limited in most countries and where these opportunities exist they are often seen as ineffective.

Selected issues arising

Choice may stimulate quality, but with risks for equity

This report confirms that better educated, middle-class parents are more likely to avail themselves of choice opportunities and send their children to the “best” school they can find. This can increase inequalities by widening the gaps between the sought-after schools and the rest. Inequalities widen too because when the most critical parents take their children from the local school, it loses the critical resource of those who tend to be the movers and shakers, *i.e.* those with most effective voice for improvement from within. The equity argument in favour of transparent choice, on the other hand, is when this means extending to all the same room to choose as privileged parents have always exercised, implicitly or explicitly. In addition, there are the familiar quality arguments in favour of creating greater choice as a vehicle for stimulating improvement. When choices exist, schools must then look beyond their own walls at what others – their potential “competitors” – are doing; without some room for exit to be exercised, parents and students have no threat to back up voice.

A lack of opportunity for voice is the rule, not the exception; but parents do not seem to be clamouring for an intensive involvement in running schools

There are plenty of examples in this report to suggest that a lack of opportunity for external voice to be heard is the norm not the exception. This can reinforce itself as low parental involvement feeds negative views

from the education side that parents and the community should have only a very limited say in what goes inside schools, who rightly perceive that schooling is not open to external influence. But there does not seem to be any signs that parents are clamouring to run schools themselves, except in extreme cases of exit (such as home schooling). And, those systems where parents already exercise a high degree of voice are likely to be those where there is greatest trust in schools and teachers as the professionals responsible for education. Expanding voice in education is thus more about finding a new balance between supply and demand than about the one displacing the other.

Parents are in general rather satisfied about their children's' schooling, raising the question whether they are the drivers for change

It is commonplace for the same parents and citizens to be positive about their local school and concerned about the state of education in general. Media, public and political dissatisfaction can co-exist with generally positive satisfaction levels among parents and students. The groups who are typically the drivers of change – the educated middle classes – tend both to be less satisfied but also to have done best with the system as it is. Their concerns are thus under-estimated by the overall satisfaction measures but do not necessarily add up to an agenda for radical change, either. In wanting to safeguard educational advantages, educated parents may even be a conservative force; perhaps paradoxically, much “demand” pressure on school systems still comes from national, state or local policy makers on the supply side. On the other hand, group demands based on articulate linguistic, religious or philosophical grounds, as well as the strongly voiced demands from parents of students with special needs, represent pressure for change, often cutting across the standard influence of socio-economic background.

Greater diversity and role for demand implies more complex governance in schooling

The enhanced role for demand, and its diversity, place educational authorities in a more complex governance situation. On the one hand, a growing research and knowledge base fosters the expectations that policies should be evidence-informed. On the other hand, the greater room for local decision-making (the supply side) and the growing pressure to recognise

diverse demands about what education is for mean that controlled, mechanistic approaches to policy-making becomes less attainable. The expectation of being able to control change grows just as the means to do so move out in many directions, by many stakeholders. The demand dimension is both an expression and a cause of this new complexity.

Serious shortcomings in information relating to the demands of different individuals and groups need to be addressed, if schooling is to be more demand-oriented

This study has highlighted the sketchy nature of the evidence on demand existing as a general rule across countries. If demand is to have an impact on the educational system or on individual schools it will be important to collect information and data more systematically and to use it. There is much to be done to make knowledge about satisfaction more systematic. Going beyond reactions to existing schooling practices means also to understand better the expectations that parents have, what it is they find important, and what they want from schooling. These are more difficult questions to answer, but they are an important means of bolstering the demand side in systems which tend to be “supply-dominated”. It will not be enough just to improve knowledge about parent and student expectations; employers, teachers and local communities, for instance, all have important stakes in schools and we could know much more about their voice. Once information is improved, there are then issues about how to enter it effectively into the decision-making process.