17 Information and Planning in the Education Sector

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17.1 Introduction

The local education authority (LEA) is the key provider of state primary and secondary education in Britain. The role of these bodies is under constant reappraisal in the light of sweeping new legislation that has redefined the provision of education. Under the 1988 Education Reform Act, the Conservative Government created a state education system in which parents were given free choice in deciding the schools to which they would send their children. This Act also introduced devolved financial budgets, the choice for schools to ‘opt out’ of local authority control and the establishment of a centralised, national curriculum. In addition, the Government’s hallmark of encouraging competitiveness underpinned the requirement for secondary schools to publish ‘performance’ information on an annual basis, detailing the academic achievement in examinations of their pupils at ages 16 and 18. Thus, a ‘market’ system has been introduced and subsequently been developed, in which schools compete for pupils and LEAs have much reduced powers, monitoring the performance of schools over which they have little or no direct control. Before 1988, state schools had fixed pupil catchment areas and few financial responsibilities. Moreover, information on achievement, if available, was not widely circulated. Now, schools without fixed catchment areas have to manage large budgets based on their pupil rolls and compete with each other in the fight for the ‘best’ pupils whose examination results are published annually for all to see and compare. The importance of achievement has been brought into focus by the publication of ‘league tables’ for primary and secondary schools throughout the nation. Thus, in the past decade there has been a continued movement away from a producer-controlled state education system towards a much more consumer-oriented system where ‘choice’ is very much the watchword. Recent legislation, including that introduced under the Labour Government, has strengthened emphasis on market-led education. Schools are now freer than ever to introduce selective schooling. The management information requirements placed on schools and LEAs are ever-increasing, enabling the imposition of ‘hit-squads’ to deal with schools (or even whole LEAs) considered to be ‘failing’
in their results; the case of The Ridings school in Halifax received national publicity in the press.

There are a number of issues which relate to these changes that are of interest to geographers and educationalists alike. Indicators of achievement have drawn increasing attention to questions about the causality of success or failure and of the determinants that underpin the geography of educational performance, if there is such a thing. It is likely, for example, that the best performing schools in large cities in terms of raw examination results will be those located in the more affluent peripheral areas, the 'leafy suburbs', because these will be the schools with access to pupils from more privileged social groups. The schools in these areas will therefore enjoy greater pressure for places which will have increasingly negative impacts on other schools. Inner city and suburban estate schools will be left to 'mop up' those pupils whose parents are unable to exercise choice (for reasons of cost, transport availability, knowledge constraint, et cetera) and these schools will thus be left in a position of spiralling decline. In section 3, we illustrate the geography of achievement for one region of the UK in relation to the underlying level of socio-economic deprivation.

The suite of planning problems which arise from LEAs losing the control they once exerted over the state-provided school network can be addressed by implementing techniques developed by geographers over the years. More specifically, GIS and spatial modelling methods can be utilised to great effect by planners in the new environment both to monitor the system, to inform the decision-making process and to help in effecting changes in a network of schools which is still in many cases in need of their support. The fact that education has become such a data-rich field means that it is ideally suited to the application of quantitative techniques. There is a great deal of spatially-referenced data available to planners and managers at every scale and this means that analysis of performance in the education sector can be undertaken through regional or LEA comparisons at a macro level, through the examination of the relative achievement of individual schools at a meso level, or through the experience of individual pupils at a micro level. The broader sets of data available to LEAs can be used firstly to help define what the problems facing a particular area might be, and where these problems arise. However, although the actual definition of what could be considered a 'problem' in education is an area fraught with difficulty, and one which relies largely on experience or local knowledge, the data can help to point to other areas which may be displaying similar traits and which may therefore be likely to experience the same problems or which may have in place strategies for coping from which other areas can learn. It is clear, however, in any situation like education, where emotions often run very high, that data-led analysis can never be more than a tool to assist planners in decision-making and can never be expected to replace that process.

GIS provide planners with the tools required for capturing and storing very large data sets, for filtering, manipulating, analysing and displaying subsets of the raw data or the results of analyses. The methods of data analysis we use in sections 17.3 and 17.4 are designed to support rather than replace the decision-making process, ideally in a proactive manner which can assist all levels of education. We outline the