

INTRODUCTION

In recent decades ‘school choice’ has become a mantra of education policy in a number of English-speaking democracies. This is associated with the new era of neoliberalism in which citizens are expected to take more responsibility for their families’ futures. In the process, the post-war settlement in favour of the state providing for universal secondary schooling is being transformed. Also supplanted is the earlier twentieth-century approach that sought to separate the educational fate of the child from the social or financial status of the parent.

In major Australian cities these changes were associated with a decline in the government sector’s share of secondary school students. There were similar trends in regional areas where the presence of non-government schools also made ‘choice’ possible. New government policies included increases in the funding of non-government schools and the encouragement of a market in all schools. Aligned with this movement was a broad loss of faith in the effectiveness of many public institutions. Parents were expected to be active and wise in choosing a school.

All social classes in Australia are affected by these trends. This study is about middle-class families who have been actively caught up in this new regime of school choice. We believe that an examination of school choice provides an understanding of a significant moment in the history of the Australian middle class and its families. This book is about the relationship between the emerging markets in education and the making of the modern middle class. The study is specific to Australia but engages with the international debate on this question.

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Some politicians have portrayed choice as part of middle-class aspiration. There may be some limited truth in this view. Over a century ago, in *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899/1973), Thorstein Veblen provided an analysis of ‘conspicuous consumption’. By the late twentieth century, when consumption had become the foundation of international economic growth, parts of the middle class could also aspire not only to material wealth but also to ‘positional’ goods that might advantage their families. Where you lived and the school to which you sent your children became part of a lifestyle, part of the consumption of many middle-class families. While plenty of leisure has proven an elusive goal for most middle-class Australians, the choosing of schools as part of the lives of middle-class families has entered a new phase.

For many, no doubt it is about positionality and, for some perhaps, conspicuous consumption; but for others, it is more about survival in a period when public services, including government schools, appear increasingly unreliable. Much of our discussion concerns the operation of middle-class families in new circumstances. Large sections of Australia’s diverse middle-class have often been crucial supporters of government schools, and need to remain so if such schools are to survive as well-regarded community schools. A middle class that feels threatened by new economic circumstances, that is fearful for the future of its children, may depart from its older patterns of school enrolment.

For most of the twentieth century at least, it was uncommon for Australian parents to actually ‘choose’ a school for their children. Governments provided schools for the vast majority of the population. If there was a family tradition of attending Catholic or other non-government schools, then tradition barely conceived such attendance as ‘choice’. Very few urban parents looked at the schools in their city and imagined that they constituted a market from which they could freely choose. In fact, until the 1970s, through school funding and other policies, governments for the most part discouraged parents from choosing schools. Children were expected to attend the local government school. Regulation made it virtually impossible to choose a government school other than

the local. In some Australian states there were selective government high schools—but here government departments, not parents, chose students on the basis of their academic merit or potential. Sending a child outside the government system attracted virtually no government assistance. Low-fee schools, usually Catholic, were often poor, relying on teachers who were underpaid or not paid at all if they belonged to a religious order. High-fee schools, usually owned by Protestant churches, were usually exclusive. To enter them one needed to be able to pay the fees or win rare scholarships. By the early 1970s government secondary schools were the majority providers of secondary education, and in general they appeared to deliver a reasonable education for all classes, though resource and teacher shortages were somewhat endemic.

Where thirty years ago parents might have been concerned about whether a child might leave school before completing Year 11 or 12, now: ‘Which school is the best choice for my child?’ is an increasingly significant question. This question produces anxiety. When interviewing an apparently relaxed parent who had recently chosen a secondary school for her child, that parent admitted to not feeling relaxed at all. In fact it was: ‘Bloody panic more likely!’ The whole process of choosing the right school has become so much part of middle-class family life that it is possible for the media to assume an immediate and knowing audience for the issue. In 2007 a comedy like *Summer Heights High* on ABC television could work only if it assumed that its mass audience had some general knowledge or a set of general prejudices about the differences between schools, the decisions involved in choosing a right rather than a wrong school, and what might happen to a child as a result of a wrong choice.

This book explores two sides of choice: aspiration and anxiety. It is based on our certain knowledge that increasing numbers of parents and caregivers are choosing schools other than the local. It is also based on the proposition that while anxiety about choosing the right school occurs across all social groups in Australia, it is especially pronounced in middle-class Australia. In developing our argument we are responsive to two books by Michael Pusey

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(1991; 2003). His discussion of economic rationalism and its social effects in Australia has been crucial for our understanding of the ways in which neoliberalism has operated since the late 1970s. One of his arguments is that substantial sections of the middle class feel let down by reduced public services. Other sections of the middle class—and the sections are not mutually exclusive—welcome the changes, including globalising forces, that have been transforming economy and society over the past two to three decades. In later chapters we discuss the significance and nature of changing formations of the Australian urban middle class and what changing patterns of school choice might mean for its families.

New regimes of ‘school choice’ are part of a wider set of practices and discourses across the Western world and beyond that transform citizens into consumers who make choices. The origin of the new approaches to markets and consumption are found in the rise of neoliberalism as the dominant set of beliefs that govern both economic and public policy. Government policy frameworks of the last three decades have underpinned radical changes to school structures, systems and accessibility. These frameworks are best described as neoliberal, although earlier in Australia ‘economic rationalism’ was the preferred term of analysis. It is not our intention to provide an extended analysis of neoliberalism; others have done this for Australia, and in particular the way it has affected education policy (Marginson 1993; 1997a; 1997b). Rather, we note some of its basic features.

First is a redefinition of the good parent–citizen whose knowing participation in the market as an informed chooser of schools is supported by government. In recent times, failure to engage in such knowing participation is often condemned as ‘lack of caring’ and, indeed, even ‘irresponsible parenting’. An older model of the good parent–citizen, one who trusted and supported government education and its aim of providing fair educational opportunity to all, has been displaced. Such displacement is contested, of course. Coalitions of supporters of government education, parents, public teacher unions and others are constantly being formed, and they are especially active during election campaigns, though there is a

diminishing practical sympathy from both major political parties. A recent product of such an alliance is a book by an activist parent and a former leader of a government schools' principals association (Bonnor & Caro 2007). The market active parent–citizen is also entrepreneurial, willing to take more control, to be less dependent, especially less 'welfare dependent'. Such parents are more likely to take responsibility for the future of their families. All this is often in theory of course, though certainly some of the parents interviewed for this study embraced this new world of market activity and consumer activism.

Second, and related, is the production of markets, apparently resurrecting a nineteenth-century liberal ideology that trusted markets as the most efficient regulators of economic, and even much social, activity. Neoliberalism distrusts large-scale government bureaucracies to provide goods and services. Big government, the welfare state, large government bureaucracies, the 'nanny' state—each of these is likely to produce inefficiencies, according to the argument. Public services such as public health, public transport, public utilities—and public education—are unlikely to adapt easily or cost-effectively to the changing needs of families, the consumers of the services. Their labour forces are likely to be protected by complex and expensive industrial awards and powerful trade unions. The policy goals of neoliberalism are usually decentralisation, the construction of competition within, as well as between, public and private institutions, and the construction of markets. There are two crucial modifiers to this model of economic and social reform. They help explain the prefix 'neo' in neoliberalism. The first is that the markets constructed are not 'natural' markets. In most cases—and this is especially the case for the school market—they are 'quasi-markets' made possible only by government support through major tax-raised subsidies (Whitty 1997). The second modifier is the idea of the 'safety net', which is meant to 'catch' and provide some relief to citizens who for some reason of incapacity do not operate effectively within a market. Increasingly in education, especially in secondary education, it is the ordinary government comprehensive high schools that perform

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the safety net role. Authors of this book have discussed the consequences of this elsewhere (Campbell & Sherington 2006b).

Third is the issue of globalisation. The discussion of the pressures on middle-class families as they choose schools for their children also occurs in such countries as New Zealand, Canada, the United Kingdom and the United States of America. This is not only produced by their historical connections. It is also a product of the global impact of neoliberalism. It is probably not good history to understand these as twin 'pulses' spreading out from the governments respectively of Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher in the 1980s; nevertheless the critiques of centralised and bureaucratic 'big' government were important in the United States and the United Kingdom first. The questioning of bureaucratically organised government school systems developed in both countries, and succeeding Democratic and Labour administrations in both nations, have supported the growth of school choice regimes. Globalisation as a phenomenon is hugely varied in its character and consequences, but the rise of neoliberalism in education, and the pressures felt by government schools, is one aspect of significance. In saying this, one needs to remember that of Australia, New Zealand, the United Kingdom and the United States, for example, it is Australia that has gone the furthest in creating school markets. Why this has occurred will be discussed in Chapter 2.

For almost thirty years neoliberal policies have operated in both the United Kingdom and United States. Considerable research there has long examined middle-class behaviour and attitudes towards the schooling of middle-class children. Through a series of questionnaires and interviews beginning in the 1980s one study in the United Kingdom employed a theoretical framework based on the work of Basil Bernstein. He had identified 'expressive' and 'instrumentalist' school cultures, the former concentrating on the conduct, character and manners, and the latter on acquisition of skills by young people. This approach suggested that parents' choice of school often revolved around two resulting cultural forms. The same study identified differences between the 'old' middle class that upheld 'radical individualism', which 'presupposes explicit

and unambiguous values', and the 'new middle class' who celebrate 'ambiguous personal identity and flexible role performances' (Power, Edwards et al. 2003, pp. 19–40). Others take a more critical view of middle-class approaches towards school choice, pointing out that it is usually the case that middle-class parents are privileged with the most effective cultural capital in understanding schools and how they can best serve their children (Ball 2003).

With England's strong 'private sector', long-term government assistance for religious schools, and a public sector divided between grammar school and comprehensive traditions, its experience has always provided relevant knowledge for explaining Australia's schooling history. In the United States, the private sector is small and the constitution specifically prohibits aid to religion and therefore to church schools. A public high school has long been the destination of the vast majority of young people. Yet the neighbourhood public school often becomes a site for maintaining class and racial segregation. Urban and suburban middle-class parents in the United States often pursue strategies deliberately designed to ensure that their children mix as little as possible with the children of distrusted social groups (Brantlinger 2003; Cucchiara 2008).

The ambitions of middle-class parents routinely extend beyond making initial school choices. Their ambit may include the organisation of the school, by supporting such arrangements as academic streaming and tracking, practices that often divide school populations by ethnicity and social class, as well as academic merit. Phillip Brown (1990) has identified the rise of the 'parentocracy' whereby a child's school progress is increasingly dependent upon effort by parents. An Australian illustration of this point came at the end of 2007 when the school captain of an elite Sydney school was reported to have told an assembly that his school year had faced pressures from 'power-hungry parents' who resorted to their social connections and even targeted teachers to ensure that their sons achieved 'position' in sporting teams, as prefects and even in the school pipe band (Noonan 2007).

In this book the movement of young people from primary to secondary school is the main focus of our inquiry. Even though

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there are often successful attempts by many schools to eliminate the sharp transition from a primary to a secondary school, a change of school at this point remains the experience of the great majority of Australian youth. Those promoting a school usually focus on the market of parents about to enrol their children in secondary school. Nevertheless the pressures are shifting downward. Choosing the right primary school is often argued to be a major factor in setting the child up for entering a desired secondary school, especially in the government system. Many non-government schools seek to consolidate their secondary enrolments by promising a seamless kindergarten to Year 12 experience. Others may offer more new places in Year 5 rather than in Year 7 or 8, for example. For some parents whose first choice is a well-thought-of government school, their fallback position is often a non-government school. This may be a risky strategy—the threat may be that a place in the fall-back option will disappear if applied for too late. The activities that seek to lock enrolments in early are complex, and they do not always have the consequences that their architects envisage. Nevertheless, anxiety about school choice can begin as early as the conception of a child. We write in Chapter 2 about the ways that middle-class families distinctively plan for the schooling of their children; nevertheless we have made the point that despite our focus on the primary to secondary transition, planning and evaluation occurs both before and after this particular moment.

This study is based on several sources of data and information. Most important are sixty-three interviews conducted with the parents and caregivers of young people who had just been through the process of choosing a school. In the interviews we were keen not only to discover why a particular school had been chosen but also to elicit our interviewees' own analyses of the process. We wanted to know what these middle-class urban Australians had actually done and thought about in choosing a school and the degree to which their plans had succeeded or been frustrated. We wanted to know how their activities differed from the way their own parents had chosen schools for them. If the thesis about the radical

impact of neoliberalism was correct, we expected some sharp discontinuities with ‘family traditions’ of school and school system loyalty. We wanted to know about their perceptions of the behaviour of other families in the school market. The interviews that we conducted across the breadth of the suburbs of Sydney met our expectations. Following normal ethical expectations in studies such as this, we have not identified our interviewees. Instead we have invented pseudonyms for them.

We also conducted a survey of parents and caregivers who had children just beginning Year 7 (the first secondary school year in New South Wales). Schools in roughly middle-class areas of Sydney, government and non-government, high, low and no fees, were chosen for the survey. Some 1350 questionnaires were returned, and these provided us with some data and hypotheses about the factors influencing school choice in the early twenty-first century.

The third major area of research was the commissioning and analysis of new tables derived from the Australian census, focusing in particular on comparing the social characteristics of families enrolling their children in different kinds of secondary schools in 1976 and 2001. Arguably 1976 was one of the last census years before the rise of neoliberalism in public education policy. By 2001 the new regimes of school markets and parental choice were well advanced. The methodology of the study is explained further in the Appendix, but this approach gave us a rich mix of quantitative and qualitative data; data that illuminated in fair depth the decision-making processes of many families, as well as statistics that reliably told us about changing patterns of school choice.

Before proceeding, there is a brief discussion that we must have regarding the naming of school sectors. Its main purpose is to explain why we almost never refer to ‘public’, ‘private’ and ‘independent’ schools, despite their role in the popular language of Australian schools and school choice.

The first problem belongs to the government, state or ‘public’ schools. As names for government-run, Education Department-controlled schools, the words ‘public’ and ‘state’ are not uniformly

used across the Australian states. Therefore we use the term ‘government’ school.

The second problem belongs to the schools of Australia that are not directly controlled by government departments. Popularly they are referred to as ‘private’ schools but also, and increasingly, ‘non-government’ schools. The trouble is that there are very few genuinely private schools left in Australia. A school owned by a church or trust, or incorporated by Act of parliament, is not a ‘private’ school. Most genuinely private schools, usually owned by their principals, did not survive the early twentieth century.

The alternative descriptor, ‘non-government’ school, is also misleading. Especially since the Schools Commission period of the 1970s, most ‘non-government’ schools have become ‘government-assisted’ schools. For the most part we now have two kinds of school in Australia: government-controlled schools and government-assisted schools. For the purposes of this book, we have decided to continue using the term ‘non-government’ school for its popular recognition, though we believe that in the long term ‘government-assisted’ should replace it. This is not the only problem. The Australian Bureau of Statistics counts two kinds of non-government school, namely ‘Catholic’ and ‘independent’. Catholic schools are usually systemic schools, run by the various Catholic Education offices. There are some Catholic schools that are ‘independent’ in the sense that they are governed by trusts and other entities, similar to those of most of the other ‘independent’ schools. We prefer the term ‘corporate’ school rather than ‘independent’ school, because ‘independent’ is not only a word adopted for its positive public relations intent but also it fails to recognise the ‘government-assisted’ character of these schools. The word ‘corporate’, associated with governance and sometimes culture, recognises that they are usually governed by corporate bodies, and are not part of the systems directly run by government or the Catholic Education Offices.

The first three chapters continue this general discussion of the middle class and school choice. Chapter 1 argues that the Australian

middle class has distinctive approaches to schooling that are historically based. Chapter 2 continues this theme by linking middle-class secondary education to the emergence of a distinctive market of schools. In both Chapters 1 and 2 we briefly note recent literature that provides insight into both the middle class and school choice. In Chapter 3 we report in numerical form the dimensions of the school sectors and markets, and how different groups within the middle class are changing their school choosing patterns.

Part II, Chapters 4 to 9, reports and discusses major issues associated with school choice through the words of our interviewees. Chapter 4 is about the degree to which families have maintained family-specific ‘traditions’ of school choice and system loyalty. In Chapter 5 is a discussion of one section of the school market and its influence on the rest. Government schools that select their students on the basis of academic achievement disrupt simplistic descriptions of the middle class and the market. Chapter 6 considers the influence of locality and real estate on school choice. In Chapter 7 we discuss the ‘communities’ question: which families are welcome or not in various schools. In the cities of Australia, this is not just about social class but also about national and ethnic origin. This leads into Chapter 8, which has the values debate as its subject. Religion provides some of the terms of this debate. For some, religion can be an empty signifier—a vague, little thought-about reason for choosing a school, perhaps a hopeful signifier of discipline and pastoral care, but little else. For others it can signify a deep commitment to a particular doctrine and the confirmation of children into a specific faith. Then there are secular values and the degree to which they can be attractive to middle-class families in the market.

The final chapter discusses the pressure of the labour markets of contemporary Australia on families preparing children for not only survival but even prosperity, given a potentially difficult future marked by continual economic restructuring and instability, climate change and other potential threats. Members of the middle class know that they live in a ‘dangerous’ world requiring various private ‘insurances’ against potential disasters.

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(For example, such private insurances include health insurance as public health becomes less reliable in the world of neoliberal public policy.) Choosing the right school for their children may be one of several danger-alleviating strategies. We consider the significance of changing patterns of school choice as a phenomenon that restructures the experience and meaning of being middle class in urban Australia and the potential influence of new school choice regimes in advantaging the few and disadvantaging the many.

Choosing schools now seems a common and expected activity among the diverse social groups that now make up the middle class in urban Australia. For more than two decades governments operating under neoliberal philosophies have encouraged families to actively choose a school in response to their aspirations for their children. We need to ask questions about the consequences of these new school choice regimes for individual families, for schools and for Australian society as a whole. Choosing schools strategically becomes an ever higher priority for families. This study illuminates the aspirations and anxieties of parents. It also asks questions about the social equity consequences of trusting so much to the schools market.