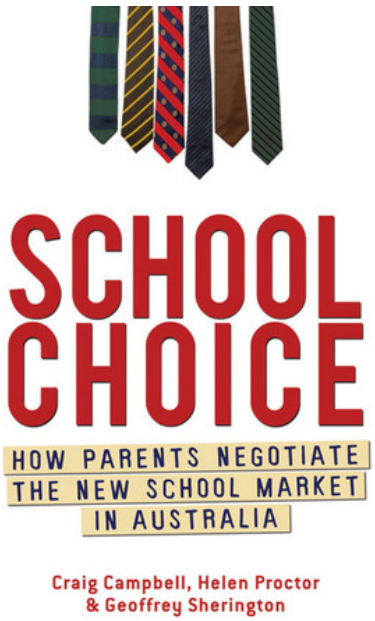

School Choice: How Parents Negotiate the New School Market in Australia

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Based on extensive interviews with parents, *School Choice* reveals their experience of the school selection process. Some are bruised or frustrated. Others feel that schools, not parents, have the real power to choose who goes to which school. As more non-government schools open and criticism of government schools becomes common, the pressure on families increases to find the right school. This book examines the anxieties, aspirations and strategies of parents, and how schools are promoting themselves and managing the selection process. *School Choice* asks why different families attempt to get their children into different kinds of schools. Who gets into selective academic schools? Why are new low-fee Christian schools becoming popular? Are parents departing from family traditions? Do coaching colleges make a difference? What does it mean when parents talk about religion and values in schooling? What strategies work and what don't? The new school market is reshaping Australian society now and for the long term. *School Choice* looks behind the brochures and websites to examine what's happening to families and schools, and who are the winners and losers.

School Choice: How Parents Negotiate the New School Market in Australia Details

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Stef Rozitis says

This book is well worth reading because I think we have all too readily embraced many of the ideas of "school choice" and our own roles as parents within this paradigm. This puts massive pressures on most families but also recreates schools and teachers as "product" requiring promotion and that is surely not in our best interest as citizens and as a society.

I don;t suppose even reading this sort of thing would radicalise Australians who seem keen to keep letting the government and rich cronies trample them under foot more and more. I like that this book is quite complex in showing the mixed motivations and often good intentions of parents. Any sort of critical view of the problems of inequality in education that demonises parents as selfish or greedy probably could benefit from the more balanced and nuanced view here.

But there is something very, very wrong.

Also how shameful that we have outstripped both US and UK systems in our bid to be neoliberalised in education!

Trevor says

As this book makes clear, school choice is a relatively recent phenomenon in Australia. This might seem odd to people as for a long time Australia has had the largest non-government education system as a percentage of the whole education system of any comparable education system in the world. But a generation ago the sorts of people who would send their kids to a private school (most often a ‘Catholic school’ and so really more sectarian than private) didn’t really do this out of choice as much as an automatic response. People tended to either send their kids to the local high school or to send them to their local Catholic school or, if they were particularly wealthy, to one of the various elite Protestant or Catholic schools that prefer to teach children to worship money than god.

But all that changed when a quasi-market was established in the state education sector. You see up until around the 1980s you pretty well either went to a private school of your ‘choice’ or you went to your local high school. Going to another high school that you were not zoned to go to was rather difficult – not impossible, not unheard of, but not exactly encouraged. But then in the 1980s both sides of politics became obsessed with neoliberal ideology and began to believe that the only way to cure society’s ills was through the expedient of free choice. This hasn’t just brought about a change in how we think about schools, but also in how we think about parents. As the authors say, “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’. Page 4”

Of course, it is only certain social classes that are really able to actively choose the school they go to, and as the authors make clear, in a lot of ways actively choosing a school for your kids is increasingly becoming one of the ways you can define ‘the middle class’ in Australia. So much so that even those who send their

kids to the local high school need to have done so following some sort of detailed process to justify their decision. And when they say ‘parent’, of course they mean ‘mother’ as this is still very much women’s work except in the most superficial of ways.

As a definition of social class, the idea of defining the middle class as ‘those who choose where to send their kids to school’, might just seem a bit reductionist. What is interesting here is that they make it very clear that a simple definition of social class – such as the Marxist ‘well, what’s your relationship to the means of production’ – really isn’t going to be enough. They define a series of ‘sub-classes’ to the middle class:

Old middle class – conservative middle class, found their roots in the 19th century, defined as much by the suburb they live in as their ‘profession’.

New middle class – emerged from white-collar jobs early 20th century. Believers in merit and having benefited from this so they tend to also support quality government education, but are being increasingly pushed elsewhere by changed circumstance.

Catholic middle class – born from working class Catholic families that benefited from Catholic education and therefore moved into the middle class over the 20th century.

Cosmopolitan middle class – grew out of the old and new middle classes, but who are now generally university educated and work in professions and upper management.

First generation middle class – first in family to acquire middle-class status and to have extended education. Possibly dissatisfied with their own education, they are ‘new arrivals’ and therefore have no strong links to any school or school system – but they are afraid their kids won’t get the benefits they have ended up with.

Self-made middle class – not made by education, but by their own hard work – so they therefore have a difficult relationship with education. They often see that education got in their way, that it didn’t help.

Marginal middle class – those who aren’t in middle class, but see education as the pathway that will bring their kids into it. They want to get their kids into a selective or ‘good’ high school.

Many in the middle class really are not what John Howard referred to as those who were sending their kids to private schools so as to have better access to the values that were being taught there – these are people whose first choice would actually be a good local high school, but they feel they are increasingly being pushed out of those schools through underfunding and the consequent lower opportunities available in them. In fact, the authors literally say this, “The rise of school choice options within the market of education is not really about creating new terrains for family or individual agency, since the most desired of choices, a high-quality local government school, is increasingly experienced as being unavailable. Page 26”

The authors don’t necessarily see the move to making a quasi-market in education as being the cause of the problem, but rather a symptom, where state and federal governments were seeking to find ways to stop the drift to the private sector and to do this they increased options for choice available within the government sector. However, these options tended to be only open to certain members of the middle classes – those with the academic capital or the financial capital available to be able to effectively buy a place in either a select entry school or a select entry program within a school (this book is focused on NSW, but what they say is also generally applicable to Victoria, at least, if not the rest of Australia). The point is always to find a means where by one can remove one’s children from the common horde.

And the drift to private education has been rather stark and remarkably rapid. In 1975, the high water mark in public provision, 76% of kids went to a government high school. By 2005 that figure had dropped to 62%. What is interesting is that over that same period the percentage of kids being educated in Catholic schools remained fairly constant – 20% in 1993 raising to 22% by 2007. While those in the 'independent schools sector' other than Catholic schools grew from 12 to 17%.

The authors explain some of this drop in support for government schools as being reflective of the alienation people increasingly felt from governments and from their employment generally. This is shown in the decline in the percentages of people engaged in manufacturing work and in working for the government over much the same time period. Employment in manufacturing for fathers fell from 30% in 1976 to 17% in 2001 and over the same period fathers employed by the government likewise fell from 22 to 13%. Working in manufacturing is generally a more 'collectivist' occupation and therefore more likely to encourage people to feel we are 'all in this together'. Our new world is focused much more on how well one can position one's children so that they can be advantaged over all others.

Nevertheless, the authors conducted research into the reasons why parents choose a particular secondary school for their children, and as they say, "Of the first ten reasons given, four may be thought of as somewhat separated from those that might be given in a 'pure' market, where the quality and character of the product on offer is all that matters. 'Proximity to home', 'siblings attend', 'local school' and 'same school as primary or from feeder school': each of these focus on decision-making that tends to put family convenience and community attachment before the dispassionate assessment of the product. This is important. Market promoters can lose sight of this fact. Page 76"

What I found most interesting, though, was the discussion of the Catholic school system and how the move towards choice was impacting on it. Catholic education is becoming less and less about educating Catholics and more and more about educating those with the financial ability to pay to attend. So, many poorer Catholics are being excluded from the Catholic system while non-Catholics are being welcomed in. The book quotes Catholics who support improved government provision, as they see this as the only way to keep Catholic education 'pure' and a means of ensuring an ongoing basis for the protection of their religion.

If one does not have the financial ability to pay the extortionate fees asked by the non-government sector (a misnomer, as all schools in Australia receive government funding) then parents seek to have their kids enter the select entry government schools. Non-government schools actively work to discourage students from attending such schools. They do this because everyone knows these schools provide equal or superior results and for free. So, private schools reduce the number of places that have available following the entrance tests to select entry schools – forcing parents to enrol their children in the independent sector before taking the entrance tests to government schools, because if they do not get into a select entry school they may be forced to go to the local high school – and remembering that, "Each year in the early twenty-first century in New South Wales some 13 000 children in Year 6 of primary school sit tests, competing for some 3000 places. Pages 105-06"

The private schools demand a substantial deposit which is, of course, non-refundable if your child gets into the government school of your choice. Also private schools offer scholarships to children most likely to succeed at school so as to draw them away from the state system and therefore improve their overall standing in the 'league tables' which are not supposed to exist in Australian schools. As the authors say, "With student success in Year 12 examinations and the publicity attached to the league tables of results published each year it is no wonder that competitive, almost anti-competitive practices, which might not have been tolerated had the commodity involved been petrol or cardboard boxes rather than education. Pages 106-07"

The fact is that despite all of the talk of free markets and the right to choose, the quasi-market in education is anything but what it is made out to be. “The market is not free, and the freedom to choose is not the same as the ‘privilege’ of being chosen. It is little wonder that schools now need the expertise of public relations companies to persuade parents to make the ‘right’ choice. Page 182”

The authors make the point that parents who send their kids to their local high school tend to be quite happy with that school – but even these parents need to make it clear that they actively chose this school, rather than just having trusted to the system. The authors make some interesting claims about why this might be the case, which I will end with:

“There are a number of possible explanations for this. First is that the schools in our study may in fact be exceptionally good schools and, as we have said before, the parents who participated in our study across all sectors mostly expressed satisfaction with their children’s schools. Second is that middle-class parents prefer to have a relationship with a school than a bureaucracy and prefer to view their children’s school as their own exceptional institution rather than part of a state-wide uniform system run by people they do not know. Third is the possibility that the neoliberal discourse is so dominant in twenty-first-century Australia that it is becoming very difficult for a ‘good’ middle-class parent to find the language to justify an attachment to government provision and an uncritical faith in the public sector. Page 188”
