CHAPTER 4

No Choice but to Choose: selecting schools in Western Australia

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SUMMARY This chapter reports on research conducted among parents and their children regarding their educational choices in Perth, Western Australia. The people targeted for this research all chose to change systems, either from so-called 'private' schools to the government education system, or vice versa. While choice has always been part of Australia's schooling systems, governments of all political hues have been busily enhancing their commitment to opening up educational choices for parents and students through increasing funding to the non-government sector. Attempts to 'de-governmentalize the state' in education have led to parents, students, teachers, politicians and bureaucrats being drawn further into reproducing a social system that exacerbates social inequality. It is argued that Keynesian-style welfarism remains an influential element in the political machinations accompanying the reformation of Australian schooling. The free market is rarely ever free, and, as some of the parents interviewed found, the private sector does not necessarily generate greater levels of efficiency and accountability, nor are their standards automatically higher than those found in the public sector. Not only that, far from being the great source of openness, freedom and democracy that some would have us believe we will find in private enterprise, they are quite capable of squashing individual freedoms. As one would expect of any complex reform process, the results of recent neo-liberal reform to Australian schooling are at best unpredictable.

You know, when you are a little girl and you just want to wear one of those cool looking private school uniforms and you just want to, I don't know, go to a private school ... something about it which is
just so ooooh, it’s a private school. (Shannon, student, 15 years old)

I knew that I wanted to go to places where I get a good education you know, and so private school, that’s automatically what everyone thinks, you know, when it comes to good education. (Samuel, student, 17 years old)

Liberalism depends upon a novel specification of the subjects of rule as active in their own government. (Rose, 1993, p. 291)

**Asking Questions of the Here and Now**

Jim is a teacher and parent.[1] He is one of 50 persons interviewed in 2005 as part of a research project conducted by me and a research associate investigating perceptions and realities of public and private education in Australia.[2] My interview with Jim took place on a student lunch table at Juniper High, where he works as an industrial arts teacher. Juniper High is a school with a reputation as one of the more academically successful government schools in the state of Western Australia. The research reported here involved a number of these in-depth, semi-structured interviews with teachers, parents, and students who reside in Perth, the state’s capital. Jim was interviewed because he had recently taken the decision to remove his son from a low-fee Protestant high school that was run by the church of which he was a member, in order to enrol him at Juniper High.

Reflecting on this decision, Jim put it to me that a generation ago he would not have worried about where he sent his son to school – the local government school would have been good enough. Thinking further about the changes he has witnessed with regard to schooling and choice of schools, Jim made the following observation:

What you’re creating is little enclaves of like-minded, wealthy people and enclaves of people who are of all the same type and I think if we’re not careful it’s going to happen with our government schools, those who have no choice have just got to accept what’s there and those who have got double incomes and highly motivated and ... I mean years ago most of those people would have been happy with a government school to be quite honest. I think schools like this [Juniper High] probably reflect what people were getting 20, 30 years ago to a certain extent ... What a lot of people are paying for ... is what they got for free 30 years ago. Does that make sense?

Jim’s comment about what people were getting two or three decades ago suggests that while Juniper High is currently seen as exceptional in the government education system, it is what used to be more like the norm in the
public system. What is now considered to be an outstanding educational institution was once more or less the standard offering among the government schools of Western Australia, or at least that is Jim’s perception of what has happened to government schooling in the state.

Aware of how the choices he was making for his children were influenced by forces sweeping across Australian society, Jim was struck by how he was part of a significant historical development. As a product of a working-class family, who had attended his local Catholic school until Year 10 and which he left in order to take up an apprenticeship as a mechanical fitter, Jim was very conscious of how his own choices and decisions were influenced by what he saw as a competitive, materialistic ethos that has come to dominate contemporary Australian society:

30, 40 years ago parents didn’t even take that active interest in what their kids did once they went out the door. They gave them their lunch and they went to school. I mean not even the mums were all that much involved really ... How has that shifted? I think because everything has become so much more competitive and the stakes ... I think we’re a more materialistic minded society, you got to have a, you know, double professional income to get ahead and the whole thrust of everything has changed.

Neo-liberal Subjects

As Jim’s comments help show, competition and choice have become significant catchphrases in contemporary Australia. But they are more than public utterances; choice and competition policy have helped drive a raft of institutional reforms that are constituted by a neo-liberal ideology that is extolled by politicians and activists across the very broad middle range of the political spectrum. The reforms are invariably aimed at making key public institutions perform in ways that are attuned to private enterprise with its emphasis on efficiency and a customer focus. Better outcomes are said to flow to citizens, who are now often construed as clients of the state, than were hitherto available when society was apparently under the spell of the stultifying orthodoxies of Keynesian welfarism.

As with its antecedent liberalism, neo-liberalism proposes that strong private property rights, open markets and free trade offer the basis for greater levels of social efficiency and wealth, and ultimately provide for human wellbeing and happiness (Harvey, 2005, p. 2). This is the orthodox economic position of our time and its effects on the organisation of schooling, among other public institutions, are profound. In the anglophone world it was Margaret Thatcher, the former Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, who led the charge by attempting to decentralise and privatise the British public education system. Or at least that was what her rhetoric suggested she would do. In reality, while she did have some success in disempowering various local education authorities and allowing individual schools to take charge of
their own destiny, she also helped produce a highly centralised national curriculum. The latter development reflected her conservative commitment to 'standards' far more than it did a liberal commitment to individualism and freedom of thought, a phenomenon that is more common than many commentators on neo-liberalism seem inclined to identify (Larner, 2005).

Anderson (1998, p. 577) argues that the global movements calling for increased decentralisation and privatisation were responding to 'a crisis of legitimisation' that was felt at the level of the state and caused much greater scrutiny of the effectiveness and efficiency of public institutions (see also McLean & Laugo, 1985; Walford, 1996; Whitty et al., 1998; Pini & Ciglitutti, 1999). The increased public scepticism about the ability of government to look after the needs of its citizens led, among many other things, to an increased demand from parents for the state to loosen its control over education and to allow them to become more involved in decisions regarding their child's education (Gaynor, 1998). One of the most influential commentators on neo-liberalism, Nikolas Rose (1993, p. 296), argues that the main aim of this political formation is to 'de-governmentalize the state'. He describes a form of detachment of the centre from the various regulatory technologies that were assembled into a single functioning network over the course of the twentieth century which was steadily replaced by a form of administration that looked to govern by 'shaping the powers and will of autonomous entities'.

Jim's musings on the changes that he has seen in his lifetime with regard to attitudes and behaviours towards schools and choices of schooling encapsulate to some degree the transformations in the style of governmentality articulated by Rose. There is now no choice but to choose, or at least for the middle classes this is the case. I know that if I ask a parent for her or his choice story when it comes to the schooling of their child that they will have experienced some of the turmoil of school selection. In contrast with past practices, when only Catholics and/or the wealthy had either the cause or ability to choose schools, significant numbers of Australian parents now pursue involvement in the selection of a school for their children, especially when it comes to secondary schooling (Beavis, 2004, p. 5). In so far as they feel autonomous in their decision making they fit with Rose's depiction of neo-liberal subjects. But there is no straightforward translation of the shifts in practice to those effects that defenders of neo-liberalism describe in terms of increased efficiencies and commitments to academic excellence (Tooley, 1998), and which critics describe as the concentration of wealth and the restoration of class power (Harvey, 2005). As this chapter shows, the results of the education reforms described here are far more complex and nuanced than the polarities of either side tend to capture. In order to more fully comprehend the local issues affecting Western Australian people interviewed for this project about their choice of educational styles and systems, it is useful firstly to paint a broad brush stroke picture of some of the major changes in government policy
leading up to the current policy regime affecting Australian educational practices.

Expanding School Choice in Australia

As has already been hinted, choice has always been part of Australia's schooling systems. Church groups were among the first to begin setting up schools in the six British colonies that were to become the states making up the Australian Federation that was formed in 1901. Catholic schools in particular came to have a significant presence across the length and breadth of the various states, so much so that towards the end of the nineteenth century they were drawing significant proportions of the population towards them, many of them non-Catholic. In Western Australia, for example, the state that is the main focus of this chapter, by the early 1890s some 34% of the population's school-going population were attending Catholic schools (Tannock, 1979). The drift towards non-government schooling that is currently causing a deal of consternation among those who support a strong public system is clearly not a new phenomenon in Australia. The main difference now is that, contrary to what happened in the 1890s, there is now very little political appetite for de-funding the schools in the so-called private sector (Forsey, 2007a).

Responsibility for administering the nation's public schools rests with the six state and two territory governments that make up the Australian Commonwealth. In the first half of the twentieth century government schooling in the various states developed into what a number of commentators have described as being amongst the most centralised systems on the planet (Chapman & Dunstan, 1990). As was the case in many other parts of the industrialised world, these highly centralised, state-wide bureaucratic systems offered a means of ensuring some level of equitable provision of educational opportunities and resources. In the Australian case this commitment to equity usually had to be pursued across vast geographic areas (Harman et al, 1991). However, the image of such a tightly controlled organisational structure is rarely portrayed in any sort of positive light. Indeed, critiques of various types of bureaucratic formations, which Rose (1993) suggests are viewed by many as inimical to liberty, are highly conventional and predictable (Herzfeld, 1992). Interestingly, the criticisms do not simply emanate solely from the conservative and the so-called 'right' side of the political field, they arise from most sections of the broad political spectrum.

In the recent past educational choice in Australia has been expanded via two main mechanisms. Firstly, since the early 1970s we have witnessed a steady increase in funding of non-government schools by the national (federal) government. These were initiated by the Whitlam Labor Government's policy of guaranteeing state aid to private schools, measures that were mainly aimed at redressing the inequalities extant in the severely
under-resourced Catholic schools sector (Forsey, 2007a). Secondly, the various state governments progressively relaxed the rules that hitherto had compelled the majority of students wishing to access government education to attend their local school.

Since state aid to non-government schools was first guaranteed in the early 1970s, there has been a steady decline in market share for government education. In 1974 the proportion of Australian school students attending government schools was 78%; by 2004 the proportion had fallen to 68% (Burke & Spaull, 2001; Australian Government Department of Education, Science and Training, 2005). The vast bulk of non-government schools, regardless of their financial status, are now guaranteed some level of federal government support. Furthermore, over the last decade, especially under the leadership of the recently deposed Liberal government, the level of financial support to the private sector has increased quite dramatically (Megalogenis, 2006, p. 18). Given that secondary schools play such an important role in preparing students for university entrance, it is not surprising that it is in this sector that these shifts have been most profoundly felt. Currently 38% of Australia’s high school students are enrolled in non-government schools (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2006). However, as this research helps show, while undoubtedly the perception and realities of academic standards helped drive this significant shift, other factors drive parental and student choice.

These shifts in commitment to the various education systems among politicians and the Australian electorate reflect a growing loss of confidence in government schools. In 2004 the Prime Minister, John Howard, attributed this growing disillusionment with public education to the perception that government schools are simultaneously devoid of values and much too politically correct. Apart from the fact that the two descriptors seem to be at odds with each other, it is interesting to note that the issue of profound shifts in funding and resource bases to the different school sectors did not emerge in the Prime Minister’s discourse as a significant contributor to the movement away from government education. Issues such as security in schools, facilities, perceptions about standards of teaching and care undoubtedly play a role in the directions parents lean in relation to public education.

The epigraphs opening this chapter help show that it is not just parents who are important decision makers when it comes to schools; student perceptions of the different types of schools are also potentially significant to the choices being made. The fact that both Samuel and Shannon ended up in public schools after trying their luck in the private sector offers some pause for thought. Their reflections will emerge in due course, but before moving to share more of the various insights regarding the selection of schools in Western Australia that emerged from this study it is important to outline how the research was conducted, who was involved and what it aimed to do.
The Study

Set against the backdrop of the fairly dramatic leakage of students out of public schools into the non-government sector, the interviews reported here focused on parental and student responses to the increased levels of choice available to them in contemporary Australia. Contrary to the impressions created by the current net flow towards the non-government sector, the stream is not unidirectional. Reflecting this fact, approximately half of the people interviewed for this project recently took the option to move from a private establishment to a government school. Clearly, the sample is neither random nor representative. We deliberately pursued approximately equal numbers of students, parents and teachers who have moved from the non-government sector towards government schooling and vice versa. We also partially relied upon the snowballing effects of recommendations from respondents we had already interviewed as to people we might contact for interviews.

Responding to his own extensive survey into parental reasons for choosing public or private schools, Beavis (2004, p. 5) acknowledges that we know quite a bit about the perceptions of the two main types of schooling, but little about how realistic such impressions are. Those who have changed their educational allegiances can take us beyond perceptions based upon singular experiences and stereotypes of the unknown ‘other’ system. By interviewing individuals who have switched systems, we have been able to capture some personal reflections on the realities of working, studying and overseeing the education of one’s children in different types of school from the perspective of those who have actual experiences of government and non-government education. Table I summarises some of the various categories of contributors to this project. Given that the majority of respondents were self-nominated volunteers, it is not surprising that close to two-thirds of interviewees are female. As David et al (1997) note from their research with parents in England, mothers tend to do the work of school choice. This project reflects that trend.

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Table I. Interview sample by category and gender.

The interviews with the parents and students usually lasted at least 45 minutes, and were mostly conducted in the participants’ homes. Each interview was audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim by a professional
typist. While we occasionally spoke with couples, most of the interviews were one-to-one. Students were usually interviewed separately from their parents, but some times the parents stayed in the room when we interviewed their children. While the youngest student we interviewed was 10 years old and the oldest in her twenties, the majority of the students were of high school age.

In their extensive and important research into school choice in England Bowe et al (1994) highlight the significance of focusing on the social context of human thought and action, particularly when reporting the results of interview-based research. The conversations reported here aimed at locating the cultural context of the participant’s decision-making processes through a deeper understanding of their biography – the beliefs, the values, the material conditions and structural forces underpinning their socially patterned choices. In moving to consider more fully the interview data generated for this project, I begin by telling the story of one of the teachers I met in 2005. I interviewed Kelly because she recently resigned her job as a teacher at a Catholic school and had taken up a posting at a government school, but it was her comments about the future schooling of her infant daughter that most intrigued me.

Kelly’s Story

Kelly is in her mid-twenties. She is a mother and a music teacher. Her first teaching appointment to a Catholic school in the eastern suburbs of Perth lasted a little over a year. As is so often the case with first-year teachers it was a ‘sink or swim’ experience and it did not work out as she hoped. Her next job was a short-term contract at a government school near where she lives with her husband in the southern industrial zone of Perth. Her experience at the government school was quite different. Kelly found both the staff and parents to be more supportive there.

Interestingly, while Kelly would be happy to continue working at the government school in which she recently had a contract, she is not at all keen for her daughter to eventually attend there. ‘I wouldn’t want her in the classes of some of the teachers’, she explains, ‘they just haven’t got a clue’. Kelly would prefer her daughter to start off in a private primary school, but she would not choose any of the non-government schools in the southern industrial zone. Her husband, who teaches in the public system, is deeply committed to government education and vehemently opposed to private schooling. He calls her a snob, ‘because you know I’ve come from south of the river and now I’m down here and it’s a totally different lifestyle, totally different outlook. The kids have different sort of ideas about things, a different home life to what I had’. [3]

What concerns Kelly most about the students she has taught in the southern industrial zone is their general lack of ambition. If her daughter were to be schooled in the area she would worry that she would not aspire to
do anything that Kelly deems to be worthwhile: ‘Down here you’re lucky if you graduate school and don’t get knocked up beforehand. ‘Cause so many of the kids that you know get out of school the first thing that happens is they end up pregnant’.

Despite her husband’s deeply held commitment to public schooling, he tends to concur with Kelly and they are seriously considering moving out of the industrial area in order to ensure that their daughter can attend a more acceptable school. They are contemplating enrolling her in a non-government primary school. As one who enjoyed her own government school education and who is happy enough to work in such schools, Kelly worries about her apparent hypocrisy; however, she is also aware of the changes that she has experienced: ‘Twenty years ago you just went to the local school, but now, we just expect more. Private schools will have better resources and they’ll have more competent teachers right throughout because they are able to weed out the undesirable teachers and the undesirable kids’. Her conclusion: ‘if I want to give my daughter every opportunity I will be hypocritical’.

As with Jim, who was introduced at the opening of this chapter, Kelly speaks of a world that has changed in the course of her relatively short lifespan. Her comment about the ways in which ‘we just expect more’ amplifies what we often hear regarding consumer expectations in this neoliberal age. This is what the shifts in policy are supposed to yield; in responding creatively to these changing expectations, schools will apparently wind their way down roads leading towards increasing levels of excellence.

The class prejudices, and their accompanying realities, that were expressed by Kelly were replicated on many occasions in the interviews conducted for this project. For example, a 12-year-old female student who had recently shifted from her local government primary school to a small Christian primary school and from there to an Anglican high school commented on the social differences she had noticed between parents in government and private schools. When I asked Louise to elaborate on this she suggested that there was a group of parents in the government school who stood out because they smoked and shouted out loud at their kids: ‘They don’t seem to take as much pride in themselves either like ... I mean because there’s nothing wrong with coming not dressed up or not like ... but they just don’t seem to have as much pride in what others think’. Louise was quite sure that there was no such group of parents in either of the non-government schools she had attended.

It is not simply class prejudice; there is something all too real about the sorts of chaos that the parents and students interviewed for this project seek to avoid in schools. As will become more apparent, it is particular government schools, those located in the poorer parts of town, that cause the greatest concern to this particular group of education consumers. Writing in defence of school choice policies in the USA, Almond (1994, pp. 70-71) identifies a commitment to altruistic ideals among the parents she has
encountered, but this only goes so far; most 'are not prepared to sacrifice their own children's welfare for the public good'. The awkwardness felt regarding the implications of expressing support for the government system whilst rejecting particular types of government school for one's own child was also evident in the reflections of a number of the participants in this project, particularly those who had chosen to shift their children from government to non-government schools.

Going Private

Jonelle, who we interviewed because she had recently removed her two children from a government school in the same southern industrial zone in which Kelly lives, reflects Almond's observation very cogently. We pursued an interview with Jonelle because we had heard about how she drove around the suburbs with a bumper-sticker proclaiming her commitment to public education despite having sent her son and daughter to the local Catholic high school. When asked about this, it drew the following response:

Yeah. I still run around with my government education sticker sitting on my car and people say, 'You're sending your kids private, why do you have this on your car?'

And I say it's because the government system is still important and just because I don't want to send my kids in there to be the so-called sacrificial lambs to fix it doesn't mean I don't care about the kids that are in there you know! Like it's still got to be fixed and I think a lot of us have still got to lobby to get them fixed particularly for the funding and just the other things down here.

Jonelle comes from a family of teachers. Her mother was a principal in government schools and her sister and brother-in-law also teach in the public system. However, despite having a strong familial link to government education, when she was in her final year at a high school in rural New South Wales she transferred out of the government school she had attended for four years in order to enrol at a high-fee Anglican school in Sydney. She describes the move as like going from hell to heaven as she moved away from the prejudices and bullying she experienced as a consequence of being an academically inclined student with an interest in music.

Jonelle’s own secondary school experiences undoubtedly guided her decision making as a parent of academically inclined children who were also interested in music. Like many Australian parents she was comfortable with them going to the local government primary school. It was when it became time for them to go to high school that she felt the need to change systems. Her eldest child won a scholarship to the Catholic school he now attends, which meant they only had to pay half of the required fees. Jonelle was particularly happy about this because not only did she judge St Margaret's to
have the best music curriculum in the district, they also had the best pastoral care programme.

Four of the ten parents interviewed who had recently moved at least one of their children from a government to a non-government school were teachers in the public system. Along with Jonelle and two of the other parents in this cohort, they expressed strong support for the public system, and, as has been shown already, they explained the obvious tensions between their public mindedness and their parental interests in fascinating ways. To draw on one further example, Hayley is also a teacher in the government system. Like Jonelle, one of her parents, her father in this instance, had been a principal in the government school system. She had also been sent to public primary schools but made the switch to an Anglican grammar school as part of her transition to high school. Hayley and her husband were committed to following a similar pattern for their children, mainly because they felt that academic standards were higher in the private system, but they also felt that their children would get better options for playing sport in church-based schools. However, having grown disillusioned with the ways in which a new principal had reshaped their local primary school, they had decided to pursue the private option earlier than they originally intended. As was the case with Kelly, Hayley was a little concerned about the apparent hypocrisy of her choices, but she was also committed in a vague, slightly uncomfortable way, to a consumerist ethic:

I have gone through this a lot, that is almost ... in some ways it's almost like hypocritical isn't it? You know, you're in one system but you've got your kids going somewhere else. And I do sort of think a lot about why you make those decisions but it's always the same, there's never anything really conclusive. [Pause]

To me it's a bit like buying a car – you go and you shop around for the best deal or whatever. And it's the same, like I've never felt that I would send all my children to the same school; just because one was there, the others had to go there, you know! I really think that if somewhere offered a particular thing that was really good for one of your children, be it state or be it government, then that's what I'd go and look at it. And it may be that the other ones might be better off somewhere else.

I think that that's how I think you should see it, they're offering you a service and you go and check them out. You line them up against everybody else.

What we hear from Jonelle and Hayley in these narratives, and they reflect the general pattern among the 10 persons we interviewed who have recently opted for non-government schooling, is a biography of choice. In a nation that has had a robust Catholic education sector, as well as a set of high-fee Protestant schools, for as long as there have been schools, there has always been some ability to select which school one wishes to attend. Clearly, both
Martin Forsey

Jonelle and Hayley were able to take advantage of this when they were students. There is now a greater ability to choose and this has intensified the desire among the likes of Jim, Kelly, Jonelle and Hayley to exercise their choices in the best interests of their children. For each of them, even for Jim who moved his child to a government school, their decisions produced some level of discomfort as they reflected upon the broader issues of the common good and social justice. But their decisions were not framed around narrow instrumental concerns associated with increasing their child’s position on the academic ladder. In many instances the parents reported being influenced by the sense of community offered by the schools, by the extra-curricular programmes, the ways in which their child was welcomed into the school, and/or by the directions that their particular son or daughter wanted to pursue.

Laura and Colin, a married couple who are both teachers in the public system, capture this very well. They had moved to a particular suburb so that their son and daughter could be guaranteed a place at the government high school with the strongest academic reputation in the state. But their son had other ideas. Josh wanted to attend a particular Catholic school because of the sporting opportunities it offered. Both Laura and Colin agree that the Catholic school did not present the same academic opportunities as their local government school, but Laura now describes herself as a ‘poster girl’ for the school her son now attends. She loves the atmosphere of the place, the ways in which Josh is cared for by the teachers and the opportunities it provides him to get involved in a wide range of activities. Both of them suggested that this sort of care is rarely available in the public system.

Jim, whose thoughts on what has happened to government schools and how this is influenced by shifts in societal expectations helped open this chapter, moved in opposite directions to the ones taken by the other people introduced so far. Interestingly, he was concerned that his son’s needs were not being met in the low-fee Protestant high school he attended mainly because it did not cater very well to those students who were not university bound. As the next section shows, this is not an uncommon story, but other concerns were also evident.

**Going Public**

*Claire, Laurie and Sam’s Story*

Claire and Laurie were both in their forties at the time of the interview. They have four children. In 2005 their eldest child, Sam, was completing Year 12 at a government high school that was some distance from their home in the foothills on the east of the city. The government high schools in their immediate vicinity have a reputation for being quite rough and Claire and Laurie discouraged Sam from attending them. Laurie talks of the ‘dirty big fence’ that surrounds their local school, a security measure that caused both of them to feel decidedly insecure about sending their son there. Sam
describes the school as a place in which drug users and ‘pretty serious gangs’ wielded a great deal of influence. To him it is ‘dangerous’.

Interestingly, it was a fight with one of Sam’s closest primary school friends that triggered his decision not to attend the fenced-off local high school. Up to that point he was intending to follow his friends there, but the divisions triggered by the conflict caused him to rethink his choices. This all happened when Sam was in Year 7 and Clair and Laurie recall a frantic last-minute search for a suitable school. Sensing that their lack of religious conviction would probably preclude the local Catholic school, and finding two other independent schools to be too expensive, they settled on a new low-fee Christian school that was just opening in a suburb about 15 kilometres from their house.

At first things went well. Sam enjoyed being at the school, describing it as a calm place, with no violence. Comparing the two and a half years he spent at the Christian school with the government school he moved to towards the end of Year 10, Sam speaks with residual surprise about how little homework he was expected to do when he first arrived at the government school: ‘there was a lot of homework and stuff like that at the private school. But when I went to [the government school] it was just like you know sitting back doing nothing really in Year 10’.

Sam describes an elaborate set of rules and regulations at the Christian school that revolved around ‘referrals’, ‘uniform defaults’, ‘letters home’ and ‘detentions’ that were mainly associated with governing homework and school uniform rules. These rules tightened progressively over Sam’s time at the school, reaching a point where a number of his friends started to react against the regulations. By about halfway through Year 10 they had all left the school. By the time Sam left, he calculates that there were only five boys left in his year group, and he was on friendly terms with only one of them.

In part Sam attributes his leaving the Christian school to having had his eyebrow pierced in Year 10. The teachers and the principal demanded that he remove it. Having spent $80 on the piercing, there was no way that Sam wanted to comply with this ruling. But, in Sam’s words:

Eyebrow thing or not I would have left there that year anyway cos
I’d come home depressed and sad. You got to have your friends to
talk to and you got to have friends there to stand by your side and
stuff. But I just had no one there, it was just me. Cos it was school
you know, but it wasn’t school any more, it was just learning.

For most of the students interviewed as part of this project, a major factor governing their choice of school revolved around where their friends were going. In interview after interview, when students reflected upon their choice of school they reported being strongly influenced by what their friends were doing. If their parents selected a school to which few of their friends were going they often found this difficult to deal with. In turn they judged their reactions to the school according to how readily they formed new friendships.
As Sam’s final comment so cogently puts it, for students at least, schools are about more than ‘just learning’; they are deeply social places.

Parents are cognisant of this, and Claire and Laurie certainly responded to Sam’s misery at the loss of his friends, but they were also concerned about the lack of resources available at the Christian school. The attrition rate, itself attributable to the lack of resources, only compounded their concerns. Without a critical mass of students going into Years 11 and 12, the school could not guarantee as wide a range of subjects as they would have liked and they were concerned that the university entrance subjects Sam wanted to take would not be available there. Shortly after we completed the interview, in fact, Claire emailed me to make sure I was clear about the various reasons they had for firstly seeking out a private school and then returning to the government system:

Reasons for initial private school decision:

- Perception of more accountability in the private system.
- Belief that the private school would be working for us and our child, i.e. take more notice of input/concerns/needs.
- An expectation of mutual respect and support of our family values.
- Perception of better facilities.
- Perception of better pastoral care for students, included in this, the view that private schools can readily expel troublemakers, thus creating a safer environment for other students.

We came to see that all was not as we’d hoped and our perceptions were not the reality. The following outlines our negative findings:

1. The private school fell short of expectations, e.g. promises not kept on several issues.
2. There was overzealous policing of minor uniform infringements and unfair and inconsistent treatment of behavioural misdemeanours.
3. The school lacked adequate facilities.
4. No tertiary entrance examination subjects available to our child.

A change to a sister college was offered, however, new uniform would be required and no subsidy or discounts were going to be forthcoming.

Another parent, Sarah, sent her son William to a Montessori school for many of the reasons listed by Claire and Laurie. Primarily she thought that an independent school would be more accountable to parents and that this would give her more control over her child’s education. The three and a half years that her son was at the school caused her to rethink this perception
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quite drastically. She found the staff uncommunicative and unsupportive of her child's needs. The lack of testing, that sounded so positive when she first went to the school, bothered her in the end as it was never clear to her how her son was progressing as a student. A number of other parents shared this concern and gradually the numbers at the school dwindled.

Failing to reach a critical mass of students is significant in a number of the new independent colleges that have opened in the past few years as a consequence of increased federal funding. Half of the cohort under consideration here chose so-called alternative forms of schooling – Montessori and Steiner – for their primary school-aged children, with three of the four commenting that the main reason for leaving these schools revolved around their lack of resources. Sarah put this very clearly when she contrasted what she noticed in the public schools she started to visit when she was considering withdrawing William from the Montessori school he was attending. Noting the strong academic, sporting and cultural focus at the government primary school in which she eventually enrolled her son, Sarah observed that such programmes are not in the independent schools 'because they don't really have the resources to offer all of those things'.

Yvette is another mother who felt that the alternative school her daughter, Shannon, attended until Year 5 was severely limited by its lack of student numbers. The literature she was reading about schools suggested to her that single-sex schools were the most appropriate for girls and so, after agonising over the best school for Shannon, she decided on one of the high-fee United Church schools. She felt that they had better social policies than the other church schools, particularly in relation to Aboriginal people, women, lesbians and gays. Her choice was also influenced by the strong academic standards she believed the school set.

Shannon, whose romantic views of elite private schools helped open this chapter, loved her new school, but after a little while both she and her mother began to have some doubts. Yvette observed that Shannon had barely progressed in maths or English – 'Every student has a laptop in the school, but they cannot spell. They download their assignments from the Internet'. Shannon is quite a gifted musician, but even in that area she appeared to be underperforming. According to Shannon and her mother, the students at the exclusive private school were 'mollycoddled' and protected from failure. They both felt that the school valued presentation over substance and Shannon developed a growing distaste for what she saw as an elitist, 'snobby' attitude among many of her schoolmates. As a consequence of this variety of factors, Shannon wanted to leave and she chose to go to a government school with a specialist music programme.

Simone also moved her son, Thomas, out of the local Catholic school in the northern suburbs of Perth because she was not happy with its academic standards. Compounding this perception, she also felt that the classes, which sometimes had up to 35 students in them, were overcrowded. Simone works in the government education system and had some inside knowledge on
which schools were best to go to, so when she transferred Thomas out of the Catholic school, he went to a hand-picked government school. Upon arriving at the new school she became immediately aware that Thomas’s work was not up to the standard of his peers in the government school, and some of the teachers also told her this was the case.

Louise and Harry had an opposite problem. While their eldest daughter had sailed through the Catholic school close to their southern suburbs home, their son Bob really struggled. Bob told us how he was never really interested in school work or going to university. His parents felt that the school only cared about finances. The school offered little by way of vocational training. To all three of them it seemed that the main curriculum concern was to get as many students doing well in the tertiary entrance examinations subjects as possible, and forget about the rest. As was the case with Jim’s son, this is the reason that Bob moved on.

As discussed earlier, school choice for parents and students has opened up on two fronts: by increasing funding to all non-government schools and by allowing students to attend the government school of their choice. Clearly, for the parents and students discussed in this section the private option did not work. The reasons are manifold, but revolve around curriculum and academic standards, as well as the lack of a critical mass of students, with its concomitant lack of resources and educational options. Most of the parents and students discussed here have therefore explored the second set of options open to them. They have shopped around in the government system and most of them have found this satisfying enough. But in all cases they did not choose to enrol their children in their local school. One parent put it to us that she chose a particular school for her daughter because out of all government schools in the state it is the one that is most like a private school.[4] As was the case with Jim, all but one of the parents choosing government education after their child had spent a period of time in a non-government school opted for places that were outside of their designated catchment zone. They were located in middle-class suburbs, had a reputation for being fairly strong academically, and for their friendly and safe atmosphere. As I have recently argued in relation to neo-liberal reorganisation of schooling (Forsey, 2007b) for all of the rhetoric of diversity and meeting individual needs that accompanies contemporary education reform, the homogenising effects of the market are strong (see also Blackmore, 1999).

As is always the case, contradictory and complicated forces are at play in the organisation of schooling. In drawing this chapter to a close I want to reflect briefly upon what the apparent anomalies discussed here indicate and what the parents and students interviewed for this project tell us about future directions for educational reform.
Choice and the Neo-liberal Consumer

The deregulation and privatisation of schools shifts the responsibility for educational outcomes squarely on to students and parents ... If one’s child does not perform and achieve to the expected level, then, as a parent one must look to oneself for the reason. Perhaps it is because insufficient attention was paid to the ‘choice of school’. (Brown, 1994, p. 63)

In an era of expanding school choice, citizen-clients of a nation state can certainly develop the impression that they are acting as autonomous individuals. As this study helps show, many more Australian parents have become more active, conscious consumers of educational services than there were in the past. In so far as they have done this in the spirit of seeking ‘self-reliance over community dependence’ (Safire, 2004), we can argue that this is part of becoming a neo-liberal subject. It would be a mistake, of course, to assume that self-interest is re-emerging out of hibernation. We have not simply moved from a period of communal care and concern into an individualistic ‘second modernity’ (Beck et al, 2003). However, the argument offered by Beck and his colleagues, that those living in the so-called West are living through a period when individualism is pursued and constructed in some unique ways, offers useful ways of comprehending the present.

Bowe et al (1994) assert that choice draws parents (and I might add students, teachers, politicians and bureaucrats) further into a system of social reproduction. They ask, ‘are we in fact witnessing not the devolution of power to the individual consumer but the exacerbation of social inequality through the unequal distribution of power in the mode of consumption?’ (p. 66). While their answer is obviously an affirmative one, nevertheless, they also point out that parents and their children are not simply dominated by a new freedom of choice or by naïve consumerism (p. 76). Both of the realities reported by Bowe et al are clearly evident in the research reported here.

As Jim’s comments indicate at the opening of this chapter, there is now no choice but to choose. The mere act of opening up public schools to the competitive forces of the market, of removing the boundary limitations compelling those living in set geographical spaces who wish to utilise public education to enrol children in their local school, causes most people to make a choice. Even remaining committed to one’s local school becomes a choice one has to take, or at least in cities and larger towns it does. There is something compelling in Brown’s (1994, p. 63) argument about the ways in which deregulation and privatisation of schools has shifted the responsibility for educational outcomes from governments to individual education consumers. This is a logical enough outcome of the predominant neo-liberal doctrine. However, there being no choice but to choose does not mean that people simply accede to the realities being constructed for them, nor do they necessarily behave in the manner hoped for by those enamoured of neo liberal ideals.
In warning against seeing the new political configurations of our time as ‘monolithic projects imposed upon passive victims’, Larner (2005, p. 12) urges social researchers to pay attention to the specificities of neo-liberal political economies, and to be sensitive to the complex, hybrid ‘political imaginaries’ these new spaces, socialities and subjects are likely to embody. One should focus on the historical continuities of social change at least as much as on the ruptures (Saussure, 1959). Even though so-called private schools are meant to be articulated through a market rather than a bureaucracy (Connell et al, 1982), as some of the parents we interviewed found in their encounters with non-government schools, they were not necessarily accountable to them as consumers of their product, or at least not as accountable as they may have wished them to be. At the same time, the non-government schools did not necessarily provide the level of commitment to excellence and service that the neo-liberal advocates of the private over the public suggest they would. As Beck and his colleagues (2003) predict in their outlining of the changes that have occurred in ‘second modernity’, this study does help reveal a group of parents and students who are primarily focused on their individual needs and aspirations in contemporary Australia. However, these needs and aspirations are rarely pursued to the exclusion of other families and students. We are not witnessing a straight reinforcement of class power. There is at least a consciousness among many of the common good and of the contradictory nature of the choices they are making. Commitment to egalitarianism has not been simply jettisoned in the rush to empower the individual to become a self-serving entrepreneur, and it is a mistake to think that parents and students choosing to attend non-government schools do so out of purely selfish motives. Many of the religious and alternative schools offer a strong commitment to social justice. Keynesian-style welfarism remains an influential enough element in the complex political struggle that accompanies the reformation of schooling in these neo-liberal times (Forsey, 2007b, pp. 160-161), something that was evident, however weakly, in the concerns raised by the parents interviewed in this project. Most, if not all of them, would favour a significant boost to the funding of government schools and a withdrawing of funds from schools that already receive more funds in student fees than the government pays in funding public schools on a per capita basis.

As this research project helps show, there are many parents who have moved their children from the public to the private system who are satisfied with the results of their decision. There are others, however, (a smaller minority) who have been far from content with what they have experienced on the other side of the fence. Contradicting what some of the more orthodox neo-liberals might say, the private sector does not necessarily generate greater levels of efficiency and accountability; their standards are not automatically higher than those found in the public sector. Not only that, as Sam found out when he pierced his eyebrow, the private system can be intolerant of the sort of individualism he sought to express. Interestingly, it
was in a school run by the apparently rigid, rule-bound bureaucracy that he found greater levels of tolerance for his slightly altered appearance.

Education cannot be run according to the rules of a pure market. Apart from the fact that schools offer services to the community, the sorts of products they deal with, such as knowledge, care and direction, are not easily commodified. Even those responsible for so-called private schools are rarely conducting a straightforward for-profit enterprise. More often than not they have a religious, or a quasi-religious, mission to fulfil that often reflects a complex mix of conservative and progressive values. Furthermore, it is not an open market. For many of the highly desirable traditional schools demand exceeds supply, so they can pick and choose who can enter and remain inside. A consequence of this is that far from being the great source of openness, freedom and democracy that some would have us believe we will find in private enterprise, they are capable of imposing rules that squash individual freedoms. The so-called free market is rarely ever free. They are eloquent fictions, as Apple (2001) has described them, and the effects of these fictions are at best unpredictable.

Notes
[1] All of the names of people and schools used in this chapter are pseudonyms.

[2] I thank Marnie Giles for her work on this project. Marnie conducted the majority of the interviews with parents and students, while I interviewed the teachers. Greg Martin also gave invaluable assistance in helping code and analyse a significant slice of the interview material.

[3] South of the river is a local expression that historically at least was suggestive of some of the more affluent suburbs of Perth.


References


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