University fodder

Understanding the place of select entry and high performing government schools

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School choice is most commonly considered in the context of private/public schooling and access to university. University entry remains a key element in family decision-making about which school they would like their children to attend. Debates about school choice are most commonly framed in relation to marketisation and the relative popularity of private and public schools. However, the demand for high performing Government schools is likely to increase and in turn have an impact on the means by which families argue their case for entry. Here school choice within the Government sector is explored, most particularly within Victoria, where there have been a number of pertinent policy initiatives.

Prologue

I was determined to get my daughter in. I went to every Open Day starting in Years 4, 5 and 6. I still go. It took me two years to get her in. Open Day is always crowded with people hanging outside the Hall. I always go early to get a seat. She always understood the expectation that we wanted her to go to Leafy Suburbs College. She had a letter from the principal of her primary school urging her acceptance at Leafy Suburbs College. We advised her to play an instrument other than flute, which is too popular and not as well weighted as other less popular instruments such as the oboe.

Mother with two daughters at the school. (Tsolidis 2006 p. 42)

I made inquiries on behalf of my daughter in 1999. I was told that my child was not eligible since I did not meet the zone requirements. I was told that I live on the wrong side of the road that marks the zone. Two students in the same class as my daughter, who do not live in the zone now attend Leafy Suburbs College. Three students from the same family living in my street attend Leafy Suburbs College.

Mother of an unsuccessful applicant. (Tsolidis 2006, p. 42)

The mechanics of school choice change dramatically when the neighbourhood comprehensive school is no longer the default destination for families. Many parents opt for high-performing Government schools and frenzy can surround such schools because demand for places outstrips supply. Leafy Suburbs College is a high performing Government school in Victoria and the comments made by the parents quoted above, reflect the investment many families make in such schools. If trends in Australia follow those in other countries, the demand for high performing Government schools is likely to increase and in turn have an impact on the means by which families argue their case for entry.

In Victoria there is a trend away from comprehensive schooling, a shift to private schools and intense competition for places at high-performing Government schools. This reiterates similar patterns played out nationally and internationally (Sherington and Campbell 2006, Forsey 2007, Forsey et al. 2008). With growing economic uncertainty there is likely to be increased pressure on high-performing Government schools as families move away from high-cost private schools. There is a possibility that this issue will be played out in Australia, as it has been in England,

where more than 80,000 appeals were lodged in 2007 because students were allocated to schools which were not their first preference. An industry is emerging in England to support parents in gaining admission for their children to their preferred schools, including through the provision of legal advice and consultations about school choice (Clark 2008).

It is not surprising that choosing a school can create anxiety for parents, particularly as they select secondary schools (Tsolidis 2006, Aitchenson 2006, Campbell et al. 2009). The link between university education and economic and social well-being remains and in this context, the capacity of a school to facilitate access to higher education continues to mark some schools as desirable. In Australia, it is students from private schools who continue to enter universities and this participation is reflecting social segregation with students from high socioeconomic status (SES) areas three times as likely as low SES students to enter university. Medium SES students remain marginally under-represented. Low SES students who participate in higher education remain clustered in a few institutions, with the number entering the eight elite universities having dropped in the period 2001 – 2005 (CSHE 2008).

The ranking of schools on the basis of VCE results relates strongly to debates about social justice and education (Teese 2000). Scores describe differences between groups of students or schools, rather than explain why such differences occur. This is particularly pertinent with regard to the relative merits of Government, Catholic, and Independent schools and, increasingly, to differences within each of these sectors. Socioeconomic and cultural differences between students, school admission policies and resourcing of schools are some of the issues that have a dramatic impact on relative rankings, but which can remain hidden by the figures. Some economists argue that the use of unadjusted league tables as the principal performance indicator in a quasi-market model opens up a route for schools to 'play the system' by improving their (perceived) performance by optimising the structure of their student body either in terms of socioeconomic composition or prior academic ability.

As parents adopt this performance indicator as a determinant of school choice, it exerts a pressure for increased social segregation between schools. As student composition becomes more polarised, the increased social segregation reduces equity of outcomes between schools (Bradley et al. 2004). The potential for parents' choice of school to have an impact on social segregation is particularly pertinent in Victoria given access to league tables and new government measures being adopted which make schools accountable for student performance, including linking this to school closures (Tomazin 2009a).

In Victoria, while there has been a general drift away from the Government sector (Tomazin 2009b), high demand continues for the two Government select-entry schools and a number of other high performing Government schools. In 2006, as one of its election pledges, the Victorian Government earmarked $40 million for an initiative to expand the number of select entry schools within the state (Ker & Rood 2006). Funding for these schools was formally announced in April 2008. The proposed schools will enrol students in 2010 and will be situated in Berwick and Wyndham Vale. Berwick is a fast growing suburb in Melbourne's south-east, and Wyndham Vale is in the west. The Berwick school will have a close relationship with Monash University and the other school will be linked with the University of Melbourne (Tomazin 2008). This is a move away from the more traditional support for comprehensive schooling by Victorian Labor Governments.

Unlike NSW where there is a stronger tradition of select entry schooling, there have been only two such schools in Victoria, both of which trace their origins to 1905. Entry to Melbourne High School for boys and MacRobertson Girls' High School is based on student performance in examinations at Year 8 level. The sense of exclusivity of these schools is reinforced by a Government-imposed requirement that no more that 3 per cent of Year 8 students from any one school may be offered places at either school. Selective entry functions as a form of 'skimming' that enables these schools to consistently achieve some of the best Year 12 results for the state, with MacRobertson achieving the highest VCE results of all Victorian schools for five consecutive years (Leung 2006). The initiative to open two additional selective schools needs to be explored as a political attempt to boost faith in public schooling.

Whilst not formally select-entry schools, several other Victorian Government schools have employed more or less subtle selection mechanisms to achieve academic status. These schools are widely known for their excellent results and are notoriously difficult for prospective students to gain access to. In broad terms, high demand for entry is managed through a complicated mix of zoning, examination-based entry into accelerated programmes, and specialised curriculum pathways. The popularity of these schools has contrib-

uted to increases in property prices within their zones as aspirational parents seek to buy houses on the birth of their first child (Tsolidis 2006).

The outstanding results obtained by students from such schools allow some Government schools to compete favourably with the higher performing private schools. The Equivalent National Tertiary Entry Rank (ENTER) is an aggregation of each student's relative performance when compared with all other students. On the basis of ENTERs determined through the Victorian Tertiary Admissions Centre (VTAC) data, high performing Government schools can be understood as those where at least 40 per cent of Year 12 students obtained a score of at least 80.00 (indicating that they out-performed 80 per cent of all Year 12 students), which would allow entry to a broad range of university courses. On the basis of 2006 data, 22 Victorian Government schools could be defined as high performing, in these terms. (Schools with fewer than 20 Year 12 enrolments and Victoria's two selective entry schools have been excluded from this analysis). These 22 schools had 3,186 students or 17 per cent of all Year 12 students at Government schools. To place this result in a State-wide context that includes non-Government schools, 18 Catholic schools and 62 Independent schools with more than 20 enrolments in Year 12 also had 40 per cent of their Year 12 student bodies generating ENTERs of at least 80.00.

School choice can have an impact on social segregation and the public's perception of particular Government schools can create huge demand for some and threaten the viability of others that families perceive as not meeting their needs. Given the potential of school choice to polarise provision in this way, there is a need to consider the basis on which we engage with related issues. On one hand, we can demonise high-performing Government schools that 'play the system' in various ways – and in so doing contribute to further residualisation within the sector. On the other hand, we can explore such schools and their potential to disrupt the uncomplicated passage of students between elite Independent and Catholic schools and universities, particularly those also deemed elite. If we accept the argument that public schools can function as the front line in the battle for social justice (Nieto 2005) we cannot afford to dismiss the role of select entry and high performing Government schools. This should not be read as unqualified support for such schools but instead as recognition that such schools occupy an ambivalent space in debates about public school-

ing and social justice. In the case of such Government schools, they are often characterised as 'pretend private schools' (Tsolidis 2006).

Like many ambivalent spaces they are situated in the borderlands (Anzaldua 1987), a location that provides opportunities to see things differently and to challenge assumptions taken for granted about the current 'lay of the land'. Here attention is drawn to several assumptions, embedded in debates about school choice, particularly in relation to the Government sector, that warrant further consideration.

Academic debates about school choice have often assumed the perspective of mainstream, middle-class parents for whom choice is understood as possible, including within the Government sector. With more financial and cultural resources, these parents can afford at least modest private schools or are education-literate enough to gain places at desirable Government schools. Parents in the latter category employ tutors to coach students to sit entry examinations for accelerated programmes or select entry schools. They also ensure that their children learn musical instruments or gain other experiences, which signal prospective secondary schools students' capacity to complete Year 12 successfully.

Some commentators focus on middle class parents because their support of Government schools is necessary if comprehensive schooling is to survive. It is necessary that they send their children to the neighbourhood Government school, so that polarisation between 'good' and 'bad' schools does not occur. Commentators debate this as a 'burden of justice', which requires middle class parents to support their local school regardless of its perceived capacity to cater for their children (Swift 2003, Clayton & Stevens 2004). Middle class parents are commonly earmarked for research because they are understood as exercising choice, which adds weightiness to their opinions. Parents deemed as having limited resources and no choice but to send their children to the neighbourhood Government school, are less well represented within the literature. In this sense, middle class choice can equal voice, restricting our exposure to the perceptions and experiences of other sectors of society.

Parents are implicated in debates about 'white flight' whereby schools with high enrolments of racialised and ethnicised students are shunned, adding a further dimension to the polarisation of school communities (Kristen 2005, Crozier et al. 2008). This is currently being played out in Australia most dramatically in rela-

tion to refugee students. It has been argued that set-tlement policies for refugee families need to account for their impact on schooling. Mr Ferguson, who at the time of writing was the Parliamentary Secretary for Multicultural Affairs has argued that 'white flight' is evident in parts of Sydney and Melbourne where there are high concentrations of refugee families. Because of this, he believes that school choice has become a major challenge for multicultural Australia. He has stated:

> 'People fear there is a monoculture in some sub-urbs. They believe there is an over-dominance of some cultures in schools, which is denigrating the quality of education…..So they are withdraw-ing their kids from government high schools and sending them to religious or selective high schools. This leads to further concentration of marginalised communities in government schools and the further stigmatisation of these schools' (Ferguson quoted in Topsfield, 2008).

While the link between the middle-class and high-performing Government schools may be strong, it is still worth questioning the assumption that these schools are the sole domain of the middle class. Select-entry and high performing Government schools are very popular and families go to extreme measures in order to gain a place for their children. It may be misleading to assume that the postcode of the school adequately illustrates the socio-economic status of its students. There is evidence that some high-performing schools accommodate a broad range of families, including low-income families receiv-ing government welfare benefits. Students come to such schools from a wide range of suburbs, including those in poorer areas. Within school zones there is a wide variety of housing, with poorer families purchas-ing single bedroom flats in order to qualify for school entry (Tsolidis 2006). Assuming that only middle class parents have educational aspirations for their children and the wherewithal to fulfil these may be too limiting a view.

Commenting on the UK experience, Ball et al. state that for those without a history of participation in higher education, particularly the working class and ethnic minorities, entry to higher education needs to be understood as 'the outcome of several stages of decision-making in which choices and constraints or barriers inter-weave' (Ball et al. 2002, p. 67). They

argue that school choice is pragmatic because it is a means towards upward social mobility. However, they point out that for groups without traditional access to higher education, school choice is also heavily imbued with the non-rational and cultural. For such groups it involves risk and anxiety because such choice and investment is pegged to becoming something differ-ent. It is a decision that can mark a shift in identity and as such is not taken lightly.

There is also the assumption that Year 12 results are the only factor taken into account in decision-making about school choice. Whilst there are clear economic incentives for gaining access to high-performing Gov-ernment schools relative to high-fee private schools, framing school choice strictly as 'value for money' (where 'value' is defined as Year 12 results) may be mis-leading. Parent decision-making can be framed more broadly. Parents are concerned with school culture, curriculum pathways, facili-ties, proximity, extra-curric-ula activities, pedagogy and discipline. There are also issues related to family tra-ditions, values and beliefs. Such factors influence selection between the Gov-ernment, Independent and Catholic systems as much as choice of a school within each. In this context it is important to consider that families, including middle class families, may value a strong Government school sector. They may value the ideal of the neighbourhood school for its potential to contribute to community.

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There is a tradition of comprehensive schooling in Australia (Campbell 2006) and it may be that families opt for an alternative with reluctance. In other words, rather than understanding Government schooling as the 'last resort', because private schooling remains unaffordable, it may be that families value the notion of a neighbourhood Government school and are pushed into other sectors because they understand this system as having been eroded.

Conclusion

The establishment of a free, compulsory and secular education system in Australia has strong historical links with egalitarian aspirations. An ethos that prom-ises all students the chance of reaching their fullest potential regardless of their backgrounds is important

in terms of economic development. This is clearly a somewhat idealistic view of schooling made evident as such by the polarisation between the types of students who gain access to higher education and the types of schools that do and don't facilitate this access. Schooling also has the potential to play a significant role with regard to social cohesion or social fragmentation. The notion of 'white flight' and the settlement of refugee families is a vivid example of the link between school choice feeding a particular type of social fracturing. Whilst there is mounting evidence that schooling may not contribute to egalitarianism we need to consider the strategic implications of letting such a vision evaporate totally.

Arguably, there are incentives in keeping the vision alive even if it serves only as a bench-mark for how far we have drifted away from its enactment. This is particularly the case in the current Victorian context where policy initiatives are emphasising selective schools, league tables and performance measures linked to possible school closures. The popularity of high-performing schools offers us an opportunity to understand what families find attractive in a school. And the link between such schools and elite universities may allow these universities to diversify their student populations. Competition for places at high performing government schools is likely to intensify as more families look to Government schooling to replace high-fee paying private schools (Jensen & Noonan, 2008). However, without adequate resourcing, Government schools are unlikely to support the broad range of students achieve their aspirations, making access to university the prerogative of the resourceful, regardless of whether being resourceful is linked to postcode or knowing what high-performing schools use as indicators of success.

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