

Public And Private Schooling In Australia - Historical And Contemporary Considerations

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Introduction

According to the most recent figures available from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (August 1996) there were 9,629 schools operating in Australia. Of these 7,087 (73.6%) were government schools operated by the State Directors-General of Education (or equivalent) and 2,542 (26.4%) were non-government schools. There were 3,142,933 full-time students attending these schools in August 1996. Of these, 2,221,475 (70.7%) attended government schools and 921,458 (29.3%) were attending non-government schools. The number of full-time students attending government schools in 1996 increased by 13,622 (0.6%) from the 2,207,853 attending in 1995, while the number of full-time students attending non-government schools increased by 19,974 (2.2%) from the 901,484 attending in 1995. There was the equivalent of 143,949 full-time teaching staff in government schools in August 1996, an increase of 0.1% from the 143,787 in 1995, while teaching staff in non-government schools totalled 60,070 full-time equivalent units, an increase of 1,456 (2.5%).

Bone (1996a:15) claims that in Australia over the previous two decades enrolments in government schools have declined by 80,000 while those in private schools have risen by 280,000. She also notes that while 30% of Australian students go to private schools this contrasts with the approximate 10% of pupils who attend private schools in Britain and North America where private schools receive no money from taxpayers (Bone, 1996a:15).

Anderson (1993: 184) claims that private school enrolments in Australia are proportionally higher than any Anglo-American country and are growing while elsewhere they are static or declining. Current private school enrolments are the highest since state systems of schooling were founded in the previous century. The Catholic school system comprises the largest segment of the "private" sector with slightly less than 20 per cent of school children. The non-Catholic "private" sector grew most in the 1980s. This included new elite schools, and ethnic and religious schools.

School choice has always been a contentious issue in Australia. From colonial Australia till the present day the issue of school choice has caused acrimonious debates and political manoeuvring with respect to the formation of public policy. Nineteen ninety-six saw the issue again assume great prominence as public policy was altered by the newly elected Federal Government in Canberra to make it easier for private school choice by parents.

This paper explores the historical and contemporary influences surrounding school choice in Australia. It examines the influence of issues such as religion, finance, politics, legal and constitutional issues, multiculturalism and egalitarianism.

Types of Private Schools

Australian "private" school types include elite secondary schools (usually associated with either the Protestant or Catholic faith), Catholic parish primary and secondary schools; primary and secondary schools with other religious affiliations or associated with particular philosophies.

Normally "private" schools obtain some government assistance. Reasons for choice of private schools vary. For example, Praetz (1974:87) found that Catholic parents selected Catholic schools because religion constituted part of the school curriculum rather than because of the "Church's decree". Partington (1988:216-219) explained private school choice in terms of the schools' powers to employ teaching staff, control over the curricula and teaching methods, religious loyalties and the role of teacher trade unions. Seiffert (1993:3) noted that secondary school choice encompassed issues such as the availability of different types of schools, travel requirements, finance, zoning, academic achievement, discipline, children's peer groups, and whether a school was co-educational.

Historical Background

Australia was initially settled as a penal colony for criminals from England, Ireland and Scotland. Originally the Church of England, claiming to be the established church, assumed responsibility for the education of the new colonists. This was challenged by the Presbyterian and Roman Catholic Churches who had a large number of adherents among the colonists.

Following intense disagreements in the early years of settlement, by various religions claiming responsibility for education, each colony between 1872 and 1895 passed the "free, compulsory and secular" Education Acts which stopped most financial assistance to church schools and made primary education a state responsibility. However, the Catholic Church established its own education system. In 1879 the Catholic Bishops of Australia realised that large numbers of Catholics were not sending their children to Catholic schools and issued a *Joint Pastoral Letter* stating that Catholics must send their children to Catholic schools unless given special dispensation by their parish priest. The *Joint Pastoral Letter* stated (O'Farrell, 1969:396):

Let parents send their children, when of fit age, exclusively to Catholic schools. Let them regard all other schools as no places for their children, who have to learn before everything else to save their souls; and who should be sedulously prepared, by breathing a Catholic atmosphere, by living amidst Catholic teachers and companions, and by an exclusively Catholic training, for encountering the perils of the world in which they will eventually be thrown.

Thirdly, let all Catholic parents know that they cannot, without serious guilt, place their children in proximate danger of perversion. Let them bear in mind that to do so is to set at defiance the teachings of the Catholic Church; and that, unless there be exceptional reasons, and the danger be remote, of which things the Church is the judge, no Confessor can absolve such parents as are willing to expose their children's souls to the blighting influence of an alien creed or a secularist system.

The Australian Catholic Church was encouraged by Rome and Pope Pius XII Syllabus of Errors which condemned state supported secular education. Hogan (1987: 94-95) argues that the policies of the Catholic hierarchy from the 1860s onwards pitted them alone against the majority of Australians and their "language of persecution glorified Catholic isolation". Hogan (1987:94-95) argues:

The strategy of the Catholic bishops ... [was] ... directed at the general community. By the late 1860s the bishops had decided that the battle to preserve state aid for denominational schools was all but lost ... The only thing was to prepare for the period after aid was withdrawn ... Another reason for the attacking strategy was to prepare for the reinstatement of aid at some future time. The arguments of Bishop Goold or of Archbishop Vaughan ... were to be the standard arguments of Catholic spokesmen for the next century- until in fact, aid was restored in the 1960s and 1970s.

The Second Vatican Council of 1962 did not alter the requirements that Catholic children attend Catholic schools, but none were as successful as in Australia where it is claimed that more than half Catholic children attend Catholic Schools, a figure alleged (Anderson, 1993:18) to be higher than anywhere else. Up until the late 1960s the Australian Catholic Church relied on religious orders in order to staff schools. Unable to do this, Protestant Churches resorted to charging high fees. Eventually this limited entry to only the wealthier sectors of society. Consequently, Protestant schools developed into prestigious high fee paying schools. For the last five decades Protestant schools enrolled only about 5 per cent of the population compared to the more than 15 per cent in Catholic schools.

Financial Assistance

While the Catholic Church established its own system of primary and secondary education based on Catholic teaching orders, it was aggrieved that for almost a century it was denied government assistance. More irksome was that the Australian Labor Party which was the party of choice for many Catholics (despite the formation of the Democratic Labor Party a party also with Catholic support) was until 1963 opposed to government assistance for church schools.

The conservative political parties represented by the Liberal and Country Parties (and encouraged by the minority Democratic Labor Party) started to relax their opposition to government assistance for church schools in the 1950s and 1960s. This was because they desired to gain the votes of Catholics and to provide assistance for the elite private schools. The situation in Catholic schools had reached a crisis point as well. By the 1960s many Catholic communities could no longer rely on bazaars and fetes to fund increasingly costly schooling. The nature of schooling had changed and one teacher in front of a large class of sixty or more could not cope. Catholics waged increasingly desperate political campaigns such as the closing in 1962 of the Catholic schools in the city of Goulburn not far from the national capital of Canberra. Such a measure placed unbearable strains on the state system.

The Federal Labor Party after more than twenty years in opposition and following bitter debates decided that only by securing a proportion of the Catholic vote by changing its opposition to state aid for Church schools would it ever gain office. Subsequently, it went to the Federal election in December of 1972 with a policy of funding all schools on a needs basis. It planned that the wealthy schools would receive no assistance and that the majority of Catholic schools which were poverty stricken would receive the majority of their running costs plus assistance with capital grants.

The Labor Party was elected nationally in December 1972. Part of the reason for its electoral success was attributed to its policies of funding all schools on a needs basis. However, aided and abetted by a powerful private school campaign, the Liberal and County Parties (who controlled the upper house of parliament) threatened to block Labor's education measures unless all schools received some government assistance. Consequently, all schools were eligible for aid based on a formula that assessed their resources. The most needy schools (mainly Catholic) obtained approximately 80% of their costs from State or Federal Governments, while the more financially well off received about 33%. Schools were also able to apply for capital grants for refurbishing or extending schools.

Thus while religion is important in the history of school choice, it is closely linked to the economic concerns. This is reinforced by Praetz. In her study of Catholic school choice (Praetz, 1974:64-96) she found a "strong correlation between [government] school attendance and low income". She also observed that "where parents go to Mass weekly the children are less likely to attend [government] school schools than those who attend Mass less frequently. However, Catholics who attend Mass weekly do send their children to [government] schools in large numbers (Praetz, 1974:64). Praetz noted "that the cost of Catholic schooling, above all the tuition fees charged by schools, is the most important reason for the attendance of [Catholic] high-school boys and girls at [government] schools". She concluded that "while Catholic-school parents are poorer than average, [those using state schools] are poorer again" (Praetz, 1974:96).

Government assistance for "private" schools has made it easier for parents with particular beliefs to select those schools. Without this financial help many parents would have found that faith was not enough and would have been unable to exercise their religious beliefs by selecting schools of their choice. Without the return of government aid to "private" schools many would not exist. In particular the Catholic system which became increasingly reliant on lay teachers from the 1970s would have disintegrated. The majority of teachers in Catholic schools today are lay teachers and paid rates of pay similar to teachers in government schools. Catholic parents still make financial sacrifices to send their children to Catholic schools, but without government assistance faith alone would not suffice.

In March 1996 a Federal Liberal and National coalition government was elected. Its Budget of 1996 made large concessions to the "private" school lobby. The normal waiting period before a new school could be established was abolished and there were increases in subsidies for "private" schools. These measures make it easier to establish private schools. Those who wish to practice their religious or other beliefs via school choice are more easily able to do so. Economics is less of a factor in sending children to "private" schools. How important these changes are is indicated by research which predicts that "100,000 students will transfer to the non- government sector over the next four years" (Messina, 1996a: 5; Watson, 1996:5-6). Marginson (1996:15) argues that:

By abandoning the "new schools policy" and increasing the grants to non-government schools, while taking the money for these off its allocation to Government schools, the Federal Government is creating a deregulated market in private schooling- but one that is heavily subsidised by the government and in a manner designed to induce a big shift of enrolments to non-government schools.

From the Commonwealth Government's point of view it hopes to save \$360 million dollars or \$3000 per pupil annually with its new funding arrangements.

Legal and Constitutional Issues

In 1978 the Catholic Bishop of Sandhurst (from the Victorian city of Bendigo) and priests from that Diocese appeared to answer High Court actions launched by a group called Defence of Government Schools. The legal action endeavoured to end government assistance to "private", especially religious affiliated, schools by arguing that state aid to Church Schools was in effect aid to a religion and subsidised religion. The Defence of Government Schools - DOGS- believed they had carefully picked their target.

Bishop Stewart was a profoundly religious man. Conservative on moral, religious, social and educational issues and no stranger to political controversy, he had incurred the ire of the Leader of the Labor Party for allegedly causing the local candidate for Bendigo to lose his seat at the 1972 election.

More importantly DOGS believed he exercised strong control on matters of faith and morals on the Catholics in his diocese. He decreed that Catholic schools were still to have holidays on Holy Days of Obligation - when the practice was abandoned in many other parts of Australia; he actively discouraged religious innovations such as Saturday Vigil Mass and the practice of receiving Communion on the hand; he was behind the writing of some of the Catechisms used in Catholic Schools in his diocese (Lawlor, 1997) and he encouraged an active program of building Catholic Schools.

DOGS believed that if any schools linked the secular and the sacred then it was his schools. One of the hallmarks of a Catholic Education was supposedly that religious education and matters of faith and morals, salvation and sin were not taught separately but were interwoven into the whole curriculum. Religion was not just a separate subject but a way of life in the total school.

High Court action by DOGS was lost on a majority verdict. This can be compared to the situation existing in the United States of America. Here a similarly led Constitutional provision prevents direct government monetary assistance to church schools.

The Nature of Australian Society

Anderson (1993:187-188) believes there are other social factors that help explain the growth of "private" schools in Australia. Firstly Australia's socially heterogeneous population, the result of large scale migration from Europe and Asia and the Middle East following World War II, contain many who wish to maintain their cultural traditions via schooling and along with Catholics value pluralism.

Secondly, Anderson (1993) suggests that state schooling has been egalitarian and opposed to the development of an academic stream. This has been exacerbated by the power of the Teacher Unions not noted for concern with things academic but more with conditions of work and the class struggle. Industrial action throughout the 1960s, 70s and 80s and the rather unedifying spectacle of teacher union leaders engaged in cheap publicity stunts (such as delivering a bag of animal manure to one State Minister of Education) on national television, have not endeared state schools to those in search of an academic curriculum leading to university and high status courses such as law and medicine or to other forms of employment. The educator Schoenemier (1974) noted that in Australia, if not elsewhere, equality was for other people's children. Western (1983: 5) notes that "while there may be an ethos of egalitarianism in Australian society ... the facts unequivocally suggest the existence of pervasive and structurally-based patterns of social inequality". It is a feature of the Australian middle class that it is out to maximise its own advantages even if it means turning on the poor - deserving and undeserving alike (Davidson, 1996a: 15). The 1980s and 1990s have seen Australia become less and less egalitarian and a further concentration of political and economic power at the top of the status hierarchy (Pilger, 1996:19; Colebatch, 1996:3). "Private" school education is seen as one way to maximise the search for the good life.

Bureaucratization

For years Walker (1964 and 1971), railed against the lack of responsiveness of the state education bureaucracies and their control of state schools. He continued a tradition established by visiting overseas Canadian and American educators such as Butts, Kandel and Jackson. Walker argued that Australian educational history with its lack of local control of schools encouraged parents to opt out of state schooling. Parents felt powerless and remote from the schools their children attended. For some being unable to play a more active part in their offspring's education in the state system led them to select the private school system. In some states there have been recent efforts to make schools more locally accountable. It is usually the case that it is the articulate, educated and better off who are able to leave and this only adds to the state schools' difficulties.

Zoning

Historically state schools had defined feeder or catchment zones. (State Board of Education for Victoria, 1985). Students had to attend the school to which they were zoned. This practice led some parents, when the locally zoned school was unsuitable on academic or other grounds, to opt for a private school. Teacher unions supported zoning on the grounds of equality of opportunity (P. Harrison-Mattley, 1983:226). The New South Teachers Federation at its conference in 1983 argued against the abolition of zoning as recommended in the McGowan Report of that year. The Victorian Education Act gave the Minister considerable powers with respect to enrolment. The minister could refuse to permit any child to be enrolled at a particular State school if there was sufficient accommodation in a government school nearer the child's residence. Similarly an application for a transfer between schools could be rejected.

A report prepared for the Australian Education Council on June 1, 1981, recommended that the traditional zoning system (as it then existed) be phased out, but referred to a "zone of right" being established around each secondary school in order to allow students residing nearby to attend, but also allowing first year-students to nominate in order of preference those schools they wished to attend. (Maslen, 1981:3).

Such zoning is now outlawed, but parents can still be "forced" to select a school in the state system that is not of their choice. (Walker and Crump, 1996: 34). Such actions are further inducements for those who can afford "private" schooling to attend those schools. Even Seiffert (1993:213) who found in his study of Victorian parents of secondary school students that zoning was at the time of the study not very important, believed that schools classified as high status may become so attractive that "schools would need to choose between parents, and so the paradox could develop that schools would become the choosers, and at least some parents would have less choice within their local area".

Teacher Selection

Historically, state schools received the teachers that Head Office in the capital city sent. Parents in state schools had no say in who was appointed. Inept teachers were almost impossible to dismiss or replace. Cases where parents forced the removal of teachers only led to that teacher being sent to another government school. It was hard to be dismissed. For parents concerned for more direct say in the selection of teachers, then the "private" school system offered more choice. Gude, Victorian State Minister for Education, (1996: 15) noted that still in 1996 "about 1300 schools are now hamstrung by the old-fashioned rules that dictate which teachers they can employ. Basically, when there is a vacancy, the department sends them a teacher regardless of what the school requires". Gude claims that he ordered this rule to be abolished from 1997. This would allow schools to choose the particular teachers required.

Praetz (1981: 27) notes the employment of lay teachers resulted in non-committed or antipathetic personnel threatening the religious identity of Catholic schools. In order to gain employment in Catholic schools, teachers now need official accreditation by the Catholic Education Office. This is no guarantee of sympathy with the Catholic faith.

Pupil Selection

"Private" schools select their pupils. This may be done in advance via the fees that not everyone can afford. There may be other barriers too such as parental support of religion. For some parents a school that is socially selective in those it accepts makes for easier school choice. Furthermore "private" schools are not loathe to expel unsuitable students. State schools must by law enrol all who seek entry. With governments eager to use schools to disguise constant youth unemployment it is extremely difficult for them to rid themselves of students whom they would not rather have.

The End Result

Buying a Future?

An important reason for parents selecting certain "private" schools especially at the secondary level, is that they are seen as the route to a secure and well-paid future. (See Maslen, 1982 and Sherington, Petersen and Bice, 1987) This is especially so for those who send their children to the elite private schools. These are mainly schools with foundations extending to the last century. They are often affiliated with one of the major religions and modelled on the public schools of England. Davidson (1996b:19) notes that the:

middle class ... are happy to withdraw their children from the public system because the perceived advantage of a private education...[they] want a narrowly focussed education directed towards getting their children into university. They don't want their children held back by children who

don't share these values.

Parents themselves support this suggesting that they selected a private school education because "I suppose we had a perception that there would be a greater chance of success (Lahey, 1996:3). McCalman (1997b:11) notes that "never has a private school been a better investment for your child than in 1997".

The elite schools recruit their students mainly from the top section of the social strata and are seen as the pathway into the prestigious professions such as Law and Medicine. Generally attendance at a so-called elite "private" school has meant that a pupil is much more likely to attend university and to enter one of the so-called prestigious faculties than if one attended a state school. Catholic school pupil entry rates for university entry are in between those of the elite "private" schools and the state schools. Anderson, (1990: 104) found that 84% of non-Catholic private students completed year 12 compared with 46% of Catholic and 30% of state. Sixty-four per cent of non-Catholic school students, 40% of public and 49% of Catholic school students proceeded to higher education. The question is whether it is school or family background and or other factors that are responsible for the better pass rates of private schools and if all background variables were controlled would the private schools still have the higher Year 12 pass rates and the high admission rates to university and the more prestigious Faculties? The research (Dunn 1982, West 1985, Williams 1987) suggests that they would not. Anderson (1990:104-105) concludes that there may be important "non-school variables" which if taken into account would explain the difference school retention rates and progression to higher education rates from state and non-state schools. McCalman's (1997b) work would support this.

It is not just the elite "private" schools that offer advantages in securing employment. There is evidence that ex-pupils from less selective schools are preferred employees. Angus, (1986) for instance, reports that Geelong employers hired former Christian Brothers School students because of preferred work habits that the school had fostered. In times of economic difficulties parents and their children are more likely to take advantage of such opportunities.

Buying a Faith?

Does Catholic school attendance produce practising Catholics? This was the *raison d'être* for the sacrifices that Catholic parents were exhorted to make under threat of eternal damnation. Mol (1985 cited in Anderson, 1993) found that those who attended Catholic schools were more likely to be frequent Mass attenders, to pray on a daily basis and to believe in God and the devil. However, he discovered that there was not much difference between those who had attended a Protestant private school and those who had been to a state school. However, Mol found out that such differences could just as well be explained by family influences. It seems that it is just as likely that it is family as much as school that is responsible for some aspects of religious belief and practice. Anderson (1990:103-104) concludes that:

There is no evidence that non-Catholic private schools influence the religious beliefs of their students any more than public schools do, and the evidence for Catholic schools causing beliefs is not strong. This does not mean that the effect does not occur, but simply that the available research has not found it.

The Catholic Church in Australia is challenged by dwindling attendance at Sunday Mass, problems of clerical abuse and a constant shortage of priests and members of religious orders. It is of course unfair to blame this lack of success on Catholic schools, but it would seem reasonable to ask why have Catholic Schools and why exhort parents to make supreme sacrifices if this is the result? Praetz (1981: 28) suggests the above are simply the wrong questions. She argues that:

The Catholic school is no longer prepared to take sole praise or blame for its products, although there is a largely implicit assumption but widely shared assumption that Catholic schools best serve parents, the church, the wider community and the individual child when the 'school complements and extends the influence of the family'

The Australian Catholic Bishops Conference (1996:25-28) would not disagree with her views.

Of course if Mass attendance and outward observance of religion are anything, the Catholic Church is in a healthier state than many others, some of who have had to effect mergers in order to survive.

Conclusion

With respect to the funding of "private" schools in Australia the wheel has turned full circle. During Australia's colonial period Churches battled with themselves and the state over control of education. Consequently the state assumed control and funding. State aid to Church schools was ended until 1963 when some concessions were made to the Churches. In 1973 further concessions were made to non-government schools. In 1996 yet again more concessions have been made to "private" schools. It is doubtful if this long list of concessions would have been made if it had not been for the powerful and tenacious advocacy of the Catholic segment of the population. However, one wonders if Australia is about to relieve the problems of its educational past for as Davidson (1996b:19) suggests in words almost reminiscent of the debates of another era, the 1996 Federal Government Budget legislation will encourage an exodus from the state school system by:

allowing every tinpot fundamentalist religious group to start schools with federal funding - with funds withdrawn from the allocation to government schools. [This] is likely to resurrect, in a multifaceted form, the sectarian divide that blighted Australia for most of its history until the 1970s.

Have we as a nation learnt nothing?

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