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## ‘My School’ and others: Segregation and white flight

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Talk to enough parents about choosing schools for their kids, and sooner or later, you’ll hear one express concern about the local public school having ‘too many Asians’, or Lebanese, or Muslims, or Aborigines. The minority groups change, but there is a growing unofficial creed among many Australian parents that a ‘good school’ for their children is one where minorities are in the minority. And public schools are increasingly viewed as ghettos, whether they are the disadvantaged schools of the poorer suburbs, or the high achieving selective schools that top all the league tables.

Ethnic concentration and ‘white flight’ from public schools surface sporadically in Australian public debate, often focused particularly on public schools in rural areas and those in disadvantaged suburbs, which, it is argued, are being abandoned by Whites (for example, Bonnor & Caro 2007; Patty 2008; McDougall 2009). The recent release of the official *My School* 2.0 website (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority 2011a) provides the most comprehensive data ever on the cultural diversity levels of all schools in Australia. These statistics show a clear pattern of cultural polarisation in schools across the board, including in wealthy elite suburbs, and suggest that Anglo-Australians may indeed have abandoned public schools in many areas.

The *My School* website reports on the percentages of students that come from language backgrounds other than English (LBOTE) for each school. These statistics are based on enrolment data provided by schools and education authorities (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority 2011b). Language background other than English is a standard measure of cultural diversity in Australia, and unlike birthplace, captures second and subsequent generation migrants who were not born overseas, but are still members of a cultural minority. It is not a perfect measure, though, as it excludes cultural minorities who are primarily English-speaking.

My analysis of the *My School* data focuses on secondary schools in metropolitan Sydney, and the statistics show a marked split between public and private schools. Across Sydney, more than half (52 per cent) of public school students are from LBOTE, while for Independent schools, the figure is just 22 per cent. Catholic schools come in between at 37 per cent. (Independent schools comprise Christian and non-denominational schools, but exclude specialist schools (for children with disabilities) and the small number of schools catering for minority populations (Islamic, Jewish, Coptic Orthodox and bilingual schools).)



Statistics show a clear pattern of cultural polarisation in schools.

At the elite level, among schools that record the strongest performances in the Higher

School Certificate (HSC), the polarisation is particularly marked. For example, among the top 50 Sydney schools in the 2010 HSC examination, sixteen private schools (or 72 per cent of all private schools) have less than 20 per cent of students from a language background other than English. Table 1 shows the full list of these schools, and also demonstrates that the cultural diversity levels in schools are often much lower than that of the suburbs in which they are located.

Comparing these private schools with their local public counterparts underscores the yawning gap between the two sectors. For instance, while St Ignatius College in Lane Cove on Sydney's wealthy North Shore has just eight per cent of its students from a language background other than English, as listed below, the figure for nearby Hunters Hill High School is 22 per cent, while another nearby local school, Chatswood High School, has 67 per cent from a LBOTE (all figures are from the *My School* website). Taking other examples from the North Shore, Queenwood School in Mosman, with 10 per cent LBOTE, contrasts with Mosman High at 26 per cent. Similarly Ravenswood's thirteen per cent LBOTE contrasts dramatically with nearby Killara High's 45 per cent and St Ives High's 49 per cent. The pattern is clear: within these wealthy Sydney suburbs, public schools routinely educate a much higher proportion of migrant-background students than do private schools.

**Table 1: Percentage from language backgrounds other than English, selected schools and suburbs in Sydney**

	% LBOTE of school	% LBOTE of suburb*
Wenona School, North Sydney	0	23
Kambala, Rose Bay	5	19
St Ignatius College, Lane Cove	8	20
SHORE – Sydney Church of England Grammar School, North Sydney	9	23
Queenwood School for Girls, Mosman	10	11
Loreto, Normanhurst	10	18
SCEGGS, Darlinghurst	12	18
Ravenswood School for Girls, Gordon	13	27
Ascham School, Edgecliff	14	18
Roseville College	14	16
Loreto, Kirribilli	14	16
St Catherine's School, Waverley	14	20
Brigidine College, St Ives	14	17
Cranbrook School, Bellevue Hill	15	25
Reddam House, North Bondi	19	28
Barker College, Hornsby	16	38

Sources: *My School* website and ABS 2006 Census community profiles.

\* These figures are based on percentages of Census respondents who reported speaking a language other than English at home. Again, this is a somewhat rough measure of cultural diversity which does not take into consideration the age profile of residents, but nevertheless, it is a standard measure of diversity in Australia.

The association between public schools and migrant students is even stronger when we look at public academically-selective schools, which are, in almost all cases, overwhelmingly dominated by students from a language background other than English, as Table 2 shows.

How are we to understand this dramatic cultural polarisation between public and private schools in Sydney? Obviously there are no official culturally-discriminatory policies in either sector. Entry into public selective schools is determined by the Selective High School Placement Test, which, although highly competitive, is open to any applicant. Private schools, on top of hefty school fees, often have a waiting list, and sometimes give priority to children of Old Boys and Girls. This may sometimes make it more difficult for children of migrants to gain entry.

Overall though, it would appear that, to some extent, families are self-segregating on the basis of cultural background. Migrant families are opting for the public system, which seems understandable given the outstanding academic outcomes achieved by selective schools, coupled with the exorbitant fees of private schools. Many Asian migrant families in particular are famously anxious about their children’s academic performance, most sensationally illustrated by Amy Chua’s bestselling book, *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* (2011), which articulates a ‘Chinese’ model of parenting that allegedly produces superior results in terms of children’s academic and other outcomes. I am not able to discuss Chua’s controversial claims about ‘Chinese’ parenting, except to say that in many cases, strong parental attention to academic performance is no doubt an attempt to ensure that the risk of migration pays off. The upshot is that migrant parents may be less willing to pay for superior grounds, facilities and other private school attractions, even when they can afford to do so. Anglo-Australians’ shunning of public selective schools is less explicable, particularly among those families with talented children who might achieve the required standard on the selective schools test. The ‘white flight’ from these schools must partly reflect an unwillingness to send children to schools dominated by migrant-background children, which simply further entrenches this domination.



Private schools, on top of hefty school fees, often have a waiting list.

**Table 2: Percentage of students from language backgrounds other than English, top 10 selective schools in NSW (in order of HSC rank)**

	<b>% LBOTE</b>
James Ruse Agricultural High School	97
North Sydney Girls High School	93
Hornsby Girls High School	86
Baulkham Hills High School	92
Sydney Girls High School	88
Sydney Boys High School	91

Northern Beaches Secondary College Manly Campus	39
North Sydney Boys High School	90
Fort Street High School	81
Normanhurst Boys High School	80
St George Girls High School	90

Source: *My School* website

Jakubowicz argues that at its heart, this phenomenon ‘represents a withdrawal from intercultural interaction, into monocultural isolation with only carefully controlled interactions with “Others”’ (2009, p. 4). He describes a similar trend among some migrant families, increasingly opting for religiously and culturally defined schooling. As a result, by the mid-2000s, Jakubowicz suggests, ‘some of the great tradition of public education as the beachhead for intercultural engagement had begun to come unstuck’ (2009, p. 4).

And of course, this cultural polarisation is not just happening at the elite level. In some of the poorer suburbs of Sydney, public schools also appear to have been abandoned by Anglo-Australians. Table 3 shows the schools with the highest proportions of students from LBOTE, all of which are located in Western Sydney. And while these schools are located in suburbs where migrants are concentrated, the school communities are disproportionately migrant-dominated.

In 2000, the NSW districts with the highest percentages of students from non-English speaking backgrounds in public schools were Granville and Fairfield, but then, the figures were 81 per cent and 75 per cent LBOTE, respectively (NSW Department of Education and Training 2000). Unlike today, there were no areas with 90 per cent or more LBOTE. So in the last decade there has been a marked ethnic consolidation in these schools.



Public schools appear to have been abandoned by Anglo-Australians.

So where are Anglo-Australian children going to school in these areas? In the central Western corridor running from Parramatta through Auburn to Bankstown, the private schools all have lower LBOTE levels than do their public counterparts, although the schools with the lowest levels still have approximately half their students from LBOTE. Examples include Our Lady of Mercy College, Parramatta (49 per cent), St Euphemia College, Bankstown (54 per cent) and Condell Park Christian School (56 per cent). Again, the Independent schools are less culturally diverse than are the Catholic schools.

The lower LBOTE levels are particularly pronounced in the outer Western suburbs. For example, private schools in the Campbelltown area, on the southwest fringe of Sydney, have an average of 14 per cent LBOTE, while those in the Penrith area, on the western outskirts of Sydney, have a 24 per cent average. While these outer suburbs are generally more Anglo-dominated than other areas of Western Sydney, it may also be the case that Anglo-Australian students are travelling further to attend these schools.

**Table 3: Percentage of students from language backgrounds other than**

### English, selected schools and suburbs

	% LBOTE of school	% LBOTE of suburb
Auburn Girls High School	98	83
Punchbowl Boys High School	98	77
Canley Vale High School	97	81
Granville Boys High School	97	69
Wiley Park Girls High School	97	81
Bankstown Girls High School	96	79
Belmore Boys High School	96	72
Cabramatta High School	95	88
Birrong Boys High School	94	55
Granville South High School	93	65
Birrong Girls High School	92	55
Sefton High School	92	61

Sources: *My School* website and ABS 2006 Census community profiles.

This shift is not entirely surprising given the policy changes that have occurred in the last two decades that have imposed market principles on the schooling system (Marginson 1997; Wilkinson, Denniss, & Macintosh 2004; Buckingham 2010). In the name of ‘choice’, a series of government policies has led to increased support for private schools, which has increased the ‘resource disparity’ between public and private schools (Kaye 2011, p. 3), and exacerbated the perception of ‘public education as the inferior choice’ (Kaye 2011, p. 3).

Federal funding for private schools increased from \$1.9 million in 1995–96 (or 57 per cent of total federal funding to schools) to \$6.6 million in 2007–09 (or 65 per cent of total federal funding to schools). While private schools experienced this tripling in funding, government school funding doubled over the same period (Buckingham 2010, p. 7). Meanwhile, the abolition of the New Schools Policy in 1997 relaxed requirements for the establishment of new private schools (Buckingham 2010, p. 7). This has led to the growth of Muslim and other schools catering for cultural minorities, as well as the increase in Christian schools (Buckingham 2010). The ‘funding maintained’ clause in the government’s socio-economic status (SES) funding policy which stipulated that no private school would lose funding, even if their socio-economic status improved over time, means that half of Australian private schools are now funded *above* their SES formula (Patty 2010).

As a result of these policies, the flight to private schools, which began in the 1980s, has gathered new momentum since the mid-1990s. Currently, 34 per cent of all students attend private schools, up from just over 20 per cent at the end of the 1970s (Buckingham 2010, p. 2). Meanwhile, since 1979, government schools have experienced a negative annual average growth rate of -0.15 per cent (Buckingham 2010, p.



Government policy has led to increased support for private schools.

3). Public schools are increasingly left with the ‘residual’ student body—students from working-class and migrant backgrounds (see Marginson 1997; Halse 2004). As Kaye (2011, p. 2) argues, ‘public education risks being reduced to a safety net system for the deeply disadvantaged’.

‘School choice’ policies have encouraged parents to become more active in their search for ‘good schools’, but parents are unevenly equipped to make educational decisions. Therefore critics of school choice argue that parents less skilled at engaging with the education system are ‘more disadvantaged by greater choice’ (Kelly 2009, p. 270, emphasis in original). Working-class and migrant background parents are among those who are usually less equipped to engage with the complexities of the schooling system, and the ‘residualisation’ of public schools is the logical outcome of this process. As Connell (2003, p. 246) argues, ‘school choice probably speeds up processes of ethnic concentration and segregation’.

Why should we be concerned about ethnic segregation in schools? The success of multiculturalism in large part relies on Australians having the skills and outlook to effectively negotiate across cultural difference. Schools are a crucial institution for instilling an understanding of, and respect for, cultural difference. Indeed, nurturing respect for cultural



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diversity is an official goal of the Australian education system. The *Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians*, released by Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs in 2008, emphasises the role of education in ‘building a democratic, equitable and just society—a society that is prosperous, cohesive and culturally diverse and that values Australia’s Indigenous cultures as a key part of the nation’s history, present and future’ (2008, p. 4). Of the ‘new demands’ being placed on Australian education, the first one listed by the Declaration is ‘the need to nurture an appreciation of and respect for social, cultural and religious diversity, and a sense of global citizenship’, followed by the need to become ‘Asia literate’, engaging and building strong relationships with Asia (2008, p. 4).

There is much that can be achieved by school curricula that expose students to diverse worldviews, histories and cultural practices. However, nothing can replicate the experiential knowledge gained by being personally confronted with cultural difference and learning how to negotiate across difference, not to mention the benefits gained from cross-cultural friendship. Scholars of ‘everyday multiculturalism’ argue that the success of Australian multiculturalism has much to do with the ordinary encounters between people of different cultural backgrounds that happen every day, in neighbourhoods, workplaces, parks—and schools. As opposed to the public anxieties around ethnic gangs, terrorism, and so on, at an everyday level, it is argued, people are routinely interacting across cultural divides, in order to coexist in a shared social space (for example, Wise & Velayutham 2009). Monocultural schools, regardless of the brilliance of their teaching programs, cannot socialise students for the reality of a cosmopolitan Australian society and a globalised world. Nor do heavily migrant-dominated schools, bereft of Anglo-Australians, provide a balanced microcosm of Australian society for socialising young people.

It is not surprising then, that overall, Australians strongly support culturally diverse school communities. A Newspann poll survey in 2004 found that 96 per cent of respondents agreed with the statement, 'it is good for children of different ethnic and religious backgrounds to mix at school' (Wilkinson, Denniss & Macintosh 2004, p. 49). This general attitude however, obviously does not always translate into choices made for their own children. The challenge here is to provide better opportunities for Australians to enact their in principle support for diverse schools by ensuring that public schools are not seen as the inferior choice.



We risk creating highly unbalanced school communities.

The growing ethnic segregation of Australian schools should therefore ring loud alarm bells to anyone concerned about equity in education, and anyone concerned to ensure that Australian schools continue to equip young people with the skills and dispositions to become competent citizens of a cosmopolitan world. If current trends continue, we risk creating highly unbalanced school communities that, rather than reflecting the full diversity of Australian society, instead constitute unhealthy and unnatural bubbles of segregation and isolation.

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