

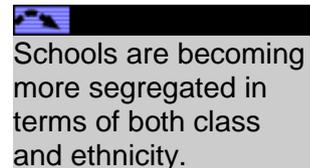
‘People like us’: School choice, multiculturalism and segregation in Sydney

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‘Mean girls’, nerds, jocks, punks, goths ... Everyone remembers the tribes that populated their schools. Even if you didn’t like your fellow students, you had to learn to deal with everyone, and in the process, understand that diversity is a natural part of any social environment. If you went to a school that was culturally diverse, you had to learn how to deal with people from different cultural backgrounds, and perhaps even forge cross-cultural friendships. Schools are ideal places for this kind of cross-cultural interaction, and for this reason, play an important role in fostering everyday multiculturalism and social cohesion.

Scholars of everyday multiculturalism (for example, Wise & Velayutham 2009; Noble 2009; Harris 2013) have highlighted the importance of daily encounters with cultural difference in establishing an organic multiculturalism that is an ordinary part of people’s everyday lives. People learn to deal with each other in a practical and everyday fashion, and cultural difference is not a barrier to engagement and sometimes friendship. Ash Amin writes about schools, along with workplaces and other social sites, as ‘micropublics’, where people from different backgrounds are thrown together and forced to deal with each other on a daily basis, in the process enabling ‘unnoticeable cultural questioning or transgression’ (2002, p. 969). He argues that this routine, everyday negotiation across cultural difference is the best way to foster intercultural understanding.

So how are Australian schools doing in fostering this kind of everyday multiculturalism? This paper argues that neo-liberal education policies that encourage school choice are damaging schools’ ability to function as micropublics. Increased public funding of private schools and a growing culture of competitiveness has led to a steady exodus from comprehensive public schools, as middle-class parents seek out more ‘desirable’ schools for their children (Bonnor & Caro 2007; Campbell, Proctor & Sherington 2009; Connell 2011). Across Australia, the number of students attending non-government schools increased from 22 per cent in 1980 to 35 per cent in 2013 (Evershed 2014). In NSW, public school enrolments increased by only one per cent between 2004 and 2013, compared to almost ten per cent for non-government schools (McNeilage & Knott 2015). As a consequence, there is now considerable segregation between public and private schools, with implications for multiculturalism and social cohesion.

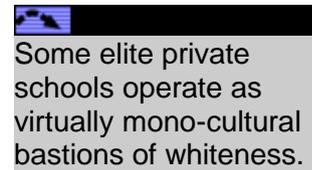


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Schools are becoming more segregated in terms of both class and ethnicity. More and more students are going to schools that do not represent the range of people in their neighbourhood, but rather a select group. Their families have chosen to enrol them in schools where there are more ‘people like us’. In providing more school ‘choice’ for parents, the government has created a marketplace in schools that has led to self-segregation.

School choice has been a powerful mantra in Australian government policy on education for decades. Providing families with free choice over where to send their children to school is presented as a democratic right, as well as the best mechanism for improving schools' performance and accountability. However, there is now substantial evidence from around the world that the creation of a marketplace in schools increases inequality between richer and poorer schools, and of course, richer and poorer students.

This paper adds another layer to this critique, by examining the ethnic self-segregation that has resulted as families engage with the school choice process. Looking at high schools in Sydney reveals a highly divided education system, with some elite private schools operating as virtually mono-cultural bastions of whiteness, while public schools, including selective schools, are sometimes overwhelmingly dominated by students from language backgrounds other than English.

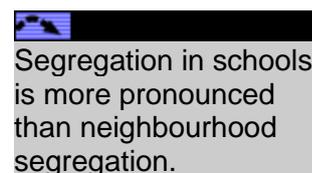


Some elite private schools operate as virtually mono-cultural bastions of whiteness.

School choice has always operated to the extent that those with the inclination and means to send their children to private schools have been able to opt out of the public system. However, from the 1970s, successive governments have increasingly framed education policy in terms of encouraging choice. Since the early 1970s, federal governments have steadily increased funding of non-government schools (Forsey 2010, p. 2). During the Howard Government (1996–2007), for example, public subsidies for high-fee schools massively increased their resource levels to more than double the per capita resources available to public schools (Windle 2009, p. 233). The number of private schools has also mushroomed, adding to the exodus from the public system. The Abbott Government's ideological commitment to private education is explicit. For example, in June 2015, education minister Christopher Pyne made the bizarre comment that the government has 'a particular responsibility for non-government schooling that we don't have for government schooling' (Knott 2015).

At the state level, in the late 1980s, the NSW government partially de-zoned schools, so that families could apply to enrol their children in a public school outside of their local catchment area. At the same time, it expanded the number of public academically-selective schools, catering for gifted and talented children. This expansion has continued since. There are now 47 fully or partially selective schools in New South Wales, the majority located in Sydney (Department of Education and Communities 2015). Selective schools are making their way into other states as well.

Research from around the world has demonstrated the negative consequences of school choice policies on disadvantaged students. The OECD report *Equity and Quality in Education* (2012, p. 92) states that 'Providing full parental school choice can result in segregating students by ability, socio economic background and generate greater inequities across education systems'. The Gonski report showed these outcomes had eventuated in Australian schools (Australian Government 2011).



Segregation in schools is more pronounced than neighbourhood segregation.

My research has also shown that segregation occurs across ethnic lines as well. Using data from the MySchool website, in 2011 I found that students from language backgrounds other than English (LBOTE) form more than half of all enrolments in Sydney's public high schools (52 per cent), while in independent schools, the figure was only 22 per cent. Catholic schools came in between at 37 per cent (Ho 2011). This segregation is particularly pronounced in some local areas. For this paper, I looked at 2014 MySchool statistics on the ethnic composition of high schools on Sydney's lower north shore, a wealthy and culturally diverse region with a large range of public and private schools. Among the public comprehensive high schools in this region, an average of 49 per cent of students came from a LBOTE in 2014. If we include the public selective schools, the figure jumps to 61 per cent. For the private schools however, LBOTE enrolments comprised only 13 per cent.

How do these figures compare to the general community in which the schools are located? Census data show that approximately 30 per cent of residents of the lower north shore spoke a language other than English at home in 2011. This means that on average, the private schools in this region are disproportionately Anglo-Australian, while the public schools are disproportionately non-Anglo. As in other countries that have encouraged school choice, segregation in schools is more pronounced than neighbourhood segregation. As Keels, Burdick-Will and Keene (2013, p. 242) explain, education systems with school choice 'have schools with higher levels of economic, ethnic, and ability segregation than the levels in the neighbourhoods in which children reside'.

The table below provides the breakdown of each school's LBOTE enrolments.

Table 1	LBOTE %
Comprehensive public high schools	
Chatswood High School	76
Hunters Hill High School	35
Mosman High School	30
Riverside Girls High School	48
Willoughby Girls High School	57
Selective high schools	
North Sydney Boys High School	91
North Sydney Girls High School	92
Private high schools	
Loreto Kirribilli	11
Marist College North Shore, North Sydney	20
Mercy College, Chatswood	34
Monte Sant' Angelo Mercy College, North Sydney	6
Queenwood School for Girls, Mosman	2
SCECGS Redlands, Cremorne	14
Roseville College	14
St Aloysius College, Kirribilli	17
St Ignatius' College, Riverview Lane Cove	5
St Pius X College, Chatswood	13
Sydney Church of England Grammar School, North Sydney	9
Wenona School, North Sydney	13

Source: MySchool.edu.au

The private schools in this region include some of the highest-fee, most prestigious schools in the country. Collectively, they play an important role in educating the children of Australia's cultural and political elite, and are sites where powerful networks are forged. The fact that there are so few students from language backgrounds other than English raises questions about the ethnic exclusivity of these networks, with ramifications for the composition of Australia's future political, cultural and economic leaders.

Some of these schools are a short stroll from the two selective schools on the list. Year after year, these schools are among the top ten schools in the state, as measured by the annual Higher School Certificate results. The fact that these academically high-performing schools are so dominated by students from backgrounds other than English raises questions about the admission process, and whether practices like academic coaching are now almost required to gain entry. It also raises questions about whether selective schools are being shunned by Anglo-Australian families.

The pattern of ethnic segregation is also evident (although to a lesser extent) in other areas, for example, in the inner-west Burwood-Strathfield region of Sydney. This is a more culturally diverse area overall, with 64 per cent speaking a language other than English in the Burwood LGA (2011 Census). However, again, the schools are polarised when it comes to ethnicity. In public high schools, an average of 80 per cent of students are from a LBOTE, while in private schools, it is about half this figure, at 42 per cent. Again, the private schools are disproportionately Anglo-Australian, while the public schools are disproportionately non-Anglo.

Table 2	LBOTE %
Public High Schools	
Strathfield Girls High School	93
Concord High School	63
Burwood Girls High School, Croydon	72
Homebush Boys High School	85
Strathfield South High School, Enfield	89
Private High Schools	
Meriden School, Strathfield	62
Santa Sabina College, Strathfield	49
MLC School, Burwood	46
Presbyterian Ladies College, Croydon	37
St Patrick's College, Strathfield	45
The McDonald College, North Strathfield	11

Source: MySchool.edu.au

Let's reiterate why all this matters. In a multicultural society like Australia, it is unnatural and unhealthy for our schools to be so ethnically divided. Our schools have

become even more segregated than our neighbourhoods, in many areas. In private schools that are overwhelmingly Anglo-dominated, students are not being given sufficient opportunity to develop the cross-cultural awareness and skills that can only be developed through everyday encounters and friendships with people from other backgrounds. On the other hand, in public schools, especially selective schools, where the majority Anglo population are all but absent, again, students are not exposed to the multicultural social environment they will need to engage with when they leave school. There are also concerns about who gains access to well-resourced schools, and whether some schools may be reproducing highly exclusive social networks into the future.

Australia is renowned for its successful multicultural society, relatively free of the ethnic segregation and tensions that are common in other countries. However, in the name of choice, Australian governments' education policies have pushed our schools in the direction of segregation and polarisation.

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