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Markets in education: ‘School choice’ and family capital

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From about the mid-1980s both state and federal governments in Australia effected a series of market-oriented reforms in education. In the late 1990s, Simon Marginson (1997a, 1997b) produced the first monograph accounts of this development, one of which was called, *Markets in education* (1997b), in which he proposed that by the end of the 20th century:

The dominant paradigm was no longer that of education as a common public service. It had become an education market, steered from the background by government, in which students and parents were consumers, teachers and academics were producers, and educational administrators had become managers and entrepreneurs. (1997b, p. 5; see also Welch 1996)

More recently, Raewyn Connell (2013) described a ‘neoliberal cascade’ of interventions in education by successive state and federal governments since the 1980s, urged on by both major political parties and various business organisations, and informed by ‘market logic’.

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Since the late 1990s terms like ‘markets’, ‘marketisation’ and ‘neoliberalism’ have come to be near universal in the sociology of Australian education to describe a set of public policy interventions that have ostensibly sought to apply the energy, flexibility and efficiency of capitalist private enterprise to the provision of teaching and learning in mass institutions, including schools – the focus of this chapter. Such educational reforms are widespread internationally (Apple 2004; Davies & Bansel 2007; Musset 2012) and there has been considerable ‘policy borrowing’ (Lingard 2010), with key influences for Australia coming from the United Kingdom, New Zealand and the United States (Forsey, Davies & Walford 2008; Marginson 1997b). Internationally, the term ‘quasi-markets’ has been coined to emphasise that, in practice, schooling markets are multiple, complex and imperfect, typically experiencing high levels of government regulation, with competition located across multiple and unequal sites (Whitty 1997). It is certainly the case in Australia that governments still play more than just a regulatory or ‘steering’ role in schooling. For example, the majority of school premises in Australia are still publicly owned and the majority of school students attend public schools. Despite the introduction of degrees of decentralised school management since the 1990s, and an increase in casual employment, the majority of public school teachers are still permanent employees with traditional sick leave benefits, standardised wages and so on. Nor has any Australian government or major interest group seriously suggested that public schools should be privatised, as has happened with some other kinds of public services and infrastructure (see Meagher & Wilson, this volume).

Nevertheless, there has indeed been substantial market-oriented change in the provision, operation and experience of schooling over the past quarter century, most notably in the allocation of students to schools. Some consider Australia to be a world leader in the market reform of schooling, specifically in the related encouragement of school ‘autonomy’ and school ‘choice’ (Jensen, Weidmann & Farmer 2013; Musset 2012). Before we turn to our discussion of families and school choice, we briefly address some of the main features of contemporary Australian school markets that have been encouraged, supported or driven by public policy: the private/public divide in school provision; the introduction of new measures of school accountability and public school ‘autonomy’; and the public funding of non-government schools.

Australian schooling has historically been characterised by the strength of its non-government sector and, even during the 1960s and 1970s, ‘the high point of the development of centrally controlled and bureaucratically managed public education’ (Campbell & Sherington 2006, p. 90), the reach of government schooling was less than universal. In 1975, just over three-quarters of all Australian secondary school students attended government high schools (Campbell, Proctor & Sherington 2009, p. 58). In the 21st century, Australia has one of the largest non-government sector enrolments in the OECD, especially in secondary schools (Musset 2012). In 2012, less than 60 percent of secondary school students were in government schools, with just over 22 percent in Catholic schools and just under 18 percent in other non-government schools (Campbell & Proctor 2014, p. 261). (Nearly 69 percent of primary school students were enrolled in public schools.)

In Australian common usage the word ‘public’ describes schools that are owned and managed by the state departments of education and ‘private’ describes schools that are run by non-government bodies such as churches or corporations. Non-government schools outside the Catholic systems (including some Catholic schools) usually describe themselves as ‘independent’ schools. The terms, ‘private’ and ‘independent’ are misleading in that the majority of such schools in Australia are heavily publicly subsidised, as we explain below, and all are subject to detailed public regulation, and because the terminology has the effect of eliding the diversity that exists within both ‘public’ and ‘private’ school sectors. Broadly speaking, however, the non-government school sector comprises a small group of elite high-fee schools, the less expensive Catholic systemic schools and a growing number of low or moderate fee ‘independent’ schools which were mainly founded during the last quarter of the 20th century. The majority of non-government school students attend Catholic schools but the strongest growth has been in the relatively new low to moderate fee schools. In the early 1960s more than 80 percent of non-government school pupils were enrolled in Catholic schools (Ryan & Watson 2004) but in 2012 the figure was about 60 percent (Campbell & Proctor 2014, p. 261). Most non-government schools have a Christian religious affiliation of one kind or another, though there is a small and rapidly growing Islamic sector (McNeilage 2013) and small numbers of ‘non-denominational’ schools, Jewish schools and ‘alternative’ schools such as Steiner schools.

The historical shift away from public schooling has occurred disproportionately among the children of higher income or 'middle-class' households (Campbell 2005; Preston 2013). The government school sector is less representative than it was in the 1970s and 1980s, enrolling disproportionately large numbers of children from low-income families (and of children with disabilities) (Campbell 2005; Gonski 2011; Musset 2012; Nous Group 2011; Preston 2013;). Although there are some exceptions, as we show in this chapter, in the main it has become possible to think of 'private' schools as schools of 'choice' and public schools as schools of 'compulsion'.

The relative extent of the influence of public policy in the shift to non-government schooling is debatable (see, for example, Ryan & Watson 2004) but there is no doubt that the promotion of choice and competition by successive state and federal governments has contributed to the change – in addition to fostering competition *within* all schooling sectors (on shifts within the public school sector, see Vickers 2004). Since the mid-1980s NSW state government activity has included the de-zoning of enrolments for public schools and the creation of new specialist and academically selective high schools (Campbell & Sherington 2006; Sherington & Hughes 2012). Public school devolution or 'autonomy' programs have been undertaken by a number of state governments beginning with Victoria under the Liberal Party Premier, Jeffrey Kennett, in the 1990s. School autonomy programs ostensibly encourage the reorientation of public schools away from their centralised bureaucratic system ties and towards a more engaged and responsive relationship with their local clientele. Federally, the establishment of the 'MySchool' website in 2010 – which records and compares school test results – provides systematic comparisons among schools to inform the choice-making of parents and encourage competition between schools.

As we have said, all non-government schools in Australia are eligible for degrees of state and federal government funding, with federal governments being the principal source of public subsidy. The history of government funding to non-government schools – or 'State Aid' – has been long and politically controversial, but since the early 1970s the principle of reliable recurrent public subsidy to non-government schools has been accepted by all the main political parties (Ryan & Watson 2004; Wilkinson et al. 2007) except, within the past decade or so, the Greens. Most non-government schools are heavily subsidised: in

2010 some 72 percent of independent schools received more than 50 percent of their net recurrent income from governments and the average Catholic systemic school more than 75 percent (Gonski 2011, p. 15).

Markets and choice

This chapter examines the practice of ‘school choice’, which we argue has been fundamental to the development and operation of market-oriented schooling in Australia – and internationally. Rather than simply enrolling their child in the nearest government (or Catholic) school, as might have been the case in the 1970s, parents in 21st-century Australia have increasingly been positioned as active consumers who may or must choose a school for their child from a number of options, especially at the secondary school level. The public vigilance of parents acting as individuals, yet coordinated by the market mechanism, is meant to be a key driver of quality control. Under-performing schools, it is argued, will be forced to make improvements in order to attract parents. Well-managed schools will be validated in the marketplace. According to Bob Lingard (2010, p. 132), ‘a basic assumption [of the Rudd government’s public accountability agenda, including the MySchool website, was] that competition between schools and parental pressures will push up standards and strengthen accountabilities’. In theory, parents (as consumers) make rational, objective, self-interested choices between competing providers (schools) who offer goods (education) in a competitive environment. Thus children are positioned as human capital, and education is the commodity which families purchase as an investment in their child’s (and the whole family’s) future wellbeing (Strober 2003). Parents’ wealth and knowhow has always been important, even decisive, in the educational fortunes of children (see, for example, Connell et al. 1982), but under current policy arrangements parental agency is explicitly validated and encouraged.

The standard critique of school choice is that choice operates to prioritise the demands of those students whose parents are savvy and well resourced (Ball 2003; Brown 1990; Windle 2009) and that children, as well as schools, can become commodified, with some children having more exchange value than others (Kenway & Bullen 2001). We fur-

ther argue that the neoliberal marketised frame has reconfigured both schools and families as new, different kinds of entrepreneurial citizens acutely aware of their own and each other's role in the marketplace – and that a particular kind of entrepreneurial parent has been produced and affirmed by the encouragement of markets in education (see also Connell 2008). This chapter is concerned with how families, as consumers, are shaped by, and respond to marketised schooling. Within this frame, financial capacity is more important than ever before – indeed the success of these reforms depend on a strong middle class. Nevertheless, we argue that school choice is predicated on more than the capacity to pay. School markets are complex and unique environments of competing interests, tensions and roles, potentially requiring specialised expertise and strategy to negotiate. Success in a market context may require families to operationalise a range of skills and capacities including social and cultural capitals (Bourdieu 1984, 1986). We argue that marketised schooling impels parents to be 'alert' and 'strategic' (Ball 2003) and to behave as 'unequivocally middle-class' (Davies & Bansel 2007) in pursuit of the 'right' school for their child.

The chapter draws on two of the earliest studies in the small but growing field of school choice in Australia: an Australian Research Council-funded study focusing on the decision-making processes of middle-class parents (Campbell et al. 2009) and a doctoral study of mothers' secondary school choice-making (Aitchison 2006). Both studies interviewed parents in Sydney, Australia, with Craig Campbell and colleagues (2009) interviewing 63 parents or couples who had recently enrolled their child in the first year of high school, and Claire Aitchison (2006) conducting return interviews with 20 mothers over a 14-month period as they engaged in secondary school decision-making. Aitchison was particularly interested in the labour of mothers as key agents in familial decision-making. Among other things, she found that the mothers she interviewed followed recognised patterns of consumer behaviour, namely information gathering, evaluating options to make a shortlist of preferences, investigating procedures for maximising access to those schools, and then taking appropriate actions to secure choices (Aitchison 2010). Campbell, Proctor and Sherington were principally concerned with historical questions of middle-class formation and the retreat from common schooling.

Choice and capital

In this section we turn to four vignettes – two from each of our collections of data – that illustrate how some families activate different capitals in the school market. The first and fourth come from Aitchison's study, the second and third are from interviews conducted by Helen Proctor. The first of these stories highlights how the realities of a restricted school market can force families to make choices against their wishes, even forcing them to draw on limited finances and place themselves in unfamiliar contexts which are at odds with family traditions and practices. The second is an example of conflict between parents over whose traditions and values will be prioritised in their child's education and the third illustrates the complexities of finding a compatible school for a child who is not necessarily considered a valuable commodity in the educational marketplace. The fourth of these vignettes was chosen because it is an uncommon example of a family that chose not to participate in the school market according to the expectations associated with capacity to pay.

Following Pierre Bourdieu (1986), we understand capital to include various kinds of resources available to a person operating within a social system where certain things are valued more than others, and where these can be exchanged for benefit. One form of capital, economic capital, is usually understood as cash or financial assets. According to Bourdieu, other forms of capital share similarities with economic capital in that they can be accumulated, passed down through the family and 'cashed in' when necessary. In our studies we found that economic capital was significant, but not the only kind of capital that families called upon in the process of school choice. In some situations cultural capital, that is, intellectual, cultural or educational resources, was a powerful force framing how parents regarded schools and navigated school choices. For others, social capital or the social networks of informants or influence, impacted on decision-making and even school choice outcomes. It seemed that this increasingly marketised system encouraged a more sustained and active engagement in school choice whereby parents accessed a 'portfolio' of capitals as required in pursuit of their interests.

May: School choice in a restricted market with limited finances

Few of the families in either of our studies reported that financial considerations were insignificant to their consideration of schools. Parents were acutely aware of the impact of money on a child's education; to buy into a school and to sustain learning. Money could be used to support a child's academic development, thus facilitating their desirability to a school, and success in a school. Financial security could also provide parallel educational support, irrespective of the child's school. As this first vignette illustrates, even though this family was not particularly financially secure, when faced with very restricted school choices, the family as a whole was forced to consider undertaking the significant financial burden of enrolling a child in a fee-paying school.

May and her husband had one child at a neighbouring boys' high school, but when she came to consider schools for her daughter, she was unhappy with the government schools. May's children had struggled academically, and they were not in a position to consider academically selective schooling. They were out of area for the nearest government girls' school, and the family believed the local comprehensive high school had a poor reputation. In addition it had a very high male to female pupil ratio, which May considered an additional disadvantage given her daughter's personality. When it became apparent that they were not likely to be accepted into the girl's school, they decided to 'pull out all stops' and try to enrol their daughter in the local systemic Catholic girls' school.

Acting on the belief that this was their only option, the family was faced with a significant and unplanned financial impost. They felt that they had to choose a school other than the available local government school, but not having the right social and financial capital restricted their set of options. In concrete terms, even the relatively modest fee-charging Catholic school meant this family would have to make significant sacrifices. May would have to take on more work, they would have to forgo family holidays and they would most likely have to eat into their savings.

There were a number of other non-economic challenges, too. Firstly, May had to work hard to 'talk her daughter around' to the idea of the Catholic school. Like many other children of her generation growing up on a farm in rural Australia, May had gone to boarding

school – in her case, Anglican. However neither she nor her family was religious:

I'm not religious ... I see myself as being an Anglican if anything. My husband is a Catholic. I don't believe in it, so I said 'If you want to take them to church you can,' and I knew he wouldn't, so it was a safe offer!

May had no experience of Catholicism and the thought of a Catholic education was unfamiliar and discomfiting: 'I'd rather they spent time on arithmetic and writing ... I'd rather have somewhere which had the same mindset as ourselves, you know, their kids and us in the same mindset.' None of their friends were planning to attend Catholic schools.

Further, the first child felt an acute sense of injustice and complained of inequity saying that he, and the whole family 'would have to pay for this!' May agreed, commenting that the non-government option 'means the whole family just can't do any of the other things it wants to do, and I just don't agree with that either.' There were mixed emotions all around, as the family realigned their thinking towards the non-government sector. There were to be financial costs draining the family's economic capital, but the family was also entering into an unfamiliar social/cultural space, and without friends joining them, they were unable to draw on relevant social capital to smooth the transition.

Megan: An unhappy child and parents at odds

At the time of her interview, Megan was co-parenting with her ex-partner with whom she was on polite but not warm terms. Megan and her former partner had divergent views about education, arising from their rather different family histories of schooling. Her daughter's father comes from a well-to-do family who supported their children through prestigious single-sex high-fee schools. His parents were very proud that they had provided him that start in life, according to Megan. It was an important part of who they were and they were at ease in that milieu.

In Bourdieuan terms, Megan's former partner had significant social, cultural and economic capital to facilitate his daughter's path through high-fee private schooling. From the time of her enrolment

in a prestigious kindergarten, her father had apparently mapped out a trajectory that would include a professional university degree. He was happy to pay the school fees and in Megan's telling he saw this as a crucial part of his parenting contribution, especially as the non-custodial parent. Megan's history of schooling was quite different. She grew up in a country town where she attended the local public high school, which was the only secondary school in town. She described herself as having a much more relaxed and progressive attitude to schooling. She preferred her daughter not to feel pressured by thoughts of the far future but rather to feel free 'to explore different pathways' through education. Despite finding her ex-partner's plans too prescriptive, Megan described herself as initially happy enough to go along with them until there was a crisis which, among other things, exposed the differences between their world views.

Their daughter was apparently badly bullied at the private school and Megan reported that she was unable to gain a satisfactory response from the school. Megan reported feeling uncomfortable: that she was different from many of the other mothers – 'less wealthy, less polished' and 'less leisured'. Nor did she feel that she was treated by the school as someone with an entitlement to speak. In other words, she lacked the 'right' social and cultural capital. Moreover she felt that the bullying was more than just the antics of a few children; rather she saw it as deriving from by the school's elitism, wealth and exclusivity. While a number of other parents in our studies admired what they saw as the discipline and smooth operation of elite schools, Megan argued that her daughter's school was too focused on its market position at the expense of the children's individuality. She identified an undue emphasis on appearances and a damaging lack of tolerance for anything spontaneous, messy or disorganised.

For several years Megan struggled with this situation and investigated other schools. She wanted to move her daughter to the local comprehensive public school because she felt it would be a better social and cultural fit but she was blocked by the child's father. The NSW public education system provided a compromise for this family in the form of an academically selective public high school, for which their daughter was clever enough to qualify. Megan eventually moved her daughter with the tepid support of her former partner, who was apparently mollified by the idea that the school was selective. The new school was

quite a contrast to the old. Megan spoke affectionately about the scruffiness of the students, the rundown buildings and even the noticeable swearing. There were quite different kinds of social and cultural capital operating there. Megan found the new school more suited to her tomboy daughter and more 'real'. She felt more comfortable as a parent and became involved in the school community. But according to Megan it took her ex-partner some weeks to confess the school change to his parents. For this family, the new school symbolised a significant change. Where their daughter's former school had symbolised her father's social, economic and cultural capital investment, Megan's social and cultural capital were now dominant.

Olivia: Using knowhow and networks to place an 'unmarketable' child

At the time of Olivia's interview she was worried about whether, having spent two years doing intensive research in order to choose the right public high school for her son, she should continue to try to work with the chosen school or cut her losses and move him. Rather than choosing from a number of options, Olivia had found it difficult to actually find a school to suit a child with 'special needs', a child for whom it takes 'a bit of extra effort' to keep up with his classmates. Olivia explained that she and her son are not 'marketable' or 'valid' for the schools for two reasons: first because of her son's special needs and second because of their family's lack of money. Finding a school had been hard work and emotionally upsetting because there seemed to be no really good options. It had just been a question, Olivia said, of 'the best of a bad bunch ... picking the best out of what we had, compromising'. Had they been able to afford it they may have tried a local Christian school, which they had heard has resources for special needs children.

At the time of the interview Olivia had chosen a school for her son which was working to build its enrolment numbers. Under a charismatic principal the school, which formerly had apparently had a long-standing reputation for being 'rough', was now gentrifying to attract a different enrolment profile from its demographically mixed local community. This had included insisting on a detailed uniform code. The pressure to keep up had been stressful: 'they're very, very careful about making sure that the kids all wear uniform every day, and that sort of

stuff, but they're not careful about how they treat the kids.' Olivia and her husband had had trouble paying for the Year 7 camp, the text books (which used to be free for all public school children), and the regulation black leather shoes that have to be replaced every few months as their child grows. The school might be publicly successful, argued Olivia, 'they want to be known as a good school', but she felt that she and her son were the casualties of that success.

Despite these problems, Olivia was by no means powerless. She had excellent research skills and came from an old Sydney family with a three-generation deep knowledge of the public education system. She was confident and articulate and has good networks. In other words she was well positioned to activate cultural capital – her knowhow – and her social capital – her networks.

When asked how she found out about schools, Olivia said:

Talking to other parents ... I read the local paper every day and you read about what's going on at schools ... you chat to other parents at playgroup, or where your kids go to school. And often parents are very willing to say 'oh don't send him to so-and-so. This is the experience we've had there'. And particularly growing up in the area, I know a lot of people ... And you do talk about it as a general topic. A lot of parents I know, we talk about schools a lot, and how disappointed we are, or how pleased we are. We swap information very quickly, and it becomes like wildfire after a while. Everyone knows.

Olivia had also worked with the school to ensure her son had a teachers' aide, had sought action over bullying and had organised counselling for her son from outside the school. At home she worked to encourage him and build his 'self-esteem'. She was able to call on considerable stores of cultural capital to confidently and competently oversee homework and to compensate for classroom deficiencies. Later she used her social capital to facilitate a move to a new school. Olivia discovered that a school she had previously dismissed had acquired a new, well-regarded principal. She made the decision to move her son and by the end of Year 7 he was 'progressing in leaps and bounds' at the new school.

Clover: Unlimited familial capital does not guarantee consumer behaviour

The vast majority of families in our research took advantage of their economic, social and cultural capital to participate in the schooling market to purchase the ‘best’ school available to them. The family described in our final vignette made a deliberate decision to seek out a comprehensive government school for their son, even though both parents had been educated outside the government school sector. They made an assessment that their social, cultural and financial capital could be better employed in supporting the child at an ‘ordinary’ school, rather than invested in seeking out the ‘best’ school.

Clover and her partner were both lawyers and were among the highest income earners in our studies and, further, Clover intended to take on more work when their only child went to high school. Clover herself was educated in Sydney’s rapidly expanding postwar suburbs in a ‘Catholic working class school’ until the final year it was available, whereupon she transferred to the local single-sex government high school to complete her schooling. Typical of that kind of Catholic schooling at the time, classes were overcrowded, facilities substandard, and the teaching force often under-trained. Of her schooling Clover said: ‘In my day ... there was never a discussion about where to go for high school, there was never a choice’. By comparison, Clover’s partner attended ‘the best Church of England grammar school’ in Queensland. He did not particularly enjoy this experience, claiming that the best teaching was reserved for the brightest students.

Clover stated that both she and her partner support public education and therefore she narrowed her choice making to neighbouring government schools only. In addition she was opposed to academically selective schooling for both ideological and educational reasons. The local co-educational high school had an academically selective stream, and they preferred the comprehensive co-educational school in the next suburb. Despite their own childhood experiences of different school systems, these parents both sought a local government school for their son.

Clover and her partner recognised that their views on schooling differ from many of their peers. They were financially well-off and their social circle included others in similar circumstances, the majority of whom would have chosen private schooling for their children. And yet

Clover observed: 'We have friends that have really achieved and they didn't go to fancy schools ... but we are in no doubt ... that going to the right school does give an advantage – we are not naïve.'

For this family, decisions about school were predominately ideological rather than economic, or religious. Unlike those motivated by religious beliefs, for example, these parents were supporters of public, comprehensive schooling – albeit a view held from a position of advantage. The family was stable economically, but also, their academically able child would be supported by parents and a wider community of well-educated professionals in a culturally rich home where learning was valued and supported.

Of all the people in Aitchison's study, Clover and her partner had the greatest economic, social and cultural capital. Unlike other participants, there was no talk of opportunity cost in discussions about secondary schooling. Their social circles included successful professional people schooled in both the public and private sectors. They were confident their child would succeed on his own merits rather than through the networks afforded by a private education. They were, however, in no doubt about the security of their cultural and economic capital, nor of how that enabled them to take chances that others experienced as too risky. They were confident that their economic, social and cultural capital provided a safety net; that they had the knowhow and resources to identify and remedy any problems should they arise. Their son could be more easily moved or supported if things started to go wrong, than if he was from a less advantaged family. In reflecting on their decision to send their child to a non-selective government school, Clover said:

We felt confident. He is a healthy, intelligent child and we come from a position of privilege and so we're lucky ... we always felt confident that he'd make his own way in the world; wherever he went to school, he'd be successful. We're lucky he [her son] has similar views, we feel very strongly about public education. If he had not wanted the same thing, I don't know, but probably we wouldn't have let him go to a private school. We have some friends who have changed to private schooling against their own ideology.

Conclusion

This chapter has outlined historical changes in the organisation of school education in Australia, with a particular focus on contemporary neoliberal formulations that impact on the ways Australian families relate to their schools. Key to this relationship is the market-oriented framing of education, facilitated by policies and practices of state and federal governments of all political persuasions, around the concept of 'choice.' Vast numbers of families are engaging in school choice and the overall trend away from the government sector to private schooling is significant and profound. Moreover, a generation of market-informed mobility has undoubtedly contributed to the social segmentation of Australian schools. On average, Australian schools have a narrower socioeconomic mix than schools in other OECD nations (Nous Group 2011), and a narrower socioeconomic mix than was the case a generation ago (Preston 2013).

Drawing from two major studies of how middle-class families negotiate this new school marketplace has enabled us to illustrate here how these policy changes played out for these families. As we have shown, parents use various strategies, sometimes over extended timeframes, to investigate and position their children and the family to maximise chances of being accepted into preferred schools. This operation of choice turns on familial capital in all its forms. As we illustrated, economic capital constrains or liberates choosers, but family decision-making is more complex and nuanced as family structures, beliefs, individual histories and needs vary, thereby constricting or informing the options parents pursue. Sometimes school choice processes and outcomes fit well with both parents' own inherited familial capitals. At other times, views, values and aspirations are contested between family members, sometimes causing long-term anxieties and disharmony. We saw, too, where some families were forced to choose schooling that did not match their social or cultural heritage and – where this combined with limited economic capital – the resultant strains and pressures. For parents of children with special needs, school choice options are even more constrained and the capacity to call on social and cultural capital sometimes became as important, if not more important, than economic capital.

For many of the families in our studies, school choice was a significant, even defining moment in the family biography. Unlike previous generations where children mostly attended schools in their local or Catholic communities, the parents in our studies were very aware of a right to choose. However, some did so with reservations about the impact of this new way for their local communities and for the schools themselves. Many found the process of school choice to be labour intensive, and emotionally and intellectually challenging. And for some, the outcome was tinged with dissatisfaction as they recognised and experienced the limitations of choice in practice.

By engaging in school markets, schools and families were themselves changed – each feeling the pressure to conform to the expectations of a market which favours and normalises traditional notions of the family and of schools. Megan and Olivia, for example, each experienced problems with schools that seemed overly preoccupied with market image. May's experience forced her to consider options well outside of her comfort zone and financial capacity to pay. By contrast, despite having ample capital to facilitate a wide set of school choices, Clover's family were motivated by an ideological perspective to choose the local government school.

The simplistic rhetoric of the market that consumer choice is rational, self-interested and individuated (Apple 2001) was challenged by our studies. Parents were driven to maximise benefits to their families, but their actions were rarely simple or straightforward. Our studies showed that school choice was complex and multifaceted, involving an interplay of subjective, emotional and intergenerational influences connecting networks of informants, and sometimes including collaborative behaviours by families and communities. It showed that successful engagement in school choice was uneven, and regularly favoured particular kinds of children and families, and educational forms. Parents in our studies had different preferences and capacities in regard to school choice and these were impacted by the particular material conditions within which they operated.

Finally, recent work by Joel Windle and Rodrigo Rocco Fossa (2012) provides an important caution that the kinds of activities we document in this chapter (and elsewhere) – while very powerful as discourse – are still not universal as practice. Interviewing parents from a cluster of 'disadvantaged' suburbs in Melbourne, Windle found:

Most families were not engaged in school choice in the ways that the Rudd government hoped when it urged families to ‘vote with their feet’ and abandon bad schools for good ones. Families that spoke a language other than English in the home, had lower socio-economic status, and had children with lower academic performance levels were even less likely than others to consider more than one option. Families expressed strong attachment to local community, and to schools where they had pre-existing family connections.

While many of the families in our larger studies did express attachments to local community and historical family connections, by and large this was not enough for them. Individual self-interested decisions are at the heart of neoliberal market philosophy and most of the families we heard from acted to advance their own interests. In so doing, they interpreted their own situations and worked strategically to activate the kinds of capitals that were available to them. The market-oriented schooling system compelled them to examine and assess their resources (capitals) and to adjust their behaviours to maximise their chances of achieving a desired outcome. An examination of this process revealed how some families (and their children) are privileged over others. It is evident that some families have more choice than others, and that it is more than a simple question of money.

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