Chapter 8
Public Diversity; Private Disadvantage: Schooling and Ethnicity

Carol Reid

Abstract When the New South Wales (NSW) Government extended the compulsory schooling age from 15 to 17 years in 2010, there was little warning and no additional resources for schools. Scant consideration was given to the complex contexts that exist in the some of the most disadvantaged areas of Sydney and other centres around the state. This chapter reports on a project that sought to understand the impact of the change on ethnically diverse high schools in south-western Sydney. Findings suggest a particular policy disjuncture is having a profound impact on schools of high minority ethnic diversity, particularly in low socioeconomic contexts: any advantages gained by extending the years of schooling have been mitigated by other policies that encourage increasing public diversity. This is because the latter set of policies has exacerbated the private disadvantage of some ethnic groups in some schools, particularly those who are unwanted by other schools or whose parents are unable to exercise choice due to income, first language status, or minimal social capital.

The chapter draws on the voices of principals, teachers, parents and students from high schools in south-western Sydney to highlight the deeply counterproductive practices surrounding these issues. The concluding comments are concerned with the extent to which the 'ethnicity' of students, rather than the policy disjuncture this research has revealed, will be seen as the problem.

Introduction

There is strong support for increasing the years of compulsory schooling (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development 1983) despite some claims that it merely covers up youth unemployment. This is clearly an important issue in Australia where youth unemployment in June 2012 was 21.6 % (ABS 2012). Until 2010 students in NSW could choose to leave school at 15 years of age with or without any formal qualification from high school, and without work. The aim

C. Reid (✉)
University of Western Sydney, Sydney, Australia
e-mail: c.reid@uws.edu.au

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H. Proctor et al. (eds.), *Controversies in Education*, Policy Implications of Research in Education 3, DOI 10.1007/978-3-319-08759-7_8

of increasing the compulsory years of schooling was to provide new pathways, work experience and diverse curriculum experiences to set young people up for a productive life and for entry to the labour market. So in NSW students can no longer leave school without a qualification or a combination of work and further education and training, or a minimum of 25 h of assured work unless they are 17 years of age.

Arguments for increasing the years of compulsory schooling include better health outcomes, higher income and more equal distribution of incomes (Angrist and Krueger 1991; Brunello et al. 2009; Card 1999; Oreopoulos 2007). Completion of secondary schooling or further training is a priority for both the Australian Government (DEEWR 2009) and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) (Ainley 1998; Ainley et al. 1997; Sweet 2000, p. 2). There is evidence that in first world countries the years of compulsory schooling are lengthening and are part of the process of globalisation achieved through various forms of policy borrowing. Lingard (2010) argues that these increasingly globalised approaches to education are inextricably entangled with neoliberal thought, and notes that features of Australian education policy, including standardised testing, national curriculum, and increased federal involvement in a sector traditionally managed by the states, demonstrate "a hybrid mix of the neo-liberal with social democratic aspirations" (p. 129) Staying on longer at school can be added to this list. This chapter takes the heretical view that it is wrong to prolong schooling by increasing the minimum compulsory school leaving age.

There are a number of heresies that accompany increasing the compulsory schooling age. Heresy Number One is that staying on longer is not necessarily better for students that, despite widespread public and political support for this initiative, the prospect of staying on longer, for many students, does not equate with better outcomes. As others have noted (Billett et al. 2010; Connell 2011), those who would most benefit from these changes are in schools where "the cost of providing high levels of support may fall most heavily on the school that needs to address disadvantage most strongly, as it may be available for other schools gratuitously through families' social and cultural capital" (Billett et al. 2010, p. 484). This is revealed in schools residualized by policies of school choice: they are not able to offer the wide range of subjects necessary to engage students who do not want to be there, nor can they provide the richness and diversity of experiences that the policy promises.

Heresy Number Two is that parent choice is not necessarily better. As Connell (2011, p. 59 and see this volume) has argued, parents have been recast as consumers and now find themselves having to read the 'market indicators' and make decisions about the kinds of options available for their children. Some do this quite well; some want nothing to do with it, while others just make a choice and hope for the best. Others have no 'real' choice at all. Research on school choice among middle class parents (Campbell et al. 2009) found that choice worked best for those with compliant or academically capable children. Money and social networks helped as well.

Choice intersects with the new compulsory schooling age and reveals the ways in which the private disadvantage of minority ethnic groups emerges through inequalities related to parents' cultural capital (educational background) and social capital (resources grounded in durable exchange-based networks of persons) and how these are related to economic capital (Bourdieu 1984). In turn, these fields of capitals – especially when they are relatively lacking with regard to schooling – play a key role in determining educational and employment futures for students.

Heresy Number Three is that more autonomy for school principals is not necessarily better. Where schools receive high levels of additional funding or resources and have not been residualized, principals can and do make changes. However, this autonomy is contingent upon harnessing all possible sources of additional funding ***and*** utilizing networks in the community. In a sense, this autonomy is not really autonomy at all, because without these additional resources principals would have their agency considerably constrained.

Heresy Number Four is that schools cannot always provide ladders of opportunity; the new compulsory schooling age in some instances simply reproduces intergenerational disadvantage. The problem here is that opportunities are scarce. In some communities the infrastructure required to take advantage of opportunities is absent. For example, transport is non-existent or minimal, severely curtailing student capacity to attend alternative education and training or work experience. In other situations the local technical colleges and training providers do not want students who do not have the Year 12 qualification or who do not have a level of maturity to deal with a more adult learning environment. Loss of funding in schools if students do go to these providers then becomes another problem, given competition for scarce resources. In other cases, work experience is not available beyond retail work and even then there is not enough to go around. The ideal of schools and communities and local organisations working together to provide this ladder of opportunity just is not always possible.

Heresy Number Five: class is not dead. The link between class and schooling outcomes continues to be debated but the research reported in this chapter reveals the continuation of the significant link between socio-economic circumstances and schooling outcomes. The discussion in this paper demonstrates the multiple ways in which class shapes schools, local communities, and student options.

Heresy Number Six is that education is not above politics. It is very clear that political decisions – about funding or where trade centres will be constructed; which schools will have selective streams and which will not; where specialist schools will be set up; which schools will be wound down through constructing competition in the next suburb, or rebranded to encourage migration across suburbs – all point to political decision-making that sits outside the radar of most students and their families. Yet these decisions fundamentally shape schooling outcomes and the school to work transition for many students in areas such as south-western Sydney.

While this chapter cannot take up all these themes in detail, it is important to raise them in the context because these are heresies that play out in complex and interactive ways in the school contexts in the study reported here. In many cases

they create multiple constraints that contribute to the production and reproduction of inequalities despite the fact that the agency of principals, teachers, parents and students fight to overcome these constraints.

The Study

The study discussed in this chapter, *a sociological analysis of ethnicity and compulsory schooling,* was funded by an Australian Research Council Discovery Project grant. It was carried out in the south-western region of Sydney, New South Wales (NSW), where the age of compulsory education was increased from 15 to 17 years in 2010. In NSW, the Year 12 completion rate of 71.1 % remains below the national average of 75.3 % (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2006) Sydney is Australia's most ethnically diverse city, and South West Sydney (SWS) has the most diverse school community. SWS has one of the lowest school retention rates, the lowest socio-economic status (SES) and high ethnic diversity. The aim of the study was to identify the pressures emerging from the policy to increase the school leaving age and to identify effective strategies that enable school retention strategies to 'work' in a socio-economically constrained environment and among ethnically diverse communities.

In the study ethnicity is used as a marker that everyone shares: it is not just attached to minorities. This approach makes possible a nuanced analysis of the relationship between ethnicity, education, privilege and inequalities. Alternatively hidden and/or reified, and at times socially deterministic in usage, ethnicity is a useful concept, even though it is potentially narrowing when examined independently of other social relations. For this reason, class and gender and their relationship to ethnicity and education are important to understand: these social relations are strongly implicated in the ways in which ethnicity is shaped and the way in which ethnicity becomes associated with particular patterns of inequality. Religion too complicates the way in which educational outcomes can be understood. Therefore, to avoid categoricalism (Connell 1987), that is, ethnicity as a 'self-contained' category, leaving social life being taken for granted, the analysis follows Miles (1993). In this approach, ethnicity and/or race are not there to be 'read off' the body but emerge in particular contexts. The salience of ethnicity is then connected to political, economic and social processes that are as important as the cultural in shaping educational outcomes, particularly in low socio-economic contexts.

Using Bourdieu's (eg. 1984) theoretical frame the analysis focussed on the extent to which institutional, social and cultural capital emerge as constraints in the negotiation of changed social conditions in the lives of students, their families, and the school communities. The themes emerged from a process that involved coding transcripts and writing up case studies focussed on the issues emerging in each school to enable a contextually bound narrative to emerge. NviVo was used to assist in the process of integrating the voices of participants.

In addition to school staff, students and parents across 21 high schools, a number of other key stakeholders were interviewed as the study progressed and as the issues

moved beyond the school gates. These included TAFE, welfare and social work agency personnel, case management service providers, and NSWDEC spell out and Board of Studies personnel. Some demographic data were gleaned from MySchool[1] and school-based websites.

While theoretical saturation appeared to have been reached with less than 21 schools from the point of view that no new information about the original questions was forthcoming, from a social justice perspective it is critical that interpretive accounts take into account cultural complexity (Charmaz 2005, pp. 527–528). For this reason the study continued to try to capture low SES, high LBOTE, single sex girls' schools. While many of the participating schools reported that single sex girls' schools 'had no problems' there are subtleties in the way in which the policy is playing out across all contexts. From a more postmodernist position, these silences were self-consciously revealed in the field (Brady 2005, p. 981) from personal saturation in contexts. So while there are strong themes presented here there are others that require further exploration and these are notably around gender. As one teacher asked:

> ... but how is it, that in terms of the same family, the parents struggle to get the boys academically moving. How is it that the girls can go and do it?

Place is fundamental to the differences among and between schools in this study so the discussion related to ethnicity, gender, and class is based on data from four geographically dispersed high schools (two boy's high schools and two comprehensive co-educational high schools) At the time of writing, the single sex girls' schools' data are yet to be analysed. The schools are chosen because they represent a range of contexts including: (1) predominantly language backgrounds other than English; (2) predominantly Anglo-Australian and a minority of indigenous students; (3) traditional comprehensive working class – employed parents, demographically mixed; and (4) inner and outer suburban. The schools are not described fully as it is important to maintain anonymity but so as not to lose contextual specificity the schools are given pseudonyms and the descriptions given by principals and/or teachers are used.

Valley High School

Valley HS, a comprehensive co-educational school, is situated in a new suburban subdivision and draws students from older semi-rural communities. The school receives no additional funding from federal or state governments. The principal describes the school as having cross section of families in terms of education and financial resources. The school is also quite ethnically diverse although mainly second and third generation immigrants.

[1] http://www.myschool.edu.au/

An aspect of the new compulsory schooling age policy is that opportunities to combine workplace experience with continuing education for less academic students are critical. Valley HS seems to be able to accommodate these options.

> For our school here, we find, because of the demographics, that there's a lot of work available within the families – family businesses, that sort of thing; extended family, that type of thing; electricians, builders – all that type of thing. I don't have a sense that this is like a second prize or anything like that for the kids who do this.

The speaker here presents an apparent example of the 'ideal' school community: mixed demographically and socio-economically, and with access to opportunities. A perfect fit for the new compulsory schooling age policy perhaps? However, when talking with mothers the pressure to find work experience for their children requires not only networks but also information about what is out there and good deal of judgement about whether or not there is any future in particular directions. As one mother said:

> Unfortunately I wasn't coming to P&C meetings... I know that's a great forum to get a lot of information but it's probably – that's my fault, I'm not saying it's anyone else's problem – but then any information really wasn't filtering home.

Timely information is important, particularly when it comes to finding work experience and juggling in-school patterns with workplace rhythms. One said:

> By the time you think of it [workplace experience] the term's rolled over, another term's rolled over and then they've got exams and the opportunity's gone. Employers that you might approach, they can't take on a work experience person at a critical time. They would have maybe – when it's a bit of a down time for them – but you've all got to co-ordinate and that's really hard.

Working out the *kinds* of experiences that might lead to eventual careers is also hit and miss. This large group of mothers talked about how they self-educated by researching 'what's out there' but they fear the world is different, that jobs are changing and that their technologically dependent children are part of this shift. Another said:

> I was reading something recently that said most of the jobs in the future will, particularly in the next 10 years ... they're not even invented yet. The top 10 jobs in say five or 10 years time haven't even been thought of yet and they're technological jobs, a lot of them.

There are good school-community relations and embedded networks of support here but parents are not finding choices involved in the new compulsory schooling age a simple matter. There is a wide curriculum aimed at supporting students in academic and non-academic streams. The school is well-equipped and has a vibrant community and in many ways reaps the benefits of successful second and third generation immigrant parents who are supportive and pro-active. Here, mothers are still largely at home to provide this kind of support yet find themselves repositioned as market negotiators and planners under the neo-liberal policy of choice (Connell 2011, pp. 52–53). This was clearly not their preference and as one mother said, commenting on her relationship to the school, "I give them the bones for them to put the meat on".

While parents at Valley HS support the school strongly and the new compulsory school leaving age, they do not necessarily find the degree to which they have to be involved easy. The above comment, from a second generation Italian mother (self-identified) was followed by a supportive comment to teachers as professionals 'who knew their job' to make the best decisions for her children because she did not feel able to make those choices.

Changing parent subjectivities in this community reveals how neo-liberal processes call for constant adaptations and reorientations. As Ball (2012) has argued, neoliberalism 'morphs and adapts, taking on local characteristics from the geographies of existing political economic circumstances and institutional frameworks' (p. 30) When comparing the concerns of this school community with others, it is possible to reveal the multiple ways in which neo-liberalism insinuates itself into communities and 'materialises' in new forms (ibid).

Green Ridge High School

Green Ridge HS, is a comprehensive co-educational school situated in a semi-rural area. It has a trade training centre attached to the school and a community with a strong history of employment in the trades. Demographically, it is predominantly Anglo-Saxon/Celtic (98 %) with a growing Indigenous student body and it does not receive any additional funding other than a small amount of subsidy for Indigenous students. The school is socio-economically mixed with some high income earners but increasing numbers of single-parent families and families on welfare due to urban migration.

A strong tradition and focus on the trades in the local area and little competition from private or selective schools has led to a large school population. This means the school can offer a diverse curriculum. The school provides school-based apprenticeships in Year 10 and the recent ending of the School Certificate in Year 10 means they can encourage even more students to take up these apprenticeships. Social capital is also critical, as Susanne indicates:

> In terms of aspiration, there seems to be what we call 'the networks'. So you've actually got the people that they can have apprenticeships with . . . because what happens out here – there's a lot of – . . . football. So that's where all the networks come from, all of those trades people are the people who either coach or their kids go and play football. That's where the networks start.

Clearly, this is a solid working class community where traditional trades are part its fabric. However, the community is undergoing change wrought by the impact of globalising processes. For example, the trade centre is attached to the school for political reasons: the shortage of skills required in the labour market. These are targeted areas – metals fabrication, engineering and hospitality: two of these with a long term history in the area. As a NSWDEC spokesperson said, trade centres are located in particular places because 'the program is dependent upon strong relationships between local industry and employers'.

Despite this advantage, the changing demographics wrought by urban migration are putting the school under strain. The rapidly increasing number of students means that not all young people are able to access opportunities. One Aboriginal mother (self-identified) says the autonomy required worries her:

> I worry about the work experience thing because you've got to find your own place to go now rather than, when I went to school, the schools liaised with all the businesses and got placements for everybody. But now having to do it yourself, I don't think he's going to be able to do it. We've got no idea where he could go.

One of the reasons for this difficulty is that the networks are so heavily masculinised. When asked about the football networks, given her son plays football, she said

> Especially with single parent families; they haven't got the male network there, you know . . . 'my mate could put him on or something like that'. We haven't got that.

Parental involvement in schooling relies on forms of cultural and social capital that are available to all, particularly minority groups. This is a community where social networks are well-established. They are built through the establishment of a trade training centre and a curriculum that targets labour market shortages as well as strengths of school staff. They provide school-based apprenticeship courses to avoid public transport problems. But there are very strong gendered dimensions to these strategies and hidden ethnic privilege that reproduces the largely Anglo male opportunities, while assigning girls to low-level retail work. In this context too, Indigenous students are becoming 'problems' as the population increases, despite having traditionally been consistently employed members of the community.

Eastern Central Boys High School

At Eastern CBHS the population is 97 % Language Backgrounds Other Than English (LBOTE) (most born in Australia) comprising Pacific Islander students, refugee students from North Africa, West Africa and Central Africa; Arabic speaking students from both the Middle East and Africa and smaller groups of Asian, Indian, Bangladeshi and Afghani students. The school receives a range of funds from federal and state sources; it is low SES and impacted by a range of alternative choices in the local area – public and private.

The school has restructured to focus on key areas of welfare, curriculum and professional development but there are a number of challenges for the staff, the students and parents. Students who are not going on to university are described by one teacher as '*non participants in their own education*'. Teachers are concerned about 'dodgy' practices by employers when students choose to work part time in the hope that they will gain an apprenticeship. Concerns over insurance if an injury occurs is a factor; so too is the potential for the boys to lose both ways – not enough time for school work and being dumped by employers once they are older. Staff also voiced concern about the ways in which the new compulsory schooling age

had resulted in parents' expectations becoming much higher with little likelihood of the result of success given the academic capacities of many students.

However, as a father points out, his son, who is in Year 11, also has higher expectations:

> Now I ask him, I say 'what are you going to do – I want to get you a new toolbox' . . . because he wants to get the marks and . . . let's say I ask if he wants to become, for example, a concreter like me . . . but he [wants to] become something higher than [a concreter] . . . that's what they're thinking of now. Back at Year 10 or Year 9, they're not thinking this.

The continuous need to improve the self to feel adequate is part of the performativity inherent in neo-liberal institutional practices (Ball 2012, p. 31). The students at this school had little understanding of the options available and the potential pathways. According to the teachers, a factor that contributes to this lack of understanding is communication issues with TAFE but also between TAFE and schools. Despite being in the same government department there is little in common in how they are organised. One teacher and said:

> TAFE people don't understand our type of environment. So they'll speak to them [parents and students] as if they're over on the North Shore but not over in Western Sydney . . .

Parents say they have to navigate TAFE for their sons. Language barriers also prevent enrolment in TAFE according to another teacher:

> Yeah, well you'd think it would be pretty cool if they had an interpreter over there, considering maybe 40 or 50 per cent of the people we send over there would speak Arabic.

In this community, the school has great difficulty in sourcing TAFE courses for students and work experience options are thin on the ground. However, the role of the school in providing the necessary cultural and social capital that is not available in families and social networks is paramount for parents. As one teacher said:

> . . . for many children here . . . they're probably far better educated than their parents so the parents don't consider themselves in a position where they can oversee what kind of work they need to do or whether they are up to the level that they need to be performing at.

The tensions at this school are palpable. Teachers, parents and students struggle to make sense of the changes and the options. Parents and students said they would like 'more practical stuff'. Limited resources as well as performance indicators connected to additional funding pressure staff. More students requiring subjects that are not academic in orientation means smaller classes for those that do want to take subjects that are relevant to university matriculation are not viable.

At Eastern Central BHS ethnicity emerges as a problem in the narratives of teachers as they explain the parental responses and their lack of social and cultural capital. This has the effect of concealing the policy disjuncture brought about by the contradictions of school choice, standardized test league tables and the new compulsory schooling age. Schools like ECBHS have multiple layers of disadvantage to work through and in these contexts a policy that extends the time young men have to be at school without any recognition of the limitations to such policies risks the association of capacity with ethnicity.

Station Boys HS

Station BHS, a low SES boy's school receives a combination of federal and state government funding support. Demographically the school is 94 % LBOTE with 85 % new arrivals. The school has been seriously residualized through policies of school choice with many local students choosing to go elsewhere at the end of primary schooling. Selective schools, single sex girls' schools, choice to go to schools outside of the area; all of these are some of the reasons for the marked residualization of this school. The impact on staff morale and the constraints on curriculum diversification are profound. The school ends up with students who are often at the lower levels of academic achievement and who have 'risk management' plans.

The staff grapple with ways to respond to the students at the school. There is a misunderstanding about VET courses; that these are somehow equated with the 'unqualified village plumber back home'. Convincing parents that these are the best options for their sons is not easy. As a teacher said:

> When you talk about different pathways, they have their unrealistic view that 'we don't want our kids to do life skills'.

For parents, the design of education with multiple pathways, flexibility of timetabling and variability of options creates confusion, raises issues of safety and duty of care. Different pathways also create confusion about the curriculum. A mother said:

> My son, first one, wants to go to the university. The study here is not good. I wanted to buy the teacher to help him. But he gives him different [work] between what he's studying with the private teacher and what he's studying here.

To keep their children in the market for future work is critical to many of these parents who do not work themselves. In discussing the possible alternatives, such as work experience or future work prospects using local networks a father said:

> You have to find somebody and then who's this somebody? You go to this place, no, this place, no, this place, no, so where are you going to go? You're going to end up in the park . . . so if the kids did something in the future they're going to end up in prison. But who created the problem in the beginning? Then the government will say oh it's the parents' fault. Come on!

One of the problems for parents is that the students are not enjoying staying on. Contributing to student disengagement is that Station BHS can't offer a very wide curriculum. They are too small in number due to the impact of school choice and religious-based gender segregation in schooling choice that they don't have enough students to form higher level classes or enough staff to offer the breadth of curriculum to support less academically inclined students.

Teachers say that it isn't just students who absent themselves but that some parents actively subvert the system. Despite a punitive system of fines for non-attendance and the requirement that 25 h work or work and training go hand in hand a male teacher said:

> See I've got about 10 students who are still on our rolls, in Year 11 alone, and they're not attending. They've shown up in our records that they're at school – and I've made several phone calls, at least four or five for those parents and they tell me they're at work. But they won't provide me with the paperwork.

At times it isn't possible to provide this paperwork. The jobs and/or apprenticeships may be with relatives who are not licensed. This didn't matter before but the new compulsory schooling age policy will not release students unless the employer is licensed and the student goes to TAFE. The 'black economy' of tilers, plumbers and electricians has virtually been wiped out. Others have sons working part time, which is not enough hours to exempt them from schooling under the new policy. Part time work can also lead to disengagement. As one teacher said:

> I've had conversations with some of the boys in year 11, last year particularly, who were working almost every night in bakeries and things like that and coming to school completely dazed. It wasn't until I had conversations with them about what's going on that this came out. I said, look, you have to stop that. You can't do school and work; you have to choose one or the other. You've chosen to be at school, or you have to be at school, that's where your focus has to be.

Station BHS is a clear example of the way in which competing policy agendas frame the lives of the most disadvantaged. The school does not have access to the networks that can make the new policy work as there are not enough opportunities available through the agencies they have access to given the high demand. The staffing levels required to provide the kinds of choices they would like to offer in the curriculum are not available. Many students have had their chance of work taken away from them because part time work doesn't count unless combined with a training option. Many of these young men are cut adrift, caught between home/school/work with no clear pathway. The private disadvantage of the ethnic minority groups at this school stands in stark contrast to the neo-liberal ideology of the market where public diversity is touted as the panacea for inequalities.

The 'X' Factor: Parents, Choice and Power

Right wing opinion piece writer Paul Sheehan recently commented that parents were the 'x' factor in student outcomes (Sheehan 2012). The shift from teachers to parents as the source of inequitable outcomes in education is not surprising other than how long this 'truism' has taken to surface in the debate surrounding class, ethnicity and schooling. Named as the 'elephant in the room' Sheehan lists all the 'Others' that make up the poor parents: Aboriginal, non-English-speaking and Pacific Islander- and he uses the voices of teachers to do it for him. However, this simplistic explanation about parent's interest in education is not matched by the evidence and just serves to conceal differences in what matters to them (Connell 2011, p. 62) and the options available to them.

The analysis of the complexities in implementing the new compulsory schooling age in NSW reveal that a policy disjuncture is occurring across schools in this

region of Sydney. In particular, the policy disjuncture – school choice alongside the potential for new pathways brought about by the new compulsory schooling age – shows that public high schools operate in very different contexts and can be residualized for several reasons. It is the impact of this disjuncture that reveals patterns of inequality, when, for example, low student numbers affect the range of subjects a school can offer, while inequalities in the level of social and cultural capital in the form of community networks restrict work experience options and work readiness programs for some ethnic groups. Political decisions too, play a role in deciding where trade schools will be located and where public schools will be set up that compete directly with other public schools for students.

The distributional outcomes of this policy are highlighted here because, as Ball (2006) suggests, placing the onus on parents to understand the education market and its reforms when they may be disadvantaged themselves through limited or different educational, cultural and linguistic capital, risks producing and reproducing social inequality. The challenges posed by the new school leaving age for many students, schools, families and communities in south-western Sydney furthermore, highlight a need for policies to directly address low levels of economic, social and cultural capital.

In response to the recent Gonski report (December, 2011) the Australian government affirmed its commitment to educational policies that supports school choice for a diverse range of schools, allowing ‘parents to choose the school that is right for their child’ (Garrett 2012). Parental choice is part of the neoliberal ideal whereby decisions are cast back onto families under the guise of empowering parents. This approach shifts the blame from government to individual families if something goes wrong; it gives space to commentators to attack parents who make the wrong decision; it ignores that Australian society and education is not a level playing field; and it makes any assertion about the bases for inequitable outcomes heresies.

Conclusion

In this study, the concern has been that minority ethnicity emerges as explanation for student outcomes rather than a policy disjuncture. Indeed, the idea of increased choices – selecting schools, new pathways in the compulsory schooling agenda, diversified curricula – are features of public diversity that can increase private disadvantage for ethnically diverse minority groups in low socio-economic contexts.

There are many other consequences of the new compulsory schooling age (Reid and Young 2012). This chapter has argued that compulsory schooling is not good for everyone because real choice is non-existent for those that need it most. The consequence for ethnic minority students and their families is the association of their failure with their cultural background or ethnicity rather than the policy disjuncture shaping their educational experiences and options. Parents also do not always want choices about pathways and curriculum because they believe teachers know best

and the labour market changes are difficult to read. Tapping into social networks for work experience requires certain kinds of capital and much of this is gendered. Some parents are financially dependent on their children doing part time work while others see little point in prolonging schooling when it does not offer any further chance of alternative pathways and is in fact blocking present opportunities. Institutional structures, such as those dividing TAFE and schooling, do not facilitate new pathways while the year 12 matriculation examination is now seen as the gold standard producing a range of unrealistic expectations and narrowing choice.

The other heresies raised in this chapter need final comment. Heresy Three, more autonomy is not better for all principals, is evident in the constraints on schools that go beyond extra funds to the cultural and social capital available in the local community and the impact of residualization within the school. Heresy Four, schools are not ladders of opportunity when there is no transport to get to work experience or further training, when there are no alternative curriculums, and when life at home is so bad that school is just an escape. Heresy Five, class is not dead: it is a social relationship that permeates not just economic aspects of family, school and community life, but also access to networks that provide opportunities. It impacts on whose voice is heard and it intersects with ethnicity in this study in particular with the most recent and most dispossessed arrivals. Finally, Heresy Six, education is not above politics. In this chapter it has been important to reveal this heresy by attending to differences in the 'contexts of practice and the distributional outcomes of policy' (Ball 2006, p. 43). Unless the causes of disadvantage are recognised and addressed, the inequitable opportunities for males from ethnic minority groups in particular have the potential to feed into wider discourses pathologizing their outcomes, particularly in terms of education and pathways to work and future employment.

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