

Parents choices in ‘new times’: A case study of The Shelbyville College

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Abstract: Globalisation has created an educational environment where practices of corporatisation, marketisation and performativity are spreading across the globe like a “policy epidemic” (Ball, 2003). In the local context, this is presented in two ways, first through attracting overseas students whose parents are seeking an international, globalised education and second through presenting South East Queensland parents with an educational option for their children which prepares them for the globalised world. A recent phenomenon has been the emergence of low-fee, professionally marketed non-government schools located especially in the rapidly developing outer ‘doughnut’ of Brisbane. The focus of this paper is on South East Queensland parents and the reasons they are choosing these new, non-government schools as their preferred alternative to government schools, ‘elite private’ schools or Catholic schools. A case study of one such school, The Shelbyville College, revealed that parents had sought a school they perceived would inculcate valued ‘cultural capital’ (Bourdieu, 1977) and prepare students for an imagined globalised future. This school purports to create ‘extraordinary children’ through exposure to its ‘institutional habitus’ (Reay et al., 2001), particularly through its Languages Other Than English (LOTE) program. An examination of the College’s prospectus (titled ‘The [Shelbyville] College: Extraordinary Kids’) and website using Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough, 1989) revealed that the school emphasises cultural capital as represented by the LOTE program to draw parents into a discourse of future success for their ‘extraordinary children’.

Keywords: globalisation, marketisation, performativity, cultural capital, private schools

Introduction

Globalisation is impacting on Australian education which can be seen in the need to diversify sources of income through the recruitment of international students, new accountability measures and the pervasive discourse of marketisation. Marketisation and its related policies of performativity and corporate managerialism are spreading across the globe like a ‘policy epidemic’ (Ball, 2003). The move to marketisation is based on a belief that there is “no alternative but for education to adapt to the imperatives of the market place on the basis that what is good for the economy is by definition good for human development” (Raduntz, 2002). Promulgated by organisations such as the World Bank and OECD, marketisation in education contains three embedded ‘policy technologies’, “the market, managerialism and performativity” (Ball, 2003, p. 215).

This paper seeks to examine the impact of marketisation as a policy technology on a new type of school which is becoming increasingly successful in these globalised, marketised new times. Called ‘new, non-government schools’, these ‘colleges’ (as they call themselves) seek to attract parents through sophisticated marketing techniques and provide value-added educational services. Through an analysis of one case study school, The Shelbyville College, the value added of Languages Other Than English (LOTE) as cultural capital is examined. This paper asks the questions, how does valued cultural capital and the habitus of an organization influence school choice in a marketised, globalised educational environment.

This study has implications for government schools which are the primary competition for new, non-government schools and to which they are losing students. As Catholic Education Office (CEO) schools have traditionally provided an alternative to parents seeking to improve their children’s social status or effect upward social mobility between the generations (McGregor, 1997), the new, non-government school is in competition with them for the aspirational parents. The continued success of the new, non-government schools is also likely to have broader effects on social and educational inequality in Australia through their effects on the government school sector. For example, some writers have argued that the question of funding of public education is the central equity issue needing to be addressed in Australia (see, Taylor and Henry, 2000).

Marketisation, performativity and school choice

All schools in Australia are encouraged to market themselves to groups of parents to ensure their continued success. The market model encourages educational institutions to see themselves as service providers who compete for clients in an environment where the market controls the economy. Linked with globalisation, marketisation of schools reconstitutes the role of education, causing it to be seen as:

... mainly a private good for which individuals should, in principle, pay; that education institutions should be forced to compete with each other to produce efficiency; and that government provision is an ‘intervention’ in the market which should be reduced, if not eliminated, while private provision is increased.

(Connell, 1998, p. 92)

In a neo-liberal, globalised context (Barry et al., 1996), government influence on institutions is supposedly reduced through the effects of economic rationalist discourses which argue for the limitation of government intervention (Marginson, 1993, p. 69). In this situation, contemporary education is “seen as a commodity, purchased by the state/parent to enhance the human capital, the potential of each individual” (Cox, 1998, p. ix). In a marketised education environment, parents are reconstituted as consumers of a service which schools must compete with each other to provide.

Closely related to the policy discourse of marketisation is performativity. In a marketised environment, the performance of skills becomes measurable via performance measures. Lyotard (1989) states that in a system where “knowledge ceases to be an end in itself”, the motivation for learning becomes ‘power’ (p. 50). In a market driven by competition, competency and efficiency “having competence in a performance oriented skill does indeed seem saleable...and it is efficient by definition” (Lyotard, 1989, p. 51). According to Lyotard “this creates the prospect for a vast marketplace for competence in operational skills” (1989, p. 51). In this environment, education is reduced to a set of skills that can be measured for effectiveness and competence and can be converted into assets which improve the social status of its consumers. Part of the utilitarian approach to education where education is viewed as “a ‘thing’ that is acquired by the individual” (Marginson, 1999, p. 230), education operates as a means to an end, rather than valued for its own sake.

Performativity demands that all the employees of an organisation demonstrate their productive capability and their ability to contribute positively to the profitability of an organisation. Furthermore Blackmore (1997, p. 4) believes that performativity “in the context of education markets has taken on a new dimension – that of being *seen to perform* as much as about substantive or quality performance...”. This relates to the display of education as a performance. By demonstrating accountability and competitiveness according to defined standards, the performance of the school is central to its promotional efforts.

Both marketisation and performativity emphasise differences between schools. Parents are invited to choose the school that best suits their needs. Choice is related to marketisation and performativity in Australia because it has created “competition between and within government and non-government sectors” as well as “significant restructuring practices within the government sector” (Groundwater-Smith, 2001). “Under the rubric of ‘choice’, governments, wedded as they are to the tenets of de-regulation and privatisation, are seeking to create a market in schooling” (Burrow and Martin, 1998, p. 97). This market invites parents to see themselves as clients and schools as service providers. The service provided by schools and the limitation of places at some socially elite schools render education as a positional good.

“Positional goods” (Hirsch, 1976) are educational experiences in schools which are considered ‘better’ than others. Marketisation and performativity have established a positional logic within education because they create a hierarchical system of schools where some schools are considered “better” than others. The positional nature of education is used in several ways by its consumers. Initially, positional goods are used as an investment to gain ‘competitive advantage’ over other students “in the competition for jobs, income, social

standing and prestige” (Marginson, 1997, p. 38). However, they may also be used for ‘social cachet’ by parents who wish to be able to capitalise on the name and status of the private school their child attends.

The ability to select the school with the best social cachet is an element of parental cultural capital. Cultural capital is non-economic wealth possessed but is linked to economic wealth. Constituted by the relationship between education and the family, cultural capital signifies the cultural competence of a person (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 124). This form of capital is given its “full realisation” within an educational system which “awards qualifications durably consecrating the position occupied in the structure of the distribution of capital” (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 125). Some families have greater access to these cultural assets of “symbolic resources in religion, philosophy, art and science” (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 125) and are able to transform this into educational and economic access and success. Thus, cultural capital allows some parents to access the market of education advantageously. Such parents are best placed to recognise and choose the ‘best’ schools for their children. Bennett et al. (1999, p. 268) found more advantaged groups utilise private schooling to “increase upward mobility across the generations”. They found certain groups of parents are seeking ‘social capital’ from private schools in the first instance and “economic capital and social capital that play the major role in the generation and reproduction of class inequality in Australia” (Bennett et al., 1999, p.268). Middle-class groups through their possession of economic and social capital have greater access to ‘better’ educational institutions as well as an increased ability to consume higher levels of education.

These ‘better’ educational institutions are able to inculcate valued cultural capital through their institutional habitus. Habitus influences all aspects of a persons’ life including education, culture, likes, status and aspirations. Acquired early in life through the family, this habitus is able to change according to experiences acquired from institutions such as schools. Reay et al. (2001) argue that the habitus of an institution such as a school is linked to and influenced by its socio-economic culture through its client catchment area. Called “institutional habitus”, it can be defined as “a complex amalgam of agency, and structure” (Reay et al., 2001, p.2). Institutional habitus can be understood as “the impact of a cultural group or social class on an individual’s behaviour as it is mediated through an organisation” (Reay et al., 2001, p. 2). Linked to school composition through group, instructional, organisational and management processes, institutional habitus can ‘compensate’ for familial habitus and devalued cultural capital. As a value-added commodity, institutional habitus is therefore an attractive saleable item for schools competing for clients who wish to maximise their children’s cultural capital and habitus in a marketised education environment.

Value adding and the new, non-government school

Marketisation and performativity have created the conditions of possibility in Australia for the establishment of schools like The Shelbyville College. Due to the Federal Government's establishment grants for new, non-government schools, it has become profitable for churches and other authorities to establish schools. These grants provide \$500 per full time equivalent student for the first year of operation and \$250 per full time equivalent student in the second year (Harrington, 2004). "An estimated \$11.9 million will be appropriated for these grants during the 2001–2004 program years" (Harrington, 2002). This has led to the establishment of new, non-government schools. In 1998, a coordinated body from the Anglican and Uniting churches established The Shelbyville College in the far western suburbs of Brisbane, Queensland, Australia. The Shelbyville College is typical of schools in the category of new, non-government schools.

Characterised by an emphasis on independence from direct church authority despite an emphasis on non-denominational or multi-denominational protestant, Christian values, providing P-12 education and a heavy reliance on marketing new, non-government schools target the aspirational; a group of parents who are seeking education to increase the upward mobility of their children. Much like Australia's 'elite' private schools, new, non-government schools focus on providing 'value-addedness' to the educational curriculum at no extra cost – usually music, drama or languages (such as Chinese). At The Shelbyville College, the value added cultural capital is inculcated in part through the exposure offered to students in its Languages Other Than English (LOTE) program. At The Shelbyville College the LOTE program emphasizes teaching of Mandarin Chinese from Prep to Year 12.

Chinese language operates as the value added educational commodity offered by The Shelbyville College. For this school Chinese language is viewed in performative terms as a thing which can be acquired through exposure to the educational product offered at the school. Described as a means of producing successful individuals through involvement in the commodified educational package offered at The Shelbyville College, the website and Prospectus claim the College's program is designed to meet the challenges of the future through equipping students with *extraordinary skills* to become *extraordinary people* (Prospectus, p. 2). These texts, produced in a response to a need to market the school in a marketised educational environment, are providing the performance criteria by which parents can judge the effectiveness of the school. These texts naturalise school choice and allow parents to see the effects of the education offered at The Shelbyville College.

Parents are invited to see their children as developing as extraordinary people through the extraordinary skills acquired as part of the holistic developmental education which is offered at the College as evidenced in the following:

The Shelbyville College is committed to a holistic, developmental education, in which each student is provided with the skills and knowledge necessary for them to develop academically, spiritually, socially, culturally, emotionally and physically.

[website – Executive Principal’s Address]

This education is achieved through a *wide range of academic opportunities* including exposure to Mandarin Chinese. Arguing that this language is one which is essential for successful careers in business, the College web site states that inculcation into this language will allow students to prepare for trade with Australia’s most significant economic partner. Operating as a form of cultural capital, the exposure of students to Mandarin Chinese is an element of performativity, value added education as a commodity and constitute part of the habitus of the organization.

Value adding LOTE

Acting as an element of the cultural capital of the institution and constituting an element of its institutional habitus, the LOTE program has an important role to play in the construction of *extraordinary individuals* and social relations between students and their future peers. Mandarin Chinese has been selected *as the College’s foreign language* and is taught *in all classes from prep onwards ... for students to acquire the language skills and an appreciation of the culture of what will be Australia’s most significant economic partner...* (Prospectus, p. 2).

This is mandated from Prep to Year Ten. However for students *enrolled in Years Eleven and Twelve, it may be taken as an elective subject* (Website – Curriculum, Mandarin Chinese). The College has claimed that knowledge of Mandarin Chinese is an essential skill for people who wish to be successful internationally in business. This constructs for parents a view of the role their children will play when they graduate. In this way discourse “privilege[s] their own version of meaning as if it were natural, inevitable, and incontestable” (Gee, 1996, p. 102).

In the promotional material, it is implied that Mandarin Chinese will be required by all students in their future roles. Arguments supporting the teaching and learning of LOTE are pervasive throughout the promotional materials produced at the College. This renders the modality of the LOTE discourse presented in the school-generated documents as unchallengeable. As Fairclough (1992, p. 160) states, modality functions as “a point of intersection in discourse between the signification of reality and the enactment of social relations”. The LOTE program is one, which purportedly empowers the students who are exposed to it, and the College’s affinity with its importance is significant. Through the LOTE program, students are enlisted into the unquestioned importance of LOTE and its relationship to the business world through their knowledge of Mandarin Chinese.

While the college emphasizes other cultural pursuits such as instrumental music and speech and drama, it is the LOTE program which most signifies the role of cultural capital in forming the habitus of the students exposed to the education at the college. The Shelbyville College, through its curricular and co-curricular emphasis on cultural activities is encouraging students to engage with valued cultural capital. Initially students' exposure to instrumental music is through the violin but after year 5, the students are able to negotiate the instrument of their choice. It is the LOTE focus on Mandarin Chinese that is maintained throughout all grades in order to expose students to the language of a country, the College states in its promotional material, that will be of one of Australia's major future trading partners. This is the cultural capital most valued by the college as it signifies not only its ability to prepare students for middle class lives in Australia but also the cultural capital to negotiate the globalised world of business the students are preparing to inhabit.

LOTE is an important site for the inculcation of valued middle class cultural capital. The LOTE program as cultural capital is an important value added to the educational offering at the new, non-government school The Shelbyville College. These schools, through co-curricular activities such as music, speech and drama and LOTE, endeavour to teach middle-class cultural capital and improve the habitus of the students who are exposed to their educational offering. These schools utilise their institutional habitus as proof of their ability to teach middle-class cultural capital and, through discourses such as the pervasiveness of Mandarin Chinese in a globalised trading future and promotional documents, emphasise their ability to promote academic success and quality education

Conclusion

LOTE represents The Shelbyville College's ability to inculcate valued cultural capital through its institutional habitus in the marketised, globalised educational environment. As an aspect of cultural capital it also represents for parents the ability to prepare students for the imagined, globalised futures where foreign language acquisition is helpful for future business success. The results of this study have implications for both Catholic Education Office (CEO) and government schools who are likely to lose students to these new, non-government schools. For CEO schools, which have traditionally been used by aspirational parents to increase the educational and social opportunities for their children, these schools are a major threat. The low fees and non-denominational nature of the new, non-government school are likely to provide competition among parents who are seeking a low cost, high quality education at an institution where *the commitment is to create a co-educational, Christian environment where students receive the individual attention they need to develop - intellectually, physically, emotionally and spiritually* (website – About Us).

The continued success of the new, non-government schools is also likely to have broader effects on social and educational inequality in Australia through their effects on the government school sector. For example, some writers have argued that the question of funding of public education is the central equity issue needing to be addressed in Australia (see, Taylor and Henry, 2000). By providing scholarships and [*endeavouring*] to keep fees as low as possible, consistent with maintaining high educational standards ... the College will be accessible to children from a range of socio-economic backgrounds (website – Our Past ... Our Future) and provide significant competition to the government school sector in Australia.

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