School Teacher Parents and the Retreat From Public Secondary Schooling: A View from the Australian Census, 1976-2001

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Abstract

This article uses data from the Australian Censuses of 1976 and 2001 to measure the extent to which the children of school teachers participated in the middle class shift from public to non-government secondary schooling of the closing decades of the last century. It builds on recent work by Craig Campbell and Geoffrey Sherington on the history of the New South Wales Public comprehensive high school, as well as recent analyses of the relationships between the middle classes and public institutions by sociologists such as Michael Pusey (for Australia) and Stephen Ball (for the United Kingdom). School teachers are of particular interest for a number of reasons including their historically uneasy status relative to other professional occupations and their complex roles as both providers and consumers of school education. The article finds that while school teachers collectively moved their children out of government high schools in common with other middle class parents over the period, there were differences within the category according to parent's gender and sector of employment.

The last quarter of the twentieth century saw a decline in the public sector's share of secondary school students in Sydney relative to non-government schools of various kinds, with similar trends in all Australian cities as well as those regional areas where the presences of non-government schools made 'choice' possible. This occurred as a result of policies, discourses and behaviours including increases in state funding of non-government schools, the encouragement of a market in low-fee schools, a broad loss of faith in the effectiveness of public institutions and the promotion of the idea that it is a parent's duty to be an actively-choosing consumer of their child's school institution. It is the activities of parents that is the focus of this article, which contributes to a growing body of literature which places the family at the centre of class-making, or, as Ball puts it, "[locates] the motor of inequality within the family" (2003, p. 4). The elevation of parents' rights or obligations to work in an individual way for the advantage of their own children, and federal and state governments' promotion of

'school choice', marked a discontinuity both with a post-war settlement in favour of comprehensive secondary schooling and an earlier twentieth-century meritocratic model which explicitly sought to separate the educational fate of the child from the social or financial status of the parent. Brown (1990) described a similar shift in the United Kingdom (under a rather differently-structured education system) as an 'ideology of parentocracy', the construction of a system predicated on the resources and motives of parents rather than early twentieth century ideas of the deserts or talents of the child or post-war concepts such as uniform provision and the collective good. The casualties of such a system might be the children of parents who are poor or parents who are not expert in the necessary networking or research who are thus condemned to struggle in the 'residualised' schools abandoned by others (Teese, 2000; Thomson, 2002; Vickers, 2004).

The late twentieth century drift away from the public high school was not evenly distributed in terms of social class. It was especially marked in middle class families (Campbell & Sherington, 2006; Campbell, 2007) and it is middle class parents who are the focus of this article. Education management is a very important way that the middle classes 'do class', to use R. W. Connell's terminology, and middle class parents have been historical pioneers of school choice. An examination of their practices of school choice reveals both expertise and anxiety (Campbell, Proctor, & Sherington, in press; Aitchison, 2006). Ball (2003, p. 186) characterises middle class parents as "fearful, alert and strategic". Power and her co-authors (2003) see fear of social falling as a crucial motivation in the management of children's schooling. Reay and Lucey (2004; Reay, 2005) and David and her co-authors (1993; David, West, & Ribbens, 1994) for the United Kingdom and Brantlinger (2003, pp. 35-78) for the United States see mothers as performing much of the crucial work on selection of school institution within middle class families, bringing together their traditional twentieth century roles as managers of family consumption and performers of emotional labour. Despite all the effort and expertise, the extent to which middle class parents are comfortable with late twentieth century developments in schooling markets is not clear. Campbell argues, following the investigations of Pusey (2003) into the feelings and beliefs of 'middle Australia', that parents may see themselves as being 'driven out' of the public school system rather than choosing to leave because "the most desired of choices, a high quality public school, is increasingly experienced as being closed off" (Campbell, 2005, p. 8).

The middle classes are, of course, neither united nor uniform and it is part of the work of this research to extend our understanding of the complexity of the middle classes of Australia's largest city.[1] Confidence, expertise and anxiety might be unevenly distributed throughout the middle classes. It is the contention of this article that in addition to detailed qualitative investigations of the motives, beliefs and aspirations of middle class

parents, it is important to know more about the quantitative dimensions of the shift away from the public high school. For example, were some groups more 'loyal' than others to government or non-government schools? The article draws on information gathered for the Australian Censuses of 1976 and 2001 to map some of the dimensions of the choices made by one particular middle class group, late twentieth century school teacher parents.

There are a number of reasons why school teachers are of interest. It is likely that school teachers as a category occupy a riskier place in the middle class than some other occupational groups. Devine (2004) found teachers and doctors in the United States and United Kingdom to be indicative to some extent of two different kinds of middle class experience with the position of teachers less secure and with fewer kinds of social and economic capital than doctors. The work of Pusey (2003) and Martin (1998) also suggest some uncertainties for Australian teachers compared with other middle class occupations and in common with other groups which are either directly employed in the public sector or reliant on public spending for their salaries and working conditions. These include an uneasy fit with currently dominant national discourses of marketisation, or what Pusey calls economic rationalism (see also Campbell, 2007). The Australian census may not be able to tell us how comfortable school teacher parents were in the developing late twentieth century schooling market, but it can give us valuable information about how they used it.

Historically speaking school teaching was a traditional route into the middle classes, an avenue of social mobility or aspiration for academically inclined children short of other forms of social capital. The history of the professionalisation of school teaching is closely connected with the history of the twentieth century New South Wales public high school and the path from the academically selective high school of the first half of the twentieth century through the Sydney or Armidale Teachers' Colleges and back into the public school system – primary or secondary – was a well trodden one. Teachers have also included historically high proportions of women in comparison with other professions, with their own individual as well as collective histories of gendered regulation of pay, promotion and marriage (Theobald & Dwyer, 1999). As a result of enduring gendered inequalities in the division of paid and unpaid labour in Australia, it is possible that men and women teachers (who are parents) have occupied somewhat different social class positions. School teachers are also interesting in terms of their position as education insiders. School teachers who are parents are both choosers and producers of education. As choosers they are agents implicated in the change or stability of public school participation, even as they have been collectively characterised as representative of one school system or another. As employees they, too, at the end of the century were moving to the non-government sector, with the changing career patterns and conditions that may bring.

Using data commissioned from the Australian Bureau of Statistics, the article uses descriptive statistics to investigate a number of aspects of the school choices made by those Sydney parents who listed their occupation as 'school teacher' in the censuses of 1976 and 2001.[2] Both the 1976 and 2001 censuses included a question which allowed for the coding of the variable, 'Type of educational institution attending' into three categories, 'Secondary-Government', 'Secondary-Catholic' and 'Secondary-Other non-government'.[3] The article uses the answers to this question to examine the extent to which teachers participated in the middle class drift from public high schools and the differences within teachers as a category, specifically the differences between school teacher mothers and fathers, the differences between teachers and some other professional and semi-professional occupations and the differences between teachers employed in the government and non-government sectors. The census of 1976 was taken at the height of public school secondary enrolment. The 2001 census, approximately a generation later, showed an unmistakeable retreat from public secondary schooling in Sydney. (At the same time it is important to keep in mind that public secondary school students still well outnumbered their non-government peers.)

The histories of Sydney secondary schooling in 1976 and 2001 were quite different. The ninety-odd year history of the public high school to 1976 was one of growth and progress. Prior to the 1960s, post-primary students in the public system had been sorted into different kinds of schools in Sydney, according to assessments of their ability and aptitude. Those judged to have greater academic potential were sent to academic high schools, others were directed to vocational and technical schools. Many of the parents of the secondary students of 1976 would have remembered being sorted in this way. The secondary students of 1976, in contrast, were the beneficiaries of reforms of the Wyndham Report of 1957 and the Education Act of 1961 under which, over the next decade, the old competitive entry into state secondary schools all but disappeared. The mid-late 1970s was approximately the closest that Sydney ever came to the fulfilment of the comprehensive ideal of universal enrolment in neighbourhood high schools offering the same opportunities to all students. It was also, of course, a period which saw the development of trenchant critiques of the persistence, despite post-war schooling reform, of decisive inequalities in Australian education, as educational sociologists in particular began to expose the failed promises of comprehensive schooling in terms of the practices and structures of public school institutions (especially Connell, Ashenden, Kessler, & Dowsett, 1982).

By the time of the 2001 census the comprehensive high school was arguably an institution of the past rather than the future because of a renewed investment by successive state governments in academically-selective high schools, the removal of the formerly strict geographical boundaries around public school catchment areas and the expansion of the non-government sector (Campbell & Sherington, 2006). The vast majority of the parents

of the secondary school students of 2001 who had been educated in Sydney would have simply been enrolled by their parents in their local comprehensive high school, but were facing a more complex set of decisions about school choice in regard to their own children. Although the census categories of 'Government', 'Catholic' and Other Non-government' are useful, in reality they represent an even greater variety, at least in terms of material resources, and it is important to note that all types of non-government schools in Australia attract government funding. At one extreme was an institution like The King's School at Parramatta, frequently cited in the mass media as an exemplar of exclusive wealth and privilege with its rolling green acres of land and state of the art facilities, financially supported by old bequests, current high fees and generous Federal government subsidies. A struggling public school at the other end of spectrum might be a 'sink school' or 'residualised school' in which a number of kinds of disadvantage were compounded (Teese, 2000, p. 189). In between these two extremes was a complex picture. Between 1976 and 2001 many low fee, non-Catholic, non-government schools, notably new kinds of bible-based Christian schools, were established. These new schools lacked the spectacular material resources of the older independent schools, yet to some extent attracted elements of their aura of exclusivity. Catholic schools ranged, as in 1976, from the expensive independent secondaries to the local low fee systemic schools, although Preston's (2003) analysis of the 2001 census and school choice found that the children of the very poorest Catholic families were to be found in public and not Catholic high schools. (Whether or not this was the case in 1976 requires further research.) While not as great as in the non-government sector, the range of resources to be found within the public sector was still consequential, and reflected Sydney's region-based socio-economic diversity. Government high schools by 2001 comprised both academically-selective and comprehensive schools and it is the strength and size of the academically-selective which has historically distinguished Sydney to some extent from other Australian cities, notably Melbourne (Peel & McCalman, 1992).

School teachers and school choice

Table 1 shows the changing market share of the three broad categories of school for all Sydney children from 1976 to 2001. Evident in these figures is the decline of the government sector, the growth of the Catholic sector and the more dramatic growth of the smallest, 'Other non-government' category, which more than doubled over the period.

	Secondary – Government	Secondary – Catholic	Secondary – Other Non-Government	Total	Total Children (N)
1976	74	20	7	100	180,819
2001	58	26	16	100	245,398

Table 1: Type of secondary school attended, Sydney, 1976 and 2001 (%)

Australian Bureau of Statistics, censuses 1976, 2001

Table 2 compares the type of school attended by the children of school teacher fathers with those of some other middle class occupational groups for 1976. The table is for specific occupations only and the analysis does not make claims for the middle class more broadly. The distribution of children across the three school types varied according to father's occupation. With the notable exception of school teachers, each of the selected occupations in the table shows a rate of enrolment in public high schools lower than the Sydney average, which was 74%. The children of school teachers were more likely to be attending a public high school than the children of the other professional or semi-professional workers included in this table. School teachers can especially be contrasted with doctors (a reasonably broad category in itself which comprises everything from specialist to general practitioner). Children of school teacher fathers were enrolled in the different categories of secondary schools in 1976 in close to the average proportions for the population of Sydney as a whole. This included a strong preference (75%) for public secondary schools. Medical practitioners, on the other hand, had already established themselves as reluctant users of the public high school, with a substantial 42% of their children in the non-government, non-Catholic sector. In 1976 this sector did not include the large number of low fee schools which would be operating by 2001.

Table 3 compares the children of school teacher mothers with those of some other occupations. The different set of occupations selected for this table reflects the gendered nature of the Sydney workforce. For example there were too few mothers of secondary school students in the higher professions to make this kind of tabulation feasible for most of them. The table shows a similar dichotomy as Table 3 between the choices made by teachers and the small number of doctors who were mothers but otherwise the differences are not so marked as for male parents between the teachers and the other groups. Each of the occupational groups listed shows lower than average rates of enrolment in public high schools relative to non-government schools. This includes teacher mothers, who were less likely to have children attending a public high school than teacher fathers. The large group of 1976 mothers who were neither in paid employment nor looking for work, on the other hand, conforms to Sydney's average school choice patterns.

	Secondary – Government	Secondary – Catholic	Secondary – Other Non-Government	Total	Total Children (N)
School teacher	75	16	9	100	1,933
Medical practitioner	31	27	42	100	1,792
Architect, engineer, surveyor	63	21	16	100	3,154
Accountant, auditor	56	23	20	100	2,023
Book-keeper, cashier, bank teller	69	26	6	100	1,086

Table 2: Type of secondary school attended by children of fathers in selected occupations, Sydney, 1976 (%)

Australian Bureau of Statistics, census 1976

	Secondary – Government	Secondary – Catholic	Secondary – Other Non-Government	Total	Total Children (N)
School teacher	68	18	15	100	3,453
Medical practitioner	31	22	48	100	321
Nurse (qualified)	62	25	14	100	2,968
Book-keeper, cashier, bank teller	76	17	7	100	3,593
Stenographer, typist	63	23	14	100	9,447
Not in the labour force	74	21	5	100	78,224

Table 3: Type of secondary school attended by children of mothers in selected occupations, Sydney, 1976 (%)

Australian Bureau of Statistics, census 1976

Tables 4 and 5 use data from the 2001 census to compare the children of school teacher fathers and mothers, respectively, with the children of other selected middle class occupational groups. There are limits to the comparability of specific occupations between 1976 and 2001 due to the considerable restructuring of the workforce which occurred over the intervening period as well as the related overhaul of the census classifications. Nevertheless, some trends are evident in Tables 4 and 5, especially the lower than average public high school enrolment for all the occupational groups other than male teachers. As in 1976 the largest gap was between the enrolments of the children of male school teachers and doctors. Fifty-nine percent of children of teacher fathers were enrolled in public secondary schools, compared with only 21% of the children whose fathers were doctors. As in 1976 the children of teacher fathers were attending public high schools at the same average rate as all Sydney children (Table 4). The children of female teachers, by comparison, were less likely than those of male teachers to be found in public high schools. Interestingly, the gender difference was reversed in the case of children of female doctors who were more likely than the offspring of male doctors to attend public schools. Further research is needed to develop explanations for this but it is possible to speculate in the first instance that there were categorical differences between male and female teachers and male and female doctors (who are also parents) in terms of career path, salary and family income. Unlike in 1976, children of mothers who were neither in paid employment nor looking for work, were more likely than other Sydney secondary students to be attending a public high school in 2001 (Table 5).

Table 6 summarises the information specifically about the children of teachers to highlight one of the main findings of the article, that is that the school choices made by teacher fathers and teacher mothers were somewhat different both in 1976 and 2001. While the children of teacher fathers were enrolled in public high schools in average numbers, the children of teacher mothers were more likely to be enrolled in non-government secondary schools. Enrolment in Catholic schools was about the same for the two groups but more children of female teachers were to be found in the 'other non-government' sector. These differences warrant further investigation. (It is also important to note that the figures are for the children of school teacher fathers and school teacher mothers as discrete categories. This set of data does not allow for the separate identification of families with more than one school teacher parent.)

Another useful way of investigating teachers' school choices is by looking at their sector of employment. The variable 'Type of educational institution attended' was cross-tabulated with the variable, 'Industry sector', under which employed persons were classified into government or non-government employees. This allowed a comparison between public with private sectors of employment. Unfortunately this particular cross tabulation was not possible to achieve for the 1976 census, or the next census, 1981. Tables 7 – 9 compare 1986, the first census for which this information was possible to put together, with 2001.

	Secondary – Government	Secondary – Catholic	Secondary – Other Non-Government	Total	Total Children (N)
School teacher	59	25	16	100	3,726
Medical practitioner	21	20	59	100	2,234
Building or engineering professional*	52	25	22	100	4,535
Accountant, auditor, corporate treasurer	41	31	28	100	4,221

**Includes architect, engineer, surveyor*

Table 4: Type of secondary school attended by children of fathers in selected occupations, Sydney, 2001 (%)

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, census 2001

	Secondary – Government	Secondary – Catholic	Secondary – Other Non-Government	Total	Total Children (N)
School teacher	50	27	24	100	12,119
Medical practitioner	31	19	51	100	1,056
Registered nurse	50	32	18	100	7,729
Accountant, auditor, corporate treasurer	46	29	25	100	2,075
Secretary, personal assistant	42	35	22	100	10,039
Not in the labour force	65	22	13	100	69,706

Table 5: Type of secondary school attended by children of mothers in selected occupations, Sydney, 2001 (%)

Australian Bureau of Statistics, census 2001

		Secondary – Government	Secondary – Catholic	Secondary – Other Non-Government	Total	Total Children (N)
1976	Fathers	75	16	9	100	1,933
	Mothers	68	18	15	100	3,453
2001	Fathers	59	25	16	100	3,726
	Mothers	50	27	24	100	12,119

Table 6: Type of secondary school attended according to children of school teacher fathers or mothers, Sydney, 1976 and 2001 (%)

Australian Bureau of Statistics, censuses 1976, 2001

In 1986 the question for 'Type of educational institution attended' allowed only the responses, 'Government' or 'Non-government' and is thus missing the richer analytical possibility of separating 'Catholic' from 'Other non-government'. The figures for type of school attended for 1986 show a weaker public school enrolment than 1976, stronger than 2001.

Tables 7 and 8 show that there were some differences between the school choices made by government and non-government school teacher parents. Unsurprisingly perhaps, industry sector of employment was a good predictor of school choice. Children both of government and non-government school teachers tended to be enrolled in the same sector as their parents taught in, for both 1986 and 2001. In these terms there was little drift from one kind of school to another, except for the children of public school teacher mothers. The difference between the enrolment patterns for children of male and female public school teachers is interesting to consider alongside the gap already identified between children of male and female school teachers as a whole. On the whole, children of school teachers shifted from government to non-government secondary schools between 1976 and 2001 but this collective view conceals some marked differences between teachers. Children with public school teacher fathers were just as likely in 2001 as in 1986 to be enrolled in a public high school, children of public school teacher mothers less so. Children of non-government teachers of either gender were likely to be enrolled in non-government schools in similar proportions in 1986 and 2001, however the relative size of these two groups changed over the period. Greater proportions of parents were employed in the non-government relative to the government institutions in 2001 than in 1986 as shown in Table 9 which groups children by their parents' employer rather than by their own school. Therefore the retreat from public secondary schools by children of teachers is to some extent the result of the movement of the numerically largest sub-group, the children of public school teacher mothers. It was also associated with the movement of jobs from the public to the non-government sectors.

		Secondary – Government	Secondary – Non-Government	Total	Total Children (N)
Public Sector	Fathers	73	27	100	1,842
	Mothers	70	30	100	4,342
Private Sector	Fathers	34	66	100	636
	Mothers	34	66	100	2,336

Table 7: Type of secondary school attended by children of school teacher fathers or mothers according to sector of employment, Sydney, 1986 (%)

Australian Bureau of Statistics, census 1986

	Secondary – Government	Secondary – Catholic	Secondary – Other Non-Government	Total	Total Children (N)
Public Fathers	75	16	9	100	2,328
Sector Mothers	63	18	19	100	7,132
Private Fathers	32	38	29	100	1,371
Sector Mothers	30	40	30	100	4,902

Table 8: Type of secondary school attended by children of school teacher fathers or mothers by sector of employment, Sydney, 2001 (%)

Australian Bureau of Statistics, census 2001

		Government Employer	Non-Government Employer	Total	Total Children (N)
1986	Fathers	74	26	100	2,478
	Mothers	65	35	100	6,678
2001	Fathers	63	37	100	3,699
	Mothers	59	41	100	12,034

Table 9: Children of school teacher parents by sector of employment of father or mother, 1986 and 2001 (%)

Australian Bureau of Statistics, census, 1986, 2001

Conclusion

This article aims to contribute to our understanding of the rise of secondary school markets in late twentieth century Australia, in particular the movement of secondary school students away from the public high school and into various kinds of non-government schools. The research is underpinned by the argument that in a system of 'choice' it is important to investigate the people who are ostensibly responsible for doing the choosing, that is the parents of secondary school students. While a number of English studies have looked closely at parents (though from a qualitative rather than quantitative perspective), the Australian literature to date has tended to focus on policies and systems. The larger project from which the research in this article is drawn is a study of the school choice behaviours of middle class Australian parents, the parents most likely to enrol their children in non-government schools. The larger study employs both qualitative and quantitative analysis. This article is a quantitative study of secondary school enrolment patterns of the children of school teachers, using data commissioned from the Australian Censuses of 1976 and 2001, which were taken at two contrasting historical moments about a generation apart. (The article uses data from the 1986 Census where particular cross tabulations were not available for 1976.) The purpose of the research was to ascertain to what extent teachers had joined the middle class movement out of public secondary schools identified by Campbell and Sherington (2006) and to measure with some precision the dimensions of the movement. School teachers comprise a significant and interesting group of middle class parents, with as strong an interest as any occupational group in securing educational success for their children, given their less comfortable social and economic status than some other professional groups and their century long reliance on prolonged schooling for their employment credentials. It is also possible to speculate that school teachers more than any other group might know what they are doing when they select a school for their own children to attend, though the divisions identified here within the category 'school teacher' make this a complicated speculation.

An examination of census data for 1976 and 2001 reveals that school teachers did indeed participate in the broader middle class movement of their children away from public secondary schooling during the last quarter of the twentieth century. Complexities emerge, however, when the patterns of fathers and mothers are compared and sector of employment is taken into account. The children of teacher parents fell into three groups. Two of these groups, the children of school teacher fathers and the children of non-government teachers, showed little movement over the period. Rather it was the movement of the children of teacher mothers which accounted for most of the shift in proportional terms. The children of all mothers were more likely to be enrolled in non- government schools in 2001 than 1976, and the figures for the children of public school teacher mothers also show an increase

from 1986 to 2001. Fathers employed in the public school system, on the other hand, demonstrated remarkable loyalty to the public high school, even showing a slight increase over the period. Public school teacher fathers enrolled their children in government high schools in 2001 to the same degree as all teacher fathers in 1976, at the rate of three in four. Further, it appears that teachers already employed in non-government schools had no less faith in the public schools in 2001 than in 1986. In contrast with some other middle class groups there was no relative movement of these children out of government schools, with two in three in the non-government sector for both years. However public school teacher fathers were a smaller group in 2001 than 1986 and non-government school teachers a larger one. If non-government school teachers had experienced a disenchantment with public schools, it is expressed in these figures in terms of their jobs. Teachers employed in the private sector were no more inclined to send their children to non-government schools in 2001 than 1986 but there were more of them in 2001. So middle class retreat in terms of school teachers was to some extent a double retreat, the parents and the children moving together.

The limits of the data analysed here have already been outlined. While data collected for the Australian Census are invaluable by virtue of its size and scope in a discussion which is too frequently characterised by anecdote and hearsay, it is also true that its large numbers come at the expense of some detail, such as the finer categorisation of schools. For example these data do not help very much in understanding the specific influence of Sydney's academically-selective high schools in attracting children to the government system. Nor does it tell us how and why these parents came to choose a school for their children. Were public school teacher fathers in fact expressing their confidence in the government system in 2001, acting with insider knowledge, or are these figures revealing the constraints of choice for a group of men whose pay and status had not kept pace with other middle class occupations? As explained earlier, mother's occupation is a different kind of variable from father's occupation, especially as an indicator of social class, due to changing employment patterns in families. These data do not show us combined family income, nor explain family relationships, especially in terms of shared financial responsibilities, and the relationship between mothers' paid labour and unpaid family work requires further investigation. Also requiring further investigation is the movement of teachers from government to non-government employment, a hitherto neglected issue in the literature of school choice. Further research is needed to explore the interplay of cause and effect between the movements of school children from one sector to another and the movement of jobs and employees.

Notes

[1] This article draws on the research for a larger Australian Research Council project on school choice and the history of the middle class conducted by Craig Campbell, Geoffrey Sherington and Helen Proctor from 2005-2007.

[2] I would like to thank Ms Dany Bouvier, Australian Bureau of Statistics.

[3] In 1976 parents were asked to fill in the name of the school, which was then allocated to a category by census processors. This created some problems in differentiating between primary and secondary students for those schools which included both levels of education, as did many 'other non-government' schools. For the purpose of the statistical analyses in this article it was decided, where the distinction between primary and secondary was otherwise unclear, to count school students aged twelve years and over as belonging to the secondary department of the school and children eleven and younger to the primary. In 2001 parents were simply asked to choose from the three categories.

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