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School choice: neoliberal education policy and imagined futures

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The launch in Australia of a government website that compares all schools on the basis of student performance in standardized tests illustrates the extent to which neoliberal policies have been entrenched. This paper examines the problematic nature of choosing schools within the powerful political context of neoliberalism. It illustrates how key elements of the neoliberal worldview are normalized in the day-to-day practices of schooling and how certain norms and values that characterize neoliberalism are shaped and reinforced in the education system and also in personal, family and social imaginaries. The task for educational sociology, therefore, is to problematize and 're-imagine' the prevailing neoliberal imaginary.

Keywords: school choice; neoliberalism; social imaginaries; educational inclusion; education policy; social class

Introduction

Choice in education is a topic of immense importance because, as Connell (2012, 681) reminds us, education has always been a 'site of struggle'. She maintains that: 'Education is dangerous, because schools and colleges do not just reproduce culture, they shape the new society that is coming into existence all around us' (2012, 681). The current historical period is especially dangerous, educationally and politically, because 'a major shift is happening between older forms of inequality based on institutional segregation and new forms of inequality based on market mechanisms' (2012, 681). Nonetheless, school choice is seen by its proponents, and largely by the general public, to be a good thing *per se*. It is claimed that market competition forces schools to continuously improve their standards in order to attract parent-consumers of the educational 'product' they are offering. The argument of this paper, however, is that choice has had educationally damaging effects on education.[1]

Kelly (2010, 54) argues that the 'global neoliberal consensus … dictates that states should be competitive abroad and facilitate a favourable

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pro-choice regulatory framework at home'. As a consequence, state institutions have, over the past three decades, been put on a quasi-market footing in keeping with governance themes of economic efficiency, competition and narrow but high-stakes forms of accountability (Apple 2009; Klees 2010). Although any precise definition of neoliberalism would seem impossible (Saad-Filho and Johnston 2005), an important element of the neoliberal consensus is that schools and other providers of services are expected to be responsive to market discipline and to adopt an enterprising approach by anticipating and satisfying the expectations of education consumers. At the local level, therefore, enterprising schools engage in impression management to signal their 'distinctiveness' and worth in comparison with other schools (Maguire et al. 2011). They are competing to be chosen.

'School choice' and neoliberalism

'Choice' is the key element of the neoliberal policy complex – a point that has been reinforced in Australia with the recent introduction by the Australian Labor Party of the My School website.[2] The website allows comparisons of the performance of schools on standardized National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) tests and displays the relative socio-economic status of students at a school as measured by the Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage. Although the Australian Constitution specifies that education is the responsibility of the Sates, the My School website operates nationally. It is one of several important measures, along with national NAPLAN testing, the introduction of national professional standards for teachers and a national Australian Curriculum, in the creation of, if not a national school system, then a very strong federal presence in schooling (Keating and Klatt 2011). As in most western nations, particularly the English-speaking ones (Angus 2012), Australian education policy has, increasingly since the 1980s, reflected neoliberal economic and political thinking (Angus and Brown 1997; Angus and Seddon 2000) that privileges the private sector over the public sector and assumes that market arrangements will always produce better outcomes than government regulation. Hence the emphasis on competition between schools to attract clients. And because parents, in their role as choosing subjects, need a seemingly objective basis on which to make informed choices about 'good' and 'bad' schools, a regime of high-stakes tests and other accountability requirements has been introduced. The policy logic is that the imposition of market pressure will result in an inevitable increase in overall standards of performance.

Decades of political and cultural work, perhaps most notably in the United Kingdom during the prime ministership of Margaret Thatcher (Hall 1979), has gone into a particular framing of educational problems and solutions through processes of discursive politics, power relations and direct government intervention. As Hall (1979, 15–16) pointed out at the time, the

'swing to the Right' in the United Kingdom '[did] not appear out of thin air' but was 'engaged in a struggle for hegemony'.

The cumulative effect of such political work over several decades, as Rizvi and Lingard (2010) explain, has been the assertion of a global 'social imaginary', which is formed and strongly asserted through political and economic ideologies and instantiated in repertoires of social practices. The notion of 'social imaginary' derives from the work of Taylor, who explains its meaning as follows:

> What I am trying to get at with this term is something much broader and deeper than the intellectual schemes people may entertain when they think about social reality in a disengaged mode. I am thinking rather of the ways in which they imagine their social existence – how they fit together with others and how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations. (2007, 199)

Taylor explains that a social imaginary has several important elements. First, it relates to the way 'ordinary people imagine their social surroundings', not in a theoretical sense but in terms of an imagined future reality that is understood for the present as depicted in images, dreams and stories. Second, it is shared by large groups of people. Third, it provides a set of common understandings that are tightly 'interwoven with an idea of how [things] ought to go' (Taylor 2007, 120) and therefore confirm certain ideas and practices as legitimate. A social imaginary, then, is socially constructed, widely shared, and has a tremendous pedagogical effect on populations by normalizing and legitimating particular social understandings. It achieves hegemonic status as it influences how people think about the nature and scope of government and society and social institutions such as education. The key point in relation to this paper is that participating in school choice is participating in the construction and legitimation of the most powerful and dominant social imaginary in the current historical period – which is, according to Rizvi and Lingard (2010), the relatively coherent set of discourses and practices that form 'the neo-liberal imaginary' through which large numbers of the general public imagine their present and future social existence. The upshot is that the neoliberal social imaginary has been asserted rather fluidly over time. However, it now seems so intransigent that alternative imaginaries are displaced by the broad acceptance of what is presented as the neoliberal 'reality'. For instance, there has long been agreement among the main political parties in Australia (and elsewhere) on the promotion of school 'choice' and strict accountability and reporting measures. These concepts, and others that make up the neoliberal policy framework, have been heavily marketed to the Australian public, most recently by means of the much-hyped My School website.

Promoting 'school choice' has become the central plank of the neoliberal education policy complex that has become entrenched in many counties over the past 20–30 years (Rizvi and Lingard 2010). The policy direction in Australia has increasingly emphasized notions of markets and consumer choice. This is, of course, reflected in the My School website, which Prime Minister Gillard promised would open up 'a new era of transparency' (quoted in Chee-Chin Lee and Caldwell 2011, 169) that would enable parents to make informed school choices. This move is said by its advocates to have introduced 'fairness' into the process of school choosing. Indeed, the chairman of the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority claimed after its initial launch that:

> Fair comparisons are those made among schools that work with similar students. For the My School website we have created an index of socio-economic advantage that reflects the home conditions of students … We have then arranged the schools in order of this index and, for each school, offered comparisons with the 30schools immediately below it and the 30 immediately above it. (McGaw 2010)

The 60 schools included in each comparison are said to be 'like' schools in that their Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage scores are similar. They are compared with each other according to the 'performance' of their students on NAPLAN tests. Comparisons are also provided between any particular school and other 'local' schools. Although the government and the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority assured the public that there was no intention of creating 'league tables' of schools, within days of the My School launch league tables based on the data had been published in most national and metropolitan newspapers. *The Australian* newspaper has gone a step further and maintains a rival website, 'Your School',[3] which, as well as maintaining national and State league tables, is promoted as being easier for the public to use.

The launch of the My School website was something of an online phenomenon. It had been heavily promoted by politicians and media. Mockler (2012, 3) identified 484 articles published between October 2009 and August 2010 in 'capital city or national daily newspapers that had MySchool as a primary focus'. The Federal Minister for Education recently claimed proudly: 'We know parents use and appreciate My School. On the launch date, the site had around 30 million page views' (Garrett 2012, 2). This level of popularity is indicative of the extent to which the logic of school choice has been implanted in the popular imagination. In a Gramscian sense, waves of neoliberal reform have 'reshaped the common sense of society' (Apple 2009, 240) and, as Mockler explains:

> Through the lens of common-sense, these narratives position MySchool and the ensuing league tables not only as justifiable, but indeed necessary to the educational health of individual children and society as a whole. (2012, 14)

The government's logic behind the creation of the site illustrates its acceptance of the neoliberal policy framework. Under conditions of 'transparency' and 'quality control', both of which are supposedly provided by My School, it is argued that market discipline and consumer choice will force schools to continually strive to out-perform each other. This has long been seen by different Australian governments as necessary to 'drive up' education standards and also to drive the economic competitiveness of the country. Such policies have imposed a very powerful disciplinary template over schools. Within this performative and regulatory policy regime, the edicts of the neoliberal global consensus (Rizvi and Lingard 2010) have been incorporated into national education legislation that has effectively brought education into the service of the global economy. The aim is that, through policies of competition and choice, education will become increasingly more 'productive' and the economy more competitive and successful. As Moutsios (2010) summarizes this argument, the power of education policy lies in 'the increasingly global acceptance of a specific perception of what education should be about: to maintain or increase "economic competitiveness" or "growth" or "development" or, ultimately, "progress"'. Moutsios argues:

> The prevalence of policy-making at both national and transnational levels, through managerial bureaucracies, should be taken in conjunction with economic globalization, which de-democratizes decision-making processes, as a number of studies have remarked … As a consequence, education politics as the activity of teachers/academics, learners and parents to question and reflect on the purpose, the contents and the pedagogic mode of learning, is superseded by transnational policy-making, which aims primarily at generating the cognitive and human resources required by labour markets. (2010, 129)

Educational politics and social re-shaping

Clearly, fundamental notions such as education, and even democracy, have been refashioned over the past 30 years. Within the politics of marketization, the assumption that is continually endorsed is that, as Kelly (2010, 57) puts it, 'democracy flourishes best in a competitive market economy with minimal state intervention, and emphasizes individual freedom at the expense of the social'. This way of looking at the world, in which education is subordinate to the economy, has become seemingly normalized. At its most fundamental level, then:

> … under the conditions of neoliberal globalization, capitalist criteria and values are incorporated into what is defined and what is measured as progress

> of societies and they are expressed in education policies across the world through the reform agendas of transnational institutions. (Moutsios 2010, 136)

Issues of student engagement at the local level are caught up in performative regimes as schools try to demonstrate that they meet and exceed mandated standards and perform well on high-stakes tests. All of this does 'symbolic violence' to alternative educational ideas and imagined educational futures that might be built along inherently 'educational' rather than economic and competitive lines. Notions of individualism, commodification and market have led to 'poor' student performance being represented as the responsibility of individual schools and bad parental choices rather than a result of socio-political, cultural and economic factors (Angus 2012). Yet, despite the ubiquitousness of school choice policies, the international literature suggests that it is middle-class families – those with sufficient family capital to take advantage of the opportunities school choice policies offer, or with sufficient 'parental imaginary' (Yoon and Gulson 2010) to envisage the potential benefits of seeking out the 'best' schools – who most assiduously attempt to improve the social advantages of their children through the 'choice' mechanism. Of particular interest in a number of countries in which neoliberal framing of education policy is apparent – the United Kingdom (Ball 2003a; Power et al. 2003; Vincent, Ball, and Kemp 2004; Reay, Crozier, and James 2011), the USA (Brantlinger 2003; Lubienski, Gulosino, and Weitzel 2009), Australia (Angus 2004; Lingard 2010), Canada (Yoon and Gulson 2010) and even China (Wu 2011) – is the investigation of 'the politics of class privilege and how middle-class families cement, or struggle to maintain, their social positioning and educational advantage' (McLeod 2009). An influential Australian example of such research is that of Campbell, Proctor, and Sherington (2009), who deal specifically with the anxieties of middle-class parents trying to gain access to the 'best' private schools, or at least to 'high-performing' public schools.

Such anxiety and emotional investment should not be surprising in a world in which, as Bourdieu has pointed out (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977; Bourdieu 1998), individual educational success has largely replaced individual, inherited wealth as the mechanism for legitimating the reproduction of privilege and status in contemporary society. In this sense, 'schooling in Australia, as in many OECD [and other] nations, has become the site par excellence for class formation' (Rowe and Windle 2012, 139) and status legitimation. Bourdieu (1998) summarizes this argument as follows:

> The educational system … maintains the pre-existing order, that is, the gap between pupils endowed with unequal amounts of cultural capital. More precisely, by a series of selection operations, the system separates the holders of inherited cultural capital from those who lack it. Differences in aptitude being inseparable from social differences according to inherited capital, the system thus tends to maintain pre-existing social differences. (Quoted in Raffo 2011, 10)

This point about class reproduction is taken up by Coldron, Cripps, and Shipton (2010) to explain the desire of already-advantaged parents to protect and enhance their own and their children's social position by choosing schools that are not generally accessible to less advantaged students. Such schools enable their children to be largely cocooned within a social and cultural milieu that is redolent of middle-class values and aspirations. School segregation of this kind is reinforced by a demonization of 'the other' – of working-class and minority children, their families and their localities, which are associated with multiple deficits. This tends to result in segregated schools, in which, according to Coldron, Cripps, and Shipton:

> it is not working class parents' deficiency that is the problem [in causing class segregation in schools] but the collective strategic practice of the middle classes together with their historical achievements in influencing policy, and establishing congenial structures, and procedures. At the same time [school segregation] is a practice which necessarily characterizes less affluent and less well-educated parents as less deserving and incompetent and their children to be avoided as peers for [middle class] children. (2010, 24)

For advantaged parents, investing in strategic school choosing is investing in the future – not only in gaining access to what they regard as appropriate educational environments for their children, but also in avoiding the risks associated with 'other' milieux in which 'other people's children', from less advantaged backgrounds, are likely to congregate. Coldron, Cripps, and Shipton (2010, 24) claim that the concern of privileged parents to protect their children's inherited economic and cultural capital can reach a stage of panic about potential damage to their own children if they are exposed to the perceived negative influences of less advantaged children:

> While all parents are well aware of the potential influence of their children's peers and feel something of a moral panic as the children approach adolescence, for middle class parents this moral anxiety is felt acutely as they contemplate loss of advantage. Consequently, educational success becomes particularly important. This anxiety is projected on to less advantaged social groups whose way of life and the places they live are demonized. (2010, 24)

The identification of 'school choice' with middle-class strategizing and the segregation of their children in private schools or high-status public schools is quite common in Australia – a country in which more than one-third of all school-children attend non-government schools, and where the term 'school choice' has historically been associated with the policies of the Liberal Party, which promises to extend subsidies to non-government schools in order to make them accessible to more families.[4] However, by the time of the launch of the My School site, school choice had increasingly become a major consideration for students and their parents of all social classes,

although the choosing has been influenced by indirect factors as much as by direct factors.

In terms of the broad effects of school choice policies on localities, societies and globally, it is important to remember that the immediate realities of any individual choice-making are influenced by the entire educational context. The pervasiveness of choice, markets and accountability factors bears down upon, and shapes, the ways in which students, parents, teachers and communities engage with their local or 'chosen' schools. Extensive qualitative research in school settings over the past three decades has demonstrated that the neoliberal policy framework has had a major effect on school and teacher cultures (Wrigley, Lingard, and Thomson 2012; Zipin, Sellar, and Hattam 2012). Schools are quite different places than they would have been if such priority had not been given to concepts such as markets, choice and high-stakes testing. The dynamics of any particular school are framed by the wider regulative environment and are therefore affected by every other school and by the pervasive market situation that prevails across all schools. The resonance of both the rhetoric and the 'reality' of school choice is therefore having a profound impact on the kind of education provided by all schools, not just in Australia but internationally. The neoliberal position is that all responsible parents must choose carefully and vote with their feet in the consumer market that has been promoted in education and throughout society. Accordingly, it would be irresponsible parenting not to be an economically rational chooser of schools. This is the clear message of the My School website.

Of course, if parents are encouraged to choose from the full market range, schools must respond by representing themselves as worthy of being chosen. The images they present must connect with various parental imaginaries and their aspirational objectives. While published performance indicators are no doubt useful to choosers in differentiating among schools, the data provide an extremely limited and often distorted picture of what the schools are actually like (Gannon 2012). The array of numbers, tables, graphs and charts conveys an impression of thoroughness, accuracy and objectivity but, as Gannon (2012, 3) points out, 'all of these data-sets are based on a single test score in each domain'. Other criteria and different kinds of information about school performance are relegated to lesser importance or are completely overlooked. The 'impoverished statistical stories' (Gannon 2012, 11) are therefore thin, compressed accounts in which the major event in the school year is the NAPLAN testing and the key information is the set of NAPLAN results. The implied thoroughness and objectivity of the busy numeric detail clearly outruns the capacity of the data to convey very much information about the day-to-day life-worlds of schools. Any school is a unique assemblage in time and space, and there can be multiple stories and counter-stories in which, for example, 'what the teacher does

and how the teacher relates to and respects the students becomes important' (Gannon 2012, 7). As Gannon elaborates:

> It is important to know more about the micro-politics of pedagogies in context and about the productive little swerves that teachers and students make as they work together to co-construct knowledge from the resources that all of them bring to that pedagogical space. (2012, 10)

That is to say, all school performances are situated and context specific. But while noting such shortcomings of the My School data is important, this criticism potentially misses the full importance of the public display of information on the website. My School should be seen as a 'technology of government' (Rowe and Windle 2012, 138), a mechanism for controlling education. As well as My School ignoring the micro-contexts of schools, school practices and communities, it is equally important to emphasize that 'within education policy the prevailing focus has been on within-school processes; a focus that has often been at the expense of understanding the influence of the wider economic and social context of schooling' (Reay 2006, 289).

Privileged choosers and desirable schools

The most desirable market segment from the point of view of schools seeking market power is obviously children from middle-class families who have a proven record of educational success. In Australia, there has been a prolonged, gradual shift of students to private schools and also increasing competition for places at 'high-performing' government schools. It is not surprising, therefore, that choosing schools creates anxiety for parents in the competition for the 'top' schools (Campbell, Proctor, and Sherington 2009). Various fractions of the middle class, according to Campbell, Proctor, and Sherington (2009), share an intense desire to make the 'best' choices and have a common view of themselves as consumers in the fraught education market place. This concern puts academically selective government schools in a strong market position, particularly in New South Wales where a long tradition of such schools for high-flyers complicates the public/private binary. Other States have recently moved to also introduce or expand the number of selective schools in order to provide similar 'choice'. Although many 'aspirational' parents opt for these and other 'high-performing' government schools, the demand for places exceeds supply, in which case it is the schools that become the choosers. For less-advantaged parents, even if they are willing to strive to gain places for their children at prestigious schools, researchers such as Exley (2012), Gannon (2012) and Rowe and Windle (2012) have demonstrated that 'the contradiction emerges that for [most] disadvantaged families, aspirations to the most "desirable schools" will be

dashed because places at those schools will go to those living in affluent areas' (Exley 2012, 7).

While, for private schools, substantial fees tend to ensure that only middle-class candidates can 'choose' to be admitted, some government schools employ unofficial, often covert, selection mechanisms to protect or improve their academic standing by attracting 'more capable' students and excluding those deemed 'less capable'. Some government schools, generally in well-to-do areas, are known for their excellent results and are notoriously difficult for prospective students to access. High demand for entry is managed by such schools through a complicated mix of zoning, examination-based entry into 'accelerated programs', and specialized curriculum pathways. Their popularity has contributed to increases in property prices within their catchment areas as aspirational parents seek to buy houses there so their children will qualify for entry (Tsolidis 2006). The excellent results obtained by students at such schools enable some of them to compete favourably with private schools. Clearly, it is middle-class parents who have the greatest capacity to exercise choice within both the non-government and government sectors. Because of their financial and cultural resources, because their children are regarded as good risks, and because they are sufficiently education literate to compose applications that will gain their children places (Tsolidis 2006), they are usually successful in gaining admittance to 'acceptable' schools. Such parents are privileged choosers and skilled, strategic game players.

Jockeying for positions at 'good' government schools occurs nationally and internationally. More-privileged parents are likely to employ tutors to coach their children for entry examinations and to ensure that their children learn musical instruments and gain other cultural or extra-curricular experiences to signal to prospective schools their worthiness as students (Tsolidis 2006). Such competition is reinforced by My School. 'Responsible' but less-advantaged parents are encouraged to scour through the data and identify schools that might provide their children with an opportunity to be rescued from, or to escape from, regions of presumed cultural and academic deprivation and the deficits associated with them (Zipin, Sellar, and Hattam 2012). The 'fantasmatic logic' (Clarke 2012) of this position presents the 'illusion that choice is equally available to all' (Clarke 2012, 13). The ideological tenet at work here, which is fostered by My School, is that all have an equal right and opportunity to choose. In other words, there is nothing political about school choosing – just atomized, self-interested, rational choosers dispassionately acting to maximize their individual advantage in ways that are ostensibly equally open to all right-thinking and conscientious people.

The material effect of such fantasmatic idealism is that, in an environment in which differentiated educational outcomes can be explained merely by the failure of individual parents to choose schools properly – that is, by

bad parenting (Exley 2012) – governments and education systems can dispense with trying to make all schools good schools or trying to promote genuine equity. The hands-free, market-oriented, chooser-dependent mechanisms for controlling education explicitly tolerate inequality. Indeed, a hierarchy of unequal schools, which are ranked as putatively good and bad, and 'uncritically constructed as such on the basis of performance and reputation with the effect of intake barely acknowledged' (Coldron, Cripps, and Shipton (2010, 22), is a necessary prerequisite for justifying the choice ideology. Such policy assumptions tolerate the hierarchical sorting of learners, schools and communities, and have the effect of maintaining existing social segregation and reinforcing privilege. The upshot of all this is that the education market, like other political and social arrangements, works 'in the interests of the already advantaged' (Coldron, Cripps, and Shipton 2010, 26). It is the nature of its intake that largely defines the level of success and reputation of a school. Students from advantaged families are likely to be winners. And the 'successful' schools are invariably those that are able to attract and retain middle-class students. Such schools, of course, are typically located in areas in which privileged families already reside.

Identity and the social pattern of school choices

Somewhat ironically, given official encouragement to parents to make use of My School data in order to aim high when choosing schools, various researchers (for example, Coldron, Cripps, and Shipton 2010; Rowe and Windle 2012; Zipin, Sellar, and Hattam 2012) have found that the close study of school league tables and strategic manipulation of the system to gain admission to favoured schools is largely irrelevant to the most privileged parents. This is because 'for the majority of those with multiple advantages – social, financial, educational, residential – the work of getting their preferred school is often already done' (Coldron et al. 2010, 24) by virtue of their wealth, status and social position. Not that this prevents such parents from being 'fearful, alert and strategic' (Ball 2003b, 168) about choosing schools because downward social mobility, or 'downclassing', is unthinkable to them. Nonetheless, to be successful in the higher reaches of the market, schools cannot allow themselves to be perceived as 'ordinary' (Maguire et al. 2011) so they must represent themselves as being especially successful, distinctive, and desirable to this market segment regardless of the data available through the My School site. Rowe and Windle (2012) found that privileged parents tend to rely mainly on relationships networks when choosing schools and to choose those that will enable further networking opportunities. These authors acknowledge that even the most socially and economically advantaged families, who are able to mobilize significant financial and cultural capital, experience anxiety about choice of school. However, the concerns of this group of parents are quite distinctive:

> Middle-class participants indicate an awareness of distinct and growing segregation between schools and express the need to connect with a similar school community to augment their positional advantage. This behaviour reinforces the assertion that middle-class participants are seeking to 'escape the perceived risks of schools with many children from deprived backgrounds' (Field, Kuczera, and Pont 2007, 65), thus reproducing social class divisions through their familial social and cultural networks. (Rowe and Windle 2012, 148)

Localized school choosing occurs against the backdrop of performance statistics that enable some schools to claim they are high-achieving. A wide range of educational options is available to middle-class parents, and the school choice environment typically reinforces the social advantages available to this class through education. Working-class parents and students with limited resources are typically assumed to exercise little if any choice. Indeed, when it comes to My School data, as Wilson (2013, 127) observes, 'in many cases, most especially those of significant socio-economic disadvantage, the data serves merely to emphasize a *lack* of choice'. Overwhelmingly, the literature, as I have emphasized, indicates that middle-class parents possess the cultural and financial advantages to operate within the school choice environment to ensure that their own children's social and educational advantages are preserved. The key point is that working-class families are not advantaged at all by the seemingly neutral assumptions that, as discussed above, make the passage into schools with good reputations relatively easy for most middle-class students (Ball et al. 2002). These students and their parents possess the kind of social capital that gels comfortably with the central concept of school choice; namely, that the parent is a consumer. Working-class parents are less likely to feel comfortable or familiar operating within such consumerist logic. This reinforces the point that notions of 'good' parental choosing, as well as 'good' educational attitudes, aspirations and performance, are socially constructed in keeping with implicit middle-class norms.

Smyth et al. (2008, 2009) indicate that the strong sense of connection of many working-class families to the local community, compared with the more cosmopolitan life-worlds of more affluent families, inclines many less-advantaged families to stick with people who are like themselves in areas with which they are familiar. Local schools are important social institutions and 'community anchors' (Lipman 2011, 223) in such neighbourhoods. In any case, by choosing local schools, such families may be making a virtue out of necessity by 'choosing what they cannot avoid' (Coldron, Cripps, and Shipton 2010, 30). Attempting to gain admission to schools favoured by middle-class parents is unlikely to be successful. Overall, as Lipman (2011, 227) puts it, 'Parents are positioned as consumers in an education marketplace rather than as citizens … who deserve a quality, relevant education in their neighbourhood'. Working-class or minority parents and their

children who *do* attempt to 'act as good consumers and conscientiously compare schools' (Coldron, Cripps, and Shipton 2010, 22), and who buy into the discursive logic of trying to gain opportunities through school choice, can be regarded as 'classing up', and may have to forgo, to some extent at least, their working-class identity (Smyth et al. 2008, 2009). Deciding to pursue educational success, for them, often means choosing to become a different sort of person, as Ball et al. explain:

> The risks and reflexivity of the middle classes are about staying as they are and who they are. Those of the working classes are about being different people in different places, about who they might become [through education] and what they must give up. (2002, 69)

By 'classing up', such young people become different and occupy different social places from their parents. Their imagined futures and 'new' identities may conflict with the 'old'. This point is crucially important because, as Lee and Anderson explain, it is difficult for such young people to form the required 'new' educational identities:

> In the educational context, questions of identity are especially critical because the development of educational practice and policies is grounded in different ways of understanding who learners are or should be. How students interpret and develop their identities in a given context is shaped by self-perceptions, desires, hopes and expectations as well as the salient aspects of social context, such as sociopolitical ideologies, histories and structures that are often beyond the control of an individual. (Quoted in Raffo 2011, 3)

This important point is ignored within neoliberal policy discourse. In the prevailing rhetoric of school choice, competition and performance, educational success is assumed to be the product of natural merit and conscientious choosing, not of social privilege.

Issues of school choice are emotionally complex and far from simple, particularly for less-advantaged families whose social and cultural capital is not congruent with the consumerist norms and assumptions about education that the current quasi-market in schooling privileges. Such considerations are connected to the ways in which less-advantaged families have previously interacted with schools, which has not been from a position of strength – unlike the typical experience of middle-class families. Such variable engagement raises questions of culture and identity. Research since the 1970s has shown that

> … the cultural habits brought to school by significant proportions of students are not utilized or scaffolded to traditional school learning methods and contents … Rather, their lack of fit with the culturally arbitrary selections that are valued by school becomes individualized and internalized as 'failure'. (Raffo 2011, 11)

The important point here is that in envisaging different possible selves, which is necessarily a social and embodied process not just an individual one, students from advantaged families are much more likely to think about possible future selves who are educationally successful. Indeed, educational success is almost invariably a necessary prerequisite for the futures imagined.

Conclusion: imagining possible selves and alternative futures

Forms of social imaginary are essential to various notions of 'good' and 'bad' schools. The task for educational sociology is therefore to problematize and 're-imagine' the prevailing neoliberal imaginary in order to think into existence alternative, more democratic and more educationally appropriate futures that will not discriminate against less-privileged families who are already disadvantaged within the education system. It is essential to think about, and to assert, a counter-hegemonic 'socially democratic imaginary' (Angus 2012) that would be an educative and socially just alternative. Further analysis of the subtle effects on people, schools and society of currently hegemonic education policies needs to draw out the identity implications of school choices through an examination of families' aspirations and expectations, their family capitals, and social imaginaries. Of course, identities and imagined futures are never static. They are continually emerging in relation to social contexts and life-experiences. Shifts in one's sense of self and sense of one's possible future occur as a result.

This paper is intended to illustrate that school choice is not merely a matter of parents and children calmly thinking about schools on offer and rationally deciding upon which seems best. In the neoliberal world, choices are actively shaped not only by schools marketing themselves, but also through the pervasiveness of the neoliberal social imaginary in education and throughout contemporary society. By this I mean the consolidation of the various elements of neoliberalism into a set of discourses and practices that, as illustrated by the prominence given to the My School website in Australia, cohere around concepts of competition, market, accountability and choice. This social imaginary, according to Rizvi and Lingard (2010), has overwhelmed other possible imaginaries that might be considered more 'educational' and socially democratic.

The theoretical framing of this paper has employed a number of interrelated conceptual tools that may be able to inform an innovative and contemporary engagement with the social contexts of school choice-making. Zipin, Sellar, and Hattam make the further point that:

> In much of the recent policy and media discourse, the aspirations of communities, parents and students are represented as culture-neutral, individual and

> primarily economic desires, such as for financial or career advancement, or for material goods. (2012, 186)

The view of culture and aspiration being presented within twenty-first-century political discourse is bland and seemingly settled according to the norms and preferences of capital and the dominant social class. This has the effect of inducing 'less powerful groups to subscribe to a future defined in terms of passively received dominant norms' (Zipin, Sellar, and Hattam 2012, 186). Promoting 'aspiration' in education therefore encourages everyone to succeed in neoliberal terms. For the less-advantaged in society, this means aspiring to what their 'betters' have. This is the future that is presented to us through social institutions such as government, the media and, increasingly, education. As Thomson, Lingard, and Wrigley (2012, 2) explain: 'reductive conceptualizations of schooling for human capital development legitimate a limited range of solutions, which always include more standardized approaches to schooling, more competition and more public accountabilities'. The essential criticism of the neoliberal imaginary, then, is that:

> … it is not the planetary scale of modern economies, communications and cultures that is the problem, but the global dominance of capitalism, particularly in its fortified neoliberal version, and the gross inequalities and injustices that it produces. (Wrigley, Lingard, and Thomson 2012, 98)

Within such capitalist logic, education, like other services, is treated as a commodity, and its inherent complexity is reduced to managerial simplicity and blind faith in market solutions and the capacities of self-interested consumers. Most importantly, such commodification, not just of education but of social life in general, as Lipman argues:

> represents not only a capital accumulation strategy but a social imaginary of a market-driven [society] in which 'citizens' are differentially rewarded competitive consumers whose success depends on their entrepreneurship and individual effort … Looked at this way, neoliberalism is a *process* that works its way into the discourses and practices of society through the actions of not just elites, but also marginalized and oppressed people acting within the constraints and limitations of the present situation. (2011, 230)

The neoliberal social imaginary may be future-oriented in terms of economic aspiration, but the standardized, backward-looking assessment, curriculum and pedagogy that it fosters in education are likely to make schools more boring places for all students – but particularly for less-advantaged and minority students whose cultural dissonance with traditional, mainstream, conservative schooling practices and high-stakes testing is most pronounced (Lipman 2011). These schooling practices explicitly reinforce the *status quo*. The problem for those who are less advantaged is that they are 'structurally constrained' in achieving neoliberal aspirations because,

'when pursuing a future defined in relation to the axioms of capital, those with less access to social, cultural or economic resources must aspire in competition with those who have greater access' (Zipin, Sellar, and Hattam 2012, 187) and who are competing on a much more comfortable and familiar terrain. The competition is stacked. The hegemony of neoliberalism:

> makes it difficult for the less powerful to imagine and articulate designs for futures that are not defined in dominant terms. Indeed, to not aspire in capitalist terms is to risk appearing as though one has no aspiration at all. (Zipin, Sellar, and Hattam 2012, 187)

This situation militates against teachers, students and communities re-imagining new possibilities and alternative futures.

This is not to argue that schools can do nothing to redress the situation for less-advantaged and minority students, but it *is* to argue that schools serving students who have been put at a disadvantage are unlikely to achieve much by simply trying to compete in neoliberal terms. Such an approach merely entrenches greater social and economic differentiation. Although my emphasis in this paper has been on critique of normalized neoliberal values and positions, my colleagues and I (along with many others) have discussed elsewhere ways of working in educational and political ways to provide better recognition and opportunities for young people who have been put at a disadvantage by the prevailing societal norms and power structures (Smyth et al. 2008, 2009; Angus 2012; Smyth and McInerney 2012; see also Thomson, Lingard, and Wrigley 2012). These authors employ positive conceptual tools that are consistent with the notion of a 'social democratic imaginary' in education (Lingard 2010; Rizvi and Lingard 2010). As I have elaborated elsewhere (Angus 2012), these include radical versions of funds knowledge, assets-based education, anti-deficit discourse, inclusion of diversity, and critical thinking about the multiple purposes of schooling in terms of social justice, economic opportunity and democratic outcomes. Hence there is an urgent need to continue to build 'alternative theoretical resources for thinking about education at systemic, policy, school and pedagogic levels' (Thomson, Lingard, and Wrigley 2012, 2). That is the intention of this paper.

Notes

1. Some ideas included in this paper were first canvassed in a funding submission to the Australian Research Council written by myself and Professor Georgina Tsolidis of the University of Ballarat. I, of course, take responsibility for the way they are presented and argued in this paper.
2. See http://www.myschool.com.au/.
3. See http://www.theaustralian.com.au/national-affairs/in-depth/your-school.
4. See http://www.liberal.org.au/Issues/Education.aspx.

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