Crossing the Public/Private Divide: Teachers and Their Work Choices

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School Choice and Teachers

In the burgeoning school choice research little, if any, attention has been given to the choices made by the providers of educational services. Yet the work-place preferences shown by teachers and school administrators impacts profoundly on educational practice and helps illuminate some of the important issues raised in the school choice literature, such as the impact of marketisation on school planning, infrastructure and service delivery in public and private schools, social justice and resource distribution, to name a few (Beavis 2004; Adnett 1999; David et al 1997; ; Gerwirtz, Ball & Bowe 1995; Smyth 1993; Walford 1996;).

I take up a double challenge here. Firstly, I aim to describe and analyse the workplace choices exercised by a range of teachers and to discuss their social implications. Secondly, I seek to find productive ways of summarising an enormous amount of interview transcripts into a readable, vibrant narrative that does not wrench research subjects out of their social context (Bowe, Gewirtz & Ball 1994) and reduce their often exciting stories of ‘into atomistic quotes and isolated variables’ (Kvale 1996:254). In so far as Bowe et al and Kvale are correct, this paper is an experiment in the writing up of qualitative research aimed at addressing the representational issues they raise.

The data for this paper are drawn from interviews conducted in 2005 with eighteen teachers who volunteered to talk with me about their choices of workplace. These interviews formed part of a wider project considering the issue of “school choice”
from the perspective of parents, students and teachers who had taken the decision to shift either from government to non-government schooling, or in the other direction – from the private to the public (See Author 2008). In interviewing people who had switched systems the aim was to move beyond impressions that are often expressed about an unknown ‘other’ towards documenting and evaluating the reflections that emerge from actual experience of both government and non-government education.

The interviews were conducted with a commitment to understanding the breadth and depth of the socio-cultural influences on individual life courses. In addressing the representational issues raised above, I processed the data by turning each interview transcript into a biographical narrative in the form of a short portrait of the interviewee(s). Reflecting my commitment to practice theory (see Bourdieu 1977; 1998; Ortner 1989 and Author 2007), the aim was to locate the cultural and structural context of the interviewee’s life within a summary of the beliefs, the values, the material conditions and structural forces underpinning the socially patterned behavior of the person that emerged through the interview. The bulk of this paper focuses on the work choice biographies of two of the men I met in 2005, whom I call Anthony and Jonathon. The great is often found in the small (Flyvbjerg 1997) so I use these stories not only as a means of depicting the predictable complexities evident in the career choices made by any teacher, but also as vehicles for reflecting on the patterns that emerged in the life stories related to me through this project. I open with Anthony’s story as one of a teacher who has moved back and forth several times between the government and non-government sector in his life time as it illustrates the variety of personal, cultural and structural factors that typically influence the work choice stories of all those interviewed.
Standing for Justice: Anthony’s Story

Born in Malaysia into an Indian family of Catholic persuasion, in the mid-1960s Anthony came to Australia when he was ten years old. Settling in Perth, he initially attended his local government primary school before enrolling at a Christian Brother’s college to complete his secondary education. When he matriculated in 1971, Anthony felt Australia was strongly committed to principles of social justice and a community spirit, which gave him an impetus towards teacher training at a Catholic institution in the state of Victoria. While he quite enjoyed his first appointment at a Western Australian Catholic boy’s school things turned sour at his second school which he reports as being run by an authoritarian nun. Experiencing a number of personal problems at the time, Anthony readily describes his teaching then as inadequate. This caused his superiors to ‘press down hard’ without any real understanding of what he was going through: ‘no-one came to help me out; they just said I was doing it wrongly; so I left.’

After six months away from the classroom Anthony found another teaching job in a Catholic school in a working class suburb, where he worked for four years. In this period he married Cecilia, who was training to be a teacher at that time. When she graduated they sought positions in the government system and were quite prepared to teach in some of the remote areas of Western Australia. However, just as Anthony resigned his post at the Catholic school, Cecilia became pregnant. Their priorities shifted and Anthony was given a temporary position in a metropolitan government school. Anthony was then posted to a rural school in 1988, from where he secured his permanency. Shortly after returning to Perth in 1989, Anthony’s second daughter was
born. Despite attaining Advanced Skills Teacher status in 1993, a designation aimed at keeping good teachers in the classroom, Anthony took up a Deputy Principalship in a Wheatbelt town in 1998. Cecelia and her and his two daughters did not enjoy life in this rural township, causing Anthony to take long service leave in order to return to Perth in 1999. This enabled him to try his hand in the Catholic system again, and while the Assistant Principal position he secured at St Laurence school, in the Hills east of Perth, did not carry any concerns about permanency, it was not long before Anthony became dissatisfied with what he experienced there. Returning to the government system the following year, he was appointed to a school 80 kilometres east of the metropolitan area. His daughters, who were both attending a Catholic girl’s school in Perth’s leafy Western Suburbs, stayed with Cecelia in Perth while he commuted back and forth on weekends, something he did for the two years before securing an appointment on the fringes of metropolitan Perth. In 2005, when the interview reported here took place, he had just been given a job in a school in a working class suburb of the city.

Looking back, Anthony is adamant that the Education Department looks after its staff much better than Catholic schools do, particularly new teachers. In the Catholic schools it was ‘sink or swim’, whereas in government schools there is a greater emphasis on mentoring new teachers. Anthony is in no doubt that the government school system’s accommodation of teacher unionism bestows upon public schools, ‘a strong regard for processes and people’s rights’. According to Anthony ‘in the non-government system, management has all the prerogative, whereas in the government system there’s a counterbalancing process where people can step into the union or get them to mitigate some of the potential excesses that principals have’. While Anthony
is by no means uncritical of ‘the stultifying effects of union regulations’, he supports the general principles of justice and the systems of negotiation they bring to the workplace.

Social justice remains a key concern for Anthony and he remains a committed Catholic. From the purview of the working class school he works at in the South-Eastern suburbs of Perth, where very few parents can afford a non-government high school option for their child, he is deeply concerned about the widening gulf between the government and non-government school sector. His experience tells him that Catholic schools are becoming increasingly elitist. Noting that parents were now sending their children to non-government schools in order that they can ‘get away from the state school population’, Anthony argued that he had witnessed a dramatic turn around in attitudes to both systems. In contrast to when he was a student in Catholic education, ‘it is the state schools that are the working class schools now’.

Lamenting the loss of the egalitarian ethic that he found so exciting when he first came to Australia, Anthony argues the need for all schools to be linked into a national system of education, one in which ‘all schools regardless of sector were obliged to take all comers and were not able to simply discard the students they don’t like, or find difficult to deal with’. This is the sort of vision for education and society that keeps Anthony working where he is, that keeps him committed to making a difference in the lives of the students he teaches and the teachers he works with.

Looking for Complete Involvement: Jonathan’s Story
Jonathan was born in Perth in the early 1950s and is a product of the state school system. It is a badge he wears with some pride and looks back on with some pleasure. He enjoyed school and was, in his words a compliant and engaged student.

Matriculating in 1967, Jonathon enrolled at university initially to do an industrial chemistry degree. While he quite liked the subject matter, he had no passion for it. Reminding himself that he liked working with kids, Jonathon bonded himself to the Education Department, agreeing to give three years of teaching service on graduation in return for a government scholarship.

Upon entering the teaching profession in 1972, Jonathan followed the path taken by most Commonwealth Scholarship recipients, in that he was appointed to a rural school. After four years in this small, South-West school, Jonathan wanted to teach science at higher levels and applied for a transfer back to Perth, where he worked for eight years before taking up a promotional position in another southern township, a posting that he and his family enjoyed immensely. By this stage he had two children; their third child was born ‘down south’.

Eventually Jonathon was promoted to Deputy Principal and in 1991 he transferred to a mining town in the state’s northwest. By this time his eldest child was getting close to high school age. This meant that Jonathan and his wife were keen to locate closer to Perth, particularly when their daughter took up an academic scholarship in 1991 at one of Perth’s elite Anglican boarding schools. Meanwhile Jonathan and his family moved to a town a little over 300 km to the south east of Perth and stayed there for three years.
Keen to reunite with his eldest child Jonathan eventually got a transfer back to the city and worked as a Deputy Principal in the eastern suburbs of Perth for a further two years. Jonathan was struck by the profound commitment his eldest daughter showed to her new school. He saw in her a passionate commitment that he had not seen in any individual in his twenty-four years in the government school system. All ‘noble thoughts’ of being with Rosalyn for her final years of school disappeared in the almost total involvement she had in her school: ‘She was in everything, drama, music, public speaking, mock trials, you name it she would get into it. What we found is because we were so close to the school we actually didn’t have a daughter at home anyway; she was always at school or in the boarding house.

Rosalyn’s commitment to her schooling had a profound impact on Jonathan. When he started looking at what she was getting out of her education, he began to wonder what the staff might be getting out of the experience and decided that he wanted to be part of that system. A position arose at a high-fee Anglican school, which Jonathan successfully applied for. He has been there since 1996 and is currently the Head of the senior school. Jonathan is very pleased with his move. Reflecting on his promotion to Senior School Head, Jonathan notices how, without any compulsion, he committed himself to a complete involvement in school life. Living on site, Saturdays he would watch sport, on Sundays it was chapel, he was in musical productions, attending all sorts of meetings, ‘in everything’, which was precisely the reason Jonathan swapped systems. ‘It wasn’t a burden. I wasn’t doing it to impress anybody; that’s what I wanted to be’. Jonathan is not deeply religious, so Anglicanism was not a big draw card for him. As he puts it, ‘the worshipping bit I can take or leave’. His commitment to the Anglican school comes more from what it allows him to do. The freedom it
gives him to get involved in the lives of the students is something he could not find in the government system.

Jonathan readily acknowledges that available resources plays a significant part in the differences he has experienced, but he also thinks that there is something in government schools that does not engender the enthusiastic embrace of such a wide range of activities. Jonathan has observed a much greater willingness on the part of those working in his current school to get involved in extra-curricular activities than he saw in the state system. While the extra money his current colleagues receive compared with their state school counterparts undoubtedly helps, he also feels that the teachers at his present school show greater levels of commitment to the whole curriculum. Having paying customers focuses the mind of those working at the school on the level of service they deliver, Jonathan is sure of that, but he never witnessed such a willing accountability to parents in the six state schools he worked at.

Looking back on his career, Jonathan is grateful for the opportunities the state school system provided to him and his family to experience many and varied places in Western Australia. He also recognises that working in the state system allowed him the time to spend with his family in these different places. But for now he is enjoying the more total experience that the high-fee Anglican school offers him:

I continue to enjoy going along and watching the productions and seeing the boys train out here on you know every afternoon of the week and the things like rowing and all those things. Going to the chapel, even though as I’ve started earlier I’m not a deeply religious person at all; it’s a remarkable place and when you’re in there twice a week hearing boys singing hymns, it’s amazing you know? It is an amazing experience, yeah!

Publicly Minded, Privately Focused: Patterns and Processes
Eighteen teachers were interviewed for this project. Anthony and Jonathon’s stories act as a backdrop for reading and interpreting the more general patterns emerging out of the research reported on here. I have argued elsewhere (Author 2007) that one cannot understand the shifts in education in Western Australia without an appreciation of the vastness of the state and the significance of the enormous concentration of the citizenry in and on the capital city. Close to three quarters of the Western Australian population live in Perth and reflecting this reality, the majority of teachers seek a position in the city at some stage of their career. Anthony’s and Jonathan’s biographies illustrate some important issues impacting upon teachers and their choice of workplace. We can hear in both accounts some of the personal, familial and social issues surrounding the generally held requirement for teachers to complete some form or rural service before they are granted permanent employment in the various state-run government education systems of Australia. Gender clearly plays a significant role in teacher location and while Anthony’s story helps show the struggle men can have in juggling the requirements of the education department with those of their family, it is interesting to note that of the ten women interviewed the only ones who achieved permanency in the government system did so when they were single and in all cases this permanency was threatened or lost once they had children. Reflecting this reality, two of the four women who had moved to the non-government sector in recent years did so because of the vulnerabilities and frustrations caused by their lack of permanency in the system.

A final element worth reflecting on is the point made in much of the school choice literature regarding the intensification it causes in social reproduction (Bowe, Gerwirtz and Ball 1994). While this study of the choices made by educational
providers complicates the reproduction picture somewhat, with both Anthony and Jonathon demonstrating their commitment to pursuing the public good in the diverging choice stories they tell, compared with the majority of interviewees in this project their obvious commitment to the system in which they currently work was a little unusual. Most of those who moved from the non-government sector to the government sector did so because of some level of disillusionment with the education bureaucracy, while the majority of those who moved from a non-government school into the government system reported doing so because of the pressures arising out of the various demands made of them as a consequence of being in a high fee, high demand school. While the majority of interviewees were ‘publicly minded’ their practice reflected a more private focus, this is also true for some of the teachers who would wish it were otherwise.

Taking one further example to close with, Lorraine was one of the very few teachers interviewed whose children attended government schools for all twelve years of their education, yet her profound commitment to government education was not enough to sustain her in government schooling as a teacher. Despite having worked in public education for close to twenty years she was never in the system on a sustained enough basis to secure tenure. Because her aged parents were starting to need more attention from her, she was keen to find an appointment in a school closer to home but the state education department were unable or unwilling to accommodate this need. ‘The department doesn’t give a stuff about you’ argued Loraine, ‘temporary teachers operate in the same way as part-time teachers operate [in the private schools] in that they're this expandable, contractable resource which the system actually requires but at the expense of the person who’s in that position’. In the way that Loraine’s
experience contrasts markedly with the mens’ stories related in some depth here, it
tells us much of what needs to be done to honour the good intentions pursued by
many teachers, regardless of whether they choose to work in public or private schools.

Ways need to be found of allowing teachers in government schools, particularly
women, to overcome some of the bureaucratic constraints they face without
sacrificing some of the structural advantages that Anthony draws to our attention.
Similarly for those pursuing meaningful work in the non-government system, it is
important to find ways of enabling teachers to pursue their commitments to the public
good without burning themselves out in the process.

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