Mothers and School Choice: Effects on the Home Front

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This thesis is presented for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY
2006

FACULTY OF EDUCATION
University of Technology, Sydney
Certificate of Authorship

I certify that the work in this thesis has not previously been submitted for a degree nor has it been submitted as part of any requirements for a degree except as fully acknowledged within the text.

I also certify that the thesis has been written by me. Any help I have received in the research and preparation of the thesis itself has been acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

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Acknowledgements

Text is a social product and this thesis is no exception. Many people, experiences and interactions contributed to its production.

Firstly I would like to thank Lyn Yates who encouraged me to pursue this topic in the first place. Her guidance and friendship through the early stages of the research were invaluable. I also need to thank Lori Beckett who supervised me in Lyn’s absence. Alison Lee has been a great mentor in recent years; offering insightful and timely advice at crucial stages. I am especially indebted to Kitty te Riele and Dave Boud who ‘took me on’ for the intensive last seven months of candidature. I thoroughly enjoyed the collegiality and professionalism that characterised this supervisory experience and I am especially grateful to Kitty for her diligent and thoughtful feedback.

Of course this research could not have happened without the generosity of the women who came forward to participate. I am privileged to have been part of their lives and grateful for the warmth, generosity and honesty they showed me. I hope I have presented your stories well.

I am also grateful to the friends and colleagues who supported me over the years. Thanks especially to Janice Catterall and my colleagues at UWS for their professional and personal support, and for buffering me from excessive work demands. Thanks to my many friends for their help and affirmation; the ‘bridge club’ that provided me with a regular escape and large doses of laughter; the neighbours who helped us through the hard times; and my family near and far.

A very special ‘thank you’ goes to those family members who suspended their needs while I worked on this doctorate; my parents who put their aging and ailments on hold till I’d finished “whatever it is that you’re doing”, my partner, Philip, and my children, Lily and Victoria. Thank you for your love, understanding and endurance.
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Abstract

There have been substantial changes in the way that families interact with schooling at the point of school choice. These shifts have been brought about by market orientated educational policy changes, and by altered forms and experiences of ‘family’. This study explores this changed dynamic by researching how a group of mothers in one urban setting engaged in school choice over a period of fourteen months.

The research set out to investigate the processes, behaviours and influences that mothers took to the task of choosing secondary schooling for their children. In particular it aimed to explore the personal, familial, cultural and social dimensions of this engagement.

These objectives were pursued using feminist and phenomenological frames because these theoretical approaches allowed for a gendered and contextualised analysis of experience. Data was gathered longitudinally through return interviews with 20 women from one socially and culturally diverse local government area in Sydney, Australia. The analysis of data is informed by perspectives on markets and consumerism from the field of cultural studies. Bourdieu’s concepts of ‘capital’, ‘habitus’ and ‘field’ were also used along with the feminist concepts of ‘emotional labour’ and ‘emotional capital’ to analyse the way that neoliberal market orientated educational policies impacted on this group of middle Australians.

This research shows that the Australian experience of school choice is an emotionally rich, highly context-specific, complex, gendered and cooperative process that contests the prevailing public rhetoric about the operations of markets and of choice. School choice, while not always welcomed by this group of middle Australians, is an overtly gendered activity mostly overseen and undertaken by mothers in gender-specific ways. For these women school choice was an activity that demanded considerable physical and emotional labouring adding significantly to mothers’ work in support of their children’s education. Further, the research showed how within this new marketised context, the family became the site for the contestation of taste via the negotiation of differing economic, social, cultural and emotional capitals vis a vis the structural imperatives imposed by the market. It showed that for these women and their families in this location, at this time, the promise of ‘choice’ was a hollow promise indeed.