

## **The dismantling of a great education system**

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Placing children in school ghettos harms the children and the society, writes Jane Caro.

As a parent, particularly of teenagers, it can be difficult sometimes to recognise when you are actually protecting your child from real risk or danger, and when you are in fact only managing your own anxiety and therefore using your child to protect yourself.

While this is understandable in parents, it becomes problematic when the management of parental anxiety becomes the basis for public policy.

Yet that is precisely what Australia is doing at the moment with the entire school system. We don't call it parental anxiety, however - we call it parental choice.

The trend in education is to place our children in ghettos of one kind or another. We put girls with girls, boys with boys, Catholics with Catholics, Jews with Jews, smart children with smart children, Muslims with Muslims, and so on. Worse, we are rapidly developing a system that puts poor kids with poor kids and rich kids with rich kids.

Indeed, Gerard Henderson on this page last Tuesday ("Why private schools get public money") appeared to suggest that wealthier parents who send their children to public schools are somehow reprehensible, so presumably even some of our public thinkers now see this separation of our kids according to sex, religion, class and income as a good thing.

When human beings feel anxious, and social researcher Hugh Mackay calls this the "Age of Anxiety", they seek the security of the familiar. Hence the fear many parents now seem to have about other people's children, particularly if they are perceived to come from a different background.

The brilliant recent TV documentary about Canterbury Boy's High in Sydney showed a school community where white, middle-class faces have virtually disappeared. Would white, middle-class children really have been worse off attending such a school? Or is their absence just another symptom of the way parents are using their children to manage their own anxieties about the future?

Is it, for example, good parenting to immediately pull a child out of a school because there are disruptive children in the class, or they have a teacher they don't really get on with? What will that same child do later when confronted with a difficult boss and disruptive colleagues?

The really important question, then, is whether the solutions we choose will actually protect our children. Does anyone else sense a cold wind approaching if we continue down this path?

Just as we cannot actually protect our children from the inevitable ups and downs of life, however much we would like to, so we cannot protect our children from one another indefinitely, no matter how hard we try. If we continue this trend of putting our children only with other children who are just like them, we will end up with a segregated school system, by default.

It is not possible to maintain a classic, comprehensive public school system that actually functions the way it should and at the same time cater to every parent's choice. Something has to give - and it seems Australia may have decided to take the more radical path.

In our anxiety to keep our own children safe, we could become the first Western democracy to dismantle, or at least residualise, its public education system.

What the long-term results of this may be for our society are hard to know, but I, for one, cannot see how such a path actually protects anyone's children in the long run.

I can't see how such an experiment maximises the potential of all our children - surely something that is essential to the future of any country.

I can't see how this helps close the already widening gap between the haves and have nots, something we already know leads to an increase in the level of crime.

Surely as adults it is our responsibility to manage our anxiety ourselves, and not use our school system to do it for us.

The mantra of parental choice is all very well but, call me old fashioned, I still believe an education system is about helping all our children to go into the future as well equipped as we can possibly make them.

And not just for their own sakes, either.

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