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# The myths we are taught about schools

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by Anthony Ashbolt

Certain mythologies pervade the assault upon public education. One of these is that Labor's education policy at the 2004 election damaged the party electorally. I will explore this next week. First, however, I will address a more recent intervention in the schooling debate which has received much attention.

Emeritus Professor Brian Caldwell, publicizing his book published by the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER), has pointed repeatedly to an AC Nielsen survey conducted for the ACER showing that a significant number of public school parents would send their children to private schools if they could. The survey, from July 2004, revealed that 34% of such parents would choose to send their children to private schools if there were no additional cost, while 54% declined the temptation to move private. Given the funding bias towards private schools now, it is that 54% statistic which is significant but Caldwell and newspaper reporters taking up his concerns chose not to focus on this. Peculiarly, on Radio National's Late Night Live (July 4), Caldwell referred confidently to this particular survey but used a statistic not found in the survey itself. He suggested it indicated that 70% of parents would send their children to private schools if they could afford the fees. This figure was repeated in the Sydney Morning Herald's report (July 5) on his reflections about the parlous conditions at public schools. Even if you were to add, with little legitimacy, the 34% surveyed to the 32.4% who already send their children to private schools, the 70% statistic is inaccurate. It does, however, serve a useful ideological purpose.

People's perceptions of the public and private systems are shaped on a daily basis by media like the Sydney Morning Herald and even by authorities who pretend to be concerned to preserve a strong public sector. In all his proselytising about the sad state of public schools, Professor Caldwell failed to mention Government policies that systematically favoured private schools. Moreover, he also forgot the real implications of the Nielsen survey.

Analysis of that survey by ACER senior research fellow at the time, Dr. Adrian Beavis, highlighted the way in which mythologies can manufacture public common sense. Beavis discovered a widespread perception, again unsurprising even if false, that public schools just do not embrace “values” in the way that private schools do. This, then, was a justification for parents wanting to go private. Still, only 34% would choose to do so even if there were no additional cost. Think about that — not if they could afford the often exorbitant fees but if there, in effect, were no fees. And think again about the 54% who said no.

Moreover, if we move beyond the murky realm of values, things get rather intriguing. Two of the other reasons for shifting (not included explicitly in the ACER press release but reported in The Age) — smaller class-sizes and better quality teaching — were based on misperceptions. Teaching qualifications are more strictly monitored in the public system and class sizes are on average smaller in the public system. Beavis' response was telling when asked by an Age reporter why these sorts of

misperceptions exist: You might want to say that the marketing managers of private schools have done a damn good job.

One thing those marketing managers have done, very cleverly and with the support of the Howard Government, is to claim values as their own preserve. But the value basis of public schools is democratic and that of private schools reeks of socially undesirable attitudes and practices. The very existence of a private education system tends to promote values that are antithetical to a just and equitable society. When Government chooses to promote that system over and above the public system, it undermines the basis of democracy and entrenches ideals or aspirations that fuel individual ambition rather than the public good.

Neo-liberal public policy in education today is sustained by mythologies that infiltrate public consciousness. The power of these mythologies is such that even Labor and trade union leaders can be heard parroting them. Their good sense on industrial relations is threatened by their keen promotion of private education and private health. They have forgotten the skein that connects crucial elements in the public sphere. What good, after all, is a world without AWAs when the education and health systems have been privatised?

**About the author**

Anthony Ashbolt is a Senior Lecturer in Politics at the University of Wollongong and an editor of the labour history journal Illawarra Unity.