

# Languages study and class privilege: The neoliberal effect in Australian schools

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## **Abstract**

*In Australia's highly multicultural and multilingual society the number of students studying languages in secondary schools has declined markedly in recent decades, but not for all students. For students from high socio-economic status (SES) families who attend elite private schools and academically selective high schools, studying traditional languages such as French or German remains a strong curriculum choice and languages continue to confer linguistic and cultural capital. Not so, however, for the majority of students in low SES government comprehensive high schools. For these students, the choice of studying languages is very limited, and for the languages courses that are available, participation rates are poor. Moreover, this social class disparity in the study of languages is ever widening as the result of neoliberal reforms to Australian schooling. In New South Wales, the focus of this paper, school choice and selective schooling policies have ensured that most students in low SES comprehensive high schools are unlikely to study languages beyond the mandatory state minimum of 100 hours in Year 7 or 8. This paper demonstrates the social class inequalities of differentiated languages provision by examining four government high schools in two urban areas in NSW. In each area, languages provision and its associated discourses in the local comprehensive high school are contrasted with the academically selective high school located just a*

*few kilometres away. Recent neoliberal education policies in NSW indicate that school and languages education segregation based on social class will continue unabated.*

**Keywords:** *languages decline, socio-economic inequalities, social justice, neoliberalism, social class*

### **Introduction: a social justice issue**

‘Kids take to languages like a duck to water here’ (Principal of an academically selective high school)

‘It’s not a priority for them’ (Principal of a low SES comprehensive high school)

The above two quotes are selected from interviews with the principals of two government high schools in New South Wales (NSW), Australia’s most populous state. The principals are reflecting on languages provision in their schools and how their students view the study of languages. In one school, languages are seen to be valued and embraced by students, while in the other school, languages are not seen to be very important. The principals are from two different types of government secondary schools: one is an academically selective high school, the other a low SES comprehensive high school. Entry to the former school type is via a state-wide, high-stakes placement test which all students can undertake in their final year of primary school (in Year 6). In academically selective high schools, which comprise students with high levels of socio-economic/educational advantage, there is a wide range of languages available in the school curriculum and many students study languages up to and including their senior school years prior to university entrance. At low SES comprehensive high schools, there is usually a very limited range of languages available, and beyond the mandatory 100 hours that students undertake in either Year 7 or 8, very few students study languages. This paper argues that this

differentiated state of languages provision is inequitable, is getting worse, and represents class privilege. It explains that languages differentiation within the curriculum of NSW schools is no accident and results from structural inequality in the Australian education system (see Teese and Polesel, 2003) exacerbated by neoliberal educational reforms of the past thirty years.

By highlighting the role of neoliberal reforms and social class in secondary school languages provision this paper departs from the majority of academic studies of languages in schools. Social class in particular rarely features in academic studies of languages in Australia (though there are some notable exceptions, see Teese and Polesel, 2003; Teese, 2013). Block (2014) writes of the ‘erasure’ of social class as a construct in the field of applied linguistics in recent decades, though he argues this situation is changing to the extent that he calls for a ‘political economy turn’ in applied linguistics research (Block, 2017, 2018). A recent study of languages in NSW schools by a research team, which includes the author of this paper, resonates with this call for a political economy research focus, finding that social class factors play a consistent and significant role in determining the nature and extent of languages provision (Cruickshank and Wright, 2016; Black, Wright and Cruickshank, 2018; Wright, Cruickshank and Black, 2018; Cruickshank et al., forthcoming).

Contributing to this erasure of social class are the complexities of languages taught in schools and the broader discourses that underpin languages spoken in Australian society. Languages differ in their perceived relevance and status. For example, the academic study of ‘foreign’ or ‘modern’ languages such as French or German is perceived differently by various socio-political interest groups to the wide range of community languages, sometimes referred to as ‘background’ or ‘heritage’ languages, spoken in Australian society and taught in schools. Asian languages also fit within different discourses, often associated with

‘trade’ and ‘human capital’ benefits, as too does the elevation of spoken and written English. Government policies and statements on languages have been extensive in recent decades and languages have been viewed variously from within strong multicultural policy discourses to societal views which represent a national ‘monolingual mindset’ (Clyne, 2005). This complex mix of foreign/modern and community languages taught in schools, languages spoken in the community, languages with perceived instrumental benefits, and the varying policy discourses on languages has tended to mask the role of social class factors.

This paper focuses on languages taught in government secondary schools in two cities approximately 100 kilometres apart. As explained later in the paper, secondary schooling in Australia comprises not only the government sector, but also an influential and fast-growing private sector, including a large Catholic sector, though the concern in this paper is primarily with the government sector. Data are drawn from an Australian Research Council (ARC) Linkage Project on languages taught in NSW schools undertaken from 2011-2014 and national data on schools available on the *My School* website (<https://www.myschool.edu.au/>). The project was undertaken to examine why the provision and uptake of languages have remained so low in NSW schools. The focus of this paper is primarily on four secondary schools, outlining details of their student populations, the number and types of languages available at the schools, and the views of key school stakeholders - principals, teachers, students and parents. These stakeholder views were obtained through semi-structured, audio-recorded interviews that were later transcribed in full. The interviews were conducted by small teams of researchers (usually two-four) who visited each school several times – at least three visits per school. While interviews with principals and teachers were undertaken individually, interviews with students and parents were sometimes undertaken as recorded focus-group meetings. Languages

classes were also observed, usually involving two researchers in the classroom taking field notes. These classes were not recorded. Research ethics approval for this study was obtained through the University of Sydney.

The focus in this paper on just four government secondary schools enables detailed qualitative illustrations of systemic inequalities in the NSW education system in relation to languages education. It is accepted as a given that private schools have always catered for the children of wealthier families and provide an elite academic curriculum (e.g. Teese, 1998), and that Catholic schools are primarily for the children of Catholic oriented families (though wealth also intersects with religion in many elite religious-based schools). Government secondary schools - ‘public’ schools - on the other hand are free, secular and technically available to all students, regardless of parental wealth or religion. But as this paper explains, not all students, especially those from low SES backgrounds, have equal access to the same academic curriculum. The focus is on how languages provision differs according to the SES backgrounds of students at the four secondary schools in the two city areas. In each area, languages provision and the perspectives of key school stakeholders at the local government comprehensive high school are juxtaposed with languages provision and stakeholder perspectives in an academically selective high school located no more than a few kilometres away.

### **Background: The decline of languages taught in schools**

Australia is an extraordinarily diverse nation in terms of languages spoken, with over 300 separately identified languages spoken at home (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2017). More than a quarter of Australians (26%) were born overseas and more than a fifth of Australians (21 per cent) speak a language other than English at home, with Mandarin being the next most spoken language (ABS, 2017). In response to growing linguistic diversity since the

post-war migration era of the 1950s and 1960s, there has been a proliferation of policies relating to languages (Lo Bianco and Gvozdenko, 2006). Lo Bianco's (1987) National Policy on Languages was the 'high point' with its comprehensive recommendations for English, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages, and languages other than English for all (Scarino and Papademetre, 2001; Scarino, 2014). Since that time, the teaching of languages has been considered central to the curriculum in all major national declarations on schooling (MCEETYA, 1989, 1998, 2008). And yet, despite policy declarations and recommendations, the study of languages in schools has declined sharply in recent decades (see Group of Eight, 2007; Liddicoat et al., 2007; Lo Bianco, 2009). It should be pointed out however, that this decline has also been the trend in other English-speaking countries (e.g. Rhodes and Pufahl, 2010; Tinsley and Board, 2017).

Lo Bianco (2009: 1) refers to 'a decline in the number of languages taught, their duration, spread and level of seriousness' and that 'a deep and persistent malaise afflicts language education in Australia.' He highlights in particular, the drop-off in languages studied in secondary schools from 79.3 per cent of students in Year 7, when the study of languages is mandated in some state jurisdictions, to just 10.3 per cent in Year 12. By comparison, in 1968, 44 per cent of students studied languages at Year 12 (Lo Bianco 2009: 49). One report states that Australian school students now spend less time learning a second language than students in all other OECD countries (Group of Eight, 2007: 1). Unfortunately, data on participation in languages education in schools is inconsistent across the Australian states and territories, but the data available indicate that NSW is one of the worst performing states (Liddicoat et al. 2007). Complicating languages taught in schools is the role of community languages. The multicultural policy discourse of the early 1970s which valued the cultural and linguistic resources of post-war migration populations, encouraged the

spread of community languages in schools, and in particular, languages such as Greek and Italian (Teese and Polesel, 2003). This era of social democratic ideology also saw the development of comprehensive schools, and thus many more students from low SES gained access to community languages study in schools. However, as immigration and demographic trends changed over time, and as multiculturalism waned as a policy discourse, by the turn of the century, so too did participation in school languages programs. According to Cruickshank and Wright (2016), it was the rise of community languages in schools that masked the decline of participation in traditional languages such as French and German, in particular in comprehensive schools.

Community languages in the curriculum were also seen as problematic insofar as school students who spoke the community language at home, that is, ‘background’ learners, were perceived to have an unfair advantage over non-background students. This has led to a range of different languages syllabuses for background and non-background students for the many community languages taught in schools. At the Year 12 level, also, inconsistencies have been reported in the way some community languages are ‘scaled’ to provide a ranking for university entrance (known as an ATAR score – see Cruickshank and Wright 2016) compared with traditional foreign or modern languages. Thus, many background learners drop languages as a subject in order to maximise their opportunities for university entrance. Cruickshank and Wright (2016: 76) refer to the ‘unresolved tension between languages as elite academic subjects and languages as an equity measure for students from community language backgrounds’ which has hindered the take-up of languages in schools. Community languages promoted through bilingual programs have been slow to develop in Australia due in part to the prevailing ‘monolingual mindset’ (Clyne, 2005), and those that do exist are predominantly in selected primary schools (Harbon and Fielding, 2013).

A range of other reasons have been provided for why languages study has declined and why some students seem reluctant to participate in them. Studies of student motivations for languages study find that languages are considered a ‘hard’ subject requiring investment of time and effort and are often not viewed as relevant to their needs or as part of the ‘core’ school curriculum. There are also many variable factors relating to the structure of the school and the languages learning experience, including what languages are available, how they are timetabled, the perspectives of the school principal and staff, and the quality and nature of how languages are taught (e.g. Liddicoat et al. 2007, Curnow et al. 2014; Kohler et al. 2014).

To date, social class has not featured prominently in Australia as an explanation of varying participation rates in school languages programs. There are some exceptions, including research on the privileging of traditional academic languages in elite schools (Teese and Polesel, 2003; Teese 2013), and in the area of school bilingual programs (Smala, Paz and Lingard, 2013). In the UK, there is increasing recognition of a ‘social divide’ in the uptake of languages in schools (Lanvers, 2017) with low participation by students in low SES schools measured by indicators such as the numbers of students in receipt of free school meals. Key national surveys have been undertaken in the UK and the results published in annual reports of languages in schools (e.g. Board and Tinsley, 2014; Tinsley and Board, 2017). The surveys indicate that the uptake of languages is highest in independent schools and those schools that select students based on academic criteria.

In this paper, the focus is also on differences in languages provision and the uptake of languages in schools that select students and those that do not, and to begin to explain these differences requires an outline of the history of



comprehensive high schools and academically selective high schools in NSW and their linkage with neoliberal reforms.

### **Comprehensive high schools and academically selective high schools**

The ‘comprehensive revolution’ effectively started in Australia in the post war population boom era of the 1960s (Campbell and Sherington, 2013: 67). Known as the Wyndham scheme (after the report of the Director-General of Schools in NSW), comprehensive high schools quickly spread throughout Australia, and despite some state variations, they were ‘comprehensive, district-based high schools in which all adolescents in a neighbourhood would be educated’ (p. 77). Most comprehensives were co-ed and they provided for students ‘regardless of class background, religious or ethnic affiliation’ (Campbell and Sherington, 2004: 4).

It needs to be made clear, however, that while comprehensive high schools from this time onwards comprised the main government secondary education sector, there has long been influential private school and Catholic school sectors in Australia. In 1970 the sector breakdown of all school enrolments was: government 78 per cent; Catholic 18 per cent; private 4 per cent (currently this breakdown is: 65, 20 and 15 per cent respectively – see Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2018). Prior to the 1960s, the limited number of government high schools were all selective, with entry based on academic tests, and very much dominated by the middle class. Most of these government selective high schools, and in particular those in Sydney, continued to exist following the introduction of the new comprehensive high schools, but they were less popular than before. According to Campbell and Sherington (2013: 73): ‘By 1975 there were vacancies for places in all surviving selective high schools except the long-established Sydney Boys High.’ While designed to meet the needs of students from all social backgrounds, it was nevertheless the growing middle-

class student population in comprehensive high schools that mainly transitioned on to university. In the 1960s and 1970s comprehensive high schools were growing faster than private sector schools and this period represented ‘the high point of the development of centrally controlled and bureaucratically managed public education in Australia’ (Campbell and Sherington, 2013: 89).

The retreat of the comprehensive high schools in Australia began in the late 1970s/early 1980s and mirrored their retreat in other countries such as the United States and the UK with the early neoliberal ‘epicentre’ regimes of Reagan and Thatcher (Harvey, 2005). In Australia, federal governments began to exert greater influence and education funding models shifted to advantage the private education sectors. According to Connell (2013a: 103), this began as a bid by the major political parties for the Catholic vote, but over time rationales have changed: ‘They now support a mass market in privately-controlled schooling that is effectively secular, and whose main clientele now is middle-class families ‘choosing’ for their own advantage.’ In the new economic rationalist and highly competitive education market that developed, comprehensive high schools were forced to compete for students from revitalised and fast-growing private sector schools. But it was not just the private and Catholic schools in the non-government sector that provided competition for comprehensives. In 1988 a conservative Liberal-National Coalition government came to power in NSW and immediately instituted long lasting neoliberal reforms. Public schools were de-zoned in order to enable greater school choice, and new academically selective high schools, along with a range of different ‘specialist’ high schools were established. Ostensibly, the NSW government’s rationale was that academically selective high schools would stop the drift from government to private schools. Before 1988 there had been 12 government secondary schools with selective entry. By 1995 there were 63 specialist secondary schools, including 19 academically selective, four ‘agricultural high schools’ (also academically selective), and a range of new

technology high schools and sports high schools (Campbell and Sherington, 2013). Since then, regardless of the political party in power, the growth of ‘non-comprehensive’ high schools has continued unabated. Considine (2012: 89-90) indicates that between 1988 and 2010 the total number of public non-comprehensive secondary schools in NSW increased by a massive 955 percent, and by contrast over the same period of time, the total number of traditional comprehensive high schools declined by 24 per cent.

School choice is a key element of the neoliberal social imaginary in which citizens are transformed into consumers in a school market (e.g. Angus, 2015). It has become a mantra for education policy within the neoliberal discourse that parents are expected to take greater responsibility for their children’s schooling. Moreover, according to this discourse, a good parent-citizen has been redefined as one who participates in the market as an informed chooser of schools (Campbell, Proctor and Sherington, 2009). De-zoning policies have allowed parents greater choice to send their children to schools beyond the traditional district zones of their local schools. Drawing on the work of Pusey (2003), who explained how many middle class families felt let down by public services, Campbell, Proctor and Sherington (2009) indicate the anxieties of middle class parents in trying to negotiate the new school market as they aspire to maximise academic opportunities for their children. In the 1970s the situation was different - most children were expected to go to their local comprehensive high school, and in a regulatory sense (i.e. school zoning), middle class parents had little school choice unless they sent their children to private schools. Increasingly, from the time of the education reforms of the late 1980s in NSW, academically selective high schools became an attractive additional choice for middle class parents. According to Connell (2013a: 103), government selective schools ‘now function as cheap private schools for families able to win at the competitive-examination game.’

NSW has more academically selective high schools than any other state, and currently there are 22 fully selective and 25 partially selective high schools in the state (the latter are selective in English, Maths and Science classes). Academically selective schools cater for high achieving students, often referred to as ‘gifted and talented’, and as entry to the schools is based primarily on a state-wide placement test which any child can take, it has the appearance of being merit-based. But according to a recent report by Ho and Bonnor (2018: 4), academically selective high schools are ‘all but inaccessible to most students.’ National school data (from the *My School* website) indicate that academically selective high schools are highly elitist (based on the Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage – ICSEA<sup>i</sup>, generally acknowledged in the academic community to be a proxy for SES). Ho and Bonnor (2018: 4) state:

Fully selective NSW high schools comprise six of the ten most socio-educationally advantaged secondary schools in the state. The rest are all high-fee private schools. An average of 73 per cent of selective school students came from the highest quarter of socio-educational advantage in 2016. Only 2 per cent of students in fully selective schools came from the lowest quarter.

Far from promoting inclusion and equity, academically selective high schools are increasingly placing socio-educationally advantaged students in a ‘class of their own’ (Ho and Bonnor 2018: 4). In order to maximise the chances of their children gaining entry to selective schools, ‘responsible’ middle class parents are spending substantial financial resources on private tutoring to prepare their children for the placement test (Sriprakash, Proctor and Hu, 2015; Doherty and Dooley, 2018; Ho and Bonnor, 2018). Ability grouping (streaming) in primary schools also provides an avenue of entry to selective high schools. Many primary schools provide opportunity classes (OC) for ‘gifted and talented’

students in Year 5 and 6, which requires students to pass another test (OC placement), and these classes are seen as ‘prep’ classes for selective school entry. Academic ability streaming in primary schools is increasingly viewed as ‘natural’ (Spina, 2018) in the contemporary neoliberal era of testing regimes, despite its long established and continuing inequities, especially for children from low SES backgrounds (Macqueen, 2012; Mills et al., 2016).

The most negative impact of academically selective high schools is felt on local comprehensive high schools. According to Ho and Bonnor (2018: 4), selective schools are responsible for a ‘brain drain’ from government comprehensive schools, depriving them of their most capable, highest-achieving students. They state that selective schools ‘comprise 11% of government schools, yet enrol almost half of the high achievers.’ Thus, as students compete for entry to the ‘socially restrictive’ selective schools, comprehensive high schools become ‘socially exposed’ (Windle, 2015). Almost inevitably, especially in the Sydney region where there are many private and selective schools, enrolment numbers drop, and some comprehensive high schools have been forced to close through dwindling enrolments, while others survive with the constant threat of closure. Campbell and Sherington (2013: 149) quote one former NSW Director General of Education as stating:

in competition with the selectives that have creamed off the academically most gifted, the teachers and students in these schools have to fight a constant battle to counter the perception that they are second best.

There is a corresponding social class effect, a ‘class shift’ (Campbell and Sherington 2013: 133) as middle class parents are reluctant to risk sending their children to schools perceived to be ‘second best.’ Ho and Bonnor (2018) cite examples of social class disparities in some Sydney areas between academically

selective high schools and their local comprehensive school neighbours. For example, at the very high achieving James Ruse Agricultural High School in 2016, 89 per cent of students came from the highest quarter on the index of socio-educational advantage (ICSEA), and none were from the lowest quarter, while the local comprehensive high school (less than a kilometre away) had 24 per cent of students in the lowest quarter. These schooling disparities resulting from selective schooling policies are not confined to Australia. In the UK, Hill and Kumar (2009: 15) report that: ‘Where selection exists the sink schools just sink further and the privileged schools just become more privileged.’

The compounding effects of ‘creaming off’ many high achieving students and a ‘class shift’ can leave some comprehensives as ‘residual’ high schools with low enrolments from the local community and multiple disadvantages. Campbell and Sherington (2013: 162) quote from Teese (2013):

In comprehensive high schools, residential segregation brings together many students with multiple disadvantages – low self-esteem, poor basic learning, language handicaps, poverty and family breakdown ... there is an accumulation of liabilities at the one site. This weakens the instructional effort and risks severe retribution against those students who stray into the more academic subjects.

Analyses of national data on schools (*My School* website) indicate that choice and competition limit access to high-status academic curriculum for working class students (Perry and Southwell, 2014). Particularly significant are inequalities between schools of different socioeconomic compositions for the final two years of secondary schooling. These two years determine opportunities for higher education participation, and opportunities are very limited for students in low SES comprehensive schools (Tranter, 2012; Perry and Lamb, 2016).

### **Neoliberalism, languages provision and the ‘political economy turn’**

To begin to explain differential and inequitable access to languages study in low SES comprehensive and academically selective high schools in NSW, this paper has briefly outlined the history of these two types of schools. It has indicated that the key reason why comprehensives have declined in recent decades and selective high schools have become so favoured is the rise of neoliberalism as the dominant form of capitalism.

Neoliberalism is a theory of political economic practices based on ‘liberating individual freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterised by strong property rights, free markets and free trade’ (Harvey, 2005: 2). This free-market capitalism requires ever expanding private profits through ever expanding markets, often created by state action. Since the late 1970s, neoliberal reforms have become the norm for Western governments, and neoliberal ideology has become so dominant and ubiquitous that it has become the ‘common sense’ way that many people interpret the world in which they live and work (Harvey, 2005: 3). Australian educational researchers have variously described the strong impact of neoliberal reforms on education as a ‘juggernaut’ (Doherty, 2015) and a ‘cascade’ (Connell, 2013a). With the introduction of school choice reforms, it has involved the retreat of the state as a provider of education and the creation of school markets which have seen a marked rise in private and selective schools (in NSW in particular) and a subsequent decline in comprehensive schools. From a Marxist perspective, increased inequality is the inevitable outcome of capital accumulation and exploitation that results from the relentless drive for profits. In relation to education, ‘it both reflects and supports the social inequalities of capitalist culture’ (Hill, Greaves and Maisuria, 2009: 102). Connell (2013a, 2013b) explains that when school markets are created, education becomes commodified and rationed, and what is sold (i.e. private education, private tutoring) is a

privilege that other people cannot obtain. This may include access to elite institutions and curriculums, and favourable teaching contexts (e.g. teacher/student ratios) and facilities (e.g. buildings, grounds, see Ting, Palmer and Scott, 2019). There also needs to be visible losers ‘if parents are persuaded to pay for their children to become winners’ (Connell, 2013b: 282). Hence, attention is drawn to children who are ‘at risk’, and ‘the nonperformers, the pockets of poverty, the bad schools, the bad families, the under-motivated, the excluded, the failures’ (ibid.). And for the losing to be accepted it needs to be ‘legitimated’ in order to be credible and not appear to be based on unfair discrimination. Thus, ‘the neoliberal takeover of education has been accompanied by a great revival of competitive testing’ (ibid.). As indicated earlier in this paper, it is ‘high stakes’ competitive tests that determines who attends academically selective high schools, and indeed the primary school ability streams that feed students into the selective system.

Marxist perspectives indicate how education is functional to capitalism and how neoliberalism accelerates the process of imposing divisions amongst school children in preparation for the stratification of the labour force. Children are thus ‘educated and skilled to the level deemed suitable by capital for work’ (Hill, Greaves and Maisuria, 2009: 120). It is no accident that ruling class business leaders and the politicians overwhelmingly comprise people educated in elite private schools (e.g. Howard and Gaztambide-Fernandez, 2010; Kenway et al. 2017). As indicated earlier, in the NSW schooling context of this paper, heightened competition between schools in the education ‘market’, in particular through school choice policies, has privileged the children of middle class families who dominate enrolments in private schools and academically selective high schools. These schools provide a direct route to prestigious universities and professions (e.g. Teese and Polesel, 2003; Polesel, Leahy and Gillis, 2018). Many comprehensive high schools on the other hand have been left as ‘residual’



schools for working class students destined for lower status working lives. The linkage between school types and their differentiated curriculums (involving languages in this paper), neoliberal reforms and social class fits within a research orientation in applied linguistics that Block (2017, 2018) calls the ‘political economy turn.’ He explains that political economy ‘focuses on and analyses the relationship between the individual and society and between the market and the state, and it seeks to understand how social institutions, their activities and capitalism interrelate’ (2017: 35).

Block (2017, 2018) provides an extensive review of research studies that fall within a political economy orientation. Underpinning much of his work and other applied linguistics researchers in this political economy research orientation is the relationship to social justice:

It comes at a time when many people, lay and academic alike, are coming to the collective realisation that we are living in times – the neoliberal era and the economic crisis wrought by neoliberal policies – in which societies are becoming more socioeconomically stratified and unequal instead of less so. (Block 2017: 36)

Much of this critical, sociolinguistic research draws on constructions of social class that are Marxist inspired, even if it is not explicitly acknowledged in the literature. In the contemporary neoliberal, globalised world, languages are increasingly commodified, viewed primarily as something to be acquired and exchanged for economic profit (e.g. Heller, 2003; Duchêne and Heller, 2012; Shin and Park, 2016). This includes the perception in many global communities that acquiring English will have economic advantages (e.g. Kubota and McKay, 2009; Park, 2011; Kubota, 2016; Shin and Park, 2016; Xiong and Yuan, 2018; Shin and Lee, 2019). Social class is inextricably linked to these discussions on

the influences of neoliberalism, and in recent years it has become a key construct for some leading researchers of languages (e.g. Block, 2014, 2017; Darwin and Norton, 2014; Kanno, 2014). Block (2017) for example, indicates how access to second languages is shaped by class hierarchies, with middle class, wealthy parents paying for their children's tuition while poorer parents are unable to do so. Block's (2017) research resonates with the NSW schooling themes discussed in this paper, the fact that it is primarily middle class parents who pay for their children to attend either private schools, or academically selective schools through private tutoring for placement tests. The languages that students study at these schools, such as French and German, are part of the traditional core academic curriculum leading to university study, and they have a 'special status' in the curriculum of many private and selective schools as they signify that students are up to the challenge of demanding academic study. As Teese (2013: 223) notes:

Languages are a recognised means of testing the capacities of children and outwardly declaring 'giftedness' through acceptance of a distinctive set of academic tasks. The schools that are able to fill language classes also lay claim to a special status because it is through them that students are found who will take up the challenge of some of the most demanding work in the curriculum and teachers.

As the following sections of this paper demonstrate, academically selective high schools provide extensive languages programs, and middle class parents are well positioned socially and financially to support their children learning languages in these schools, including through overseas trips and school exchanges. These conditions are absent in low SES comprehensive schools.

### **Four schools, two local areas**

The paper focuses on four schools in two local areas in NSW (referred to with pseudonyms). The first area is highly urban and approximately 10 kilometres from the centre of the capital city (*Central District*). Languages provision is examined at an academically selective high school (*Central Selective*), and at a comprehensive high school (*Central Comprehensive*) located less than two kilometres away. The second area approximately 100 kilometres away is in a regional NSW city (*Regional District*), and in this area languages provision is similarly examined at an academically selective high school (*Regional Selective*) and a nearby local comprehensive high school (*Regional Comprehensive*). The two local areas, whilst both urban, have demographic differences. *Central District* is highly multicultural with over 40 per cent of residents born overseas and speaking a wide range of languages other than English, including Vietnamese, Greek, Italian, Mandarin, Cantonese, Spanish and Portuguese. In *Regional District*, the percentage of residents born overseas is less (25 per cent), and languages spoken other than English include Macedonian, Italian, Mandarin and Arabic. Most of the data in the following paragraphs were collected in 2014.

*Central Selective High School*: ‘The school has a long history of sister school exchanges’ (school’s website)

*Central Selective High School* is long established, one of the original NSW selective high schools that existed well prior to the introduction of comprehensive schools in the 1960s. There are over 900 students at the school (609 boys, 325 girls) who are generally from high SES families (ICSEA scale: 73 per cent in the top quarter, 3 per cent in the bottom quarter). As a very popular academically selective high school, students travel to the school from far afield, and in fact the school profile boasts of a diverse student population from over 100 suburbs. The majority of students (81 per cent) speak a language

other than English at home, and a recent annual report of the school states that 45 per cent of students are from Chinese speaking backgrounds. This accords with recent research which indicates the role of ‘new’ middle class migrant families, especially from Asian/Indian backgrounds, who send their children to private coaching for entry to selective high schools (Butler, Ho and Vincent, 2017; Ho, 2017a and b; Watkins, 2017). The school is proud of its academic achievements, claiming in the school’s profile (in the *My School* website) that 95 per cent of its students each year proceed to the university of their choice immediately after the HSC (Higher School Certificate, the Year 12 exam).

Languages provision at the school is extensive, though nevertheless on par with other academically selective high schools nearby. There is a Head Teacher of Languages and nine full time and part time languages teachers. Four languages are taught: Chinese (i.e. Mandarin), French, German and Japanese. There is strong participation and continuity in each of these languages from Year 7 when it is mandatory to study a language, to languages as elective subjects in Year 8 and 9. In the senior school years (10-12), according to departmental data for 2012 collected as part of the research, there were cohorts of students studying these four languages at every level, including at the most advanced Extension level (for most languages there are three levels: Beginners, Continuers, Extension). Generally, all students achieve bands 5 or 6 (the highest two bands) in their final Year 12 languages HSC results.

Languages have a strong profile in the school. Student overseas exchanges for example, have a prominent role with the hosting of students and reciprocal ‘sister school’ exchanges. Groups of languages students in Year 10 and 11 visit China, France, Germany and Japan on alternate years where they attend classes for two weeks and travel for the third week. The school is also one of six others in the state with a dedicated Confucius classroom (with Hanban funding). Each year around 150 students undertake the ALC (Assessment of Language

Competence – a suite of tests designed to assess language competence) in the four school languages and they achieve well above the state average.

One of the languages teachers explained why she thought students at the school did so well in languages, an academic subject generally viewed as hard to learn. She explained that many parents had themselves studied languages and were well travelled. There was also the view that students had to ‘put the time in, get your head down and work.’ She saw parallels with the study of music at the school, the view that:

we're in this for the long haul. There will be lots and lots of piano practice required or viola practice required to get anywhere and that's a transferrable thing, I'm just going to have to do lots of vocab learning.

Students at this school are well prepared for this form of academic diligence, often having spent preparatory years in ‘gifted and talented’ streams at primary school, many hours in private coaching classes, and having come from home lives where homework ‘is factored in.’

Student attitudes towards the study of languages are complex, but overwhelmingly favourable. For many of the students, languages already feature extensively in their everyday family lives. One Year 7 student for example, commented:

Oh my dad's half French and Korean, so he can speak both of those fluently. As well, he can speak Spanish and Italian fluently. But my mum just speaks all different types of Chinese.

Some students, especially those who speak community languages at home, feel they are particularly receptive to learning new languages. One Year 11 student commented: ‘Once you start learning one language, it's easier to learn other languages as well.’ Student attitudes towards studying languages vary: some for

example, stated they were interested in studying different cultures, others focused on future travel or the usefulness of languages for future careers, while others simply enjoyed languages and were good at studying them. For the Chinese background students, Chinese (Mandarin) is often their community language and it is studied for family/cultural reasons as well as for instrumental reasons relating to future work. Chinese, however, suffers a drop-off in enrolments as a final year HSC subject as many Chinese background students seek to maximise their scores for university entrance and choose other, often science-based subjects instead (Chinese scales poorly as a Year 12 subject, see Cruickshank and Wright, 2016).

*Central Comprehensive High School: 'I'm surrounded by selective schools'*  
(Principal)

*Central Comprehensive high school* is just a 15-minute walk from *Central Selective* but is quite different in many ways. It is a local co-ed high school that is struggling for enrolments with less than 400 students (228 boys, 151 girls) from generally low SES backgrounds (ICSEA: 13 per cent in the top quarter, 39 per cent in the lowest quarter). 84 per cent of students speak a language other than English at home, and classroom interviews indicated that the main languages include a range of African languages, Vietnamese, Portuguese and Pacific Islander languages (e.g. Tongan, Cook Islands). Indigenous students comprise 7 per cent of enrolments. Included within the school is an Intensive English Centre (IEC - for newly arrived migrant and refugee students whose first language is not English), and a support unit for intellectually disabled students. According to the school profile (*My School*), there is a focus on literacy and numeracy at the school and also computer technology.

The school has changed in recent decades. One longstanding teacher at the school claimed that in the 1980s there were close to 1200 students. By the early

2000s however, enrolments were so low that there was a government proposal to close the school (later reversed following a community action campaign). Currently with less than 400 students, the school fits the ‘residual’ label, and the principal stated that the school is surrounded by selective schools which ‘draw away the more academic students’ (see Black, Wight and Cruickshank, 2018: 353)

The principal claimed that there is a perception amongst local parents that the school is undesirable and ‘tough’. This may not be surprising given that the more academic students have been ‘creamed off’ to private and selective high schools, and the school may be seen to comprise the ‘multiple disadvantages’ that Teese (2013: 189) refers to in some comprehensive high schools. In this school, they include a high percentage of students speaking languages other than English (including the IEC), and cohorts of intellectually disabled students and Indigenous students. It is no accident that the school focuses on developing (English) literacy and numeracy skills.

Only one language, Italian, is taught at the school by the sole languages-trained teacher. Italian was chosen because it is the main language taught by the languages teacher. The previous languages teacher at the school taught Indonesian for the same reason. The current Italian teacher is young (in her 20s), and *Central Comprehensive* is her first appointment since qualifying to teach languages in schools. She is located within the English department at the school, and she teaches ESL as her second subject, which is just as well because at the time of the research study, Italian was only taught as the mandatory 100 hours course to Year 8 students. She was unable to teach Italian for her full teaching program because there were insufficient numbers of students electing to study Italian beyond Year 8 for the classes to be viable. The principal claimed she tries to ‘massage’ the numbers to enable Italian electives to run, but

‘because we are a small school, we can’t run everything.’ There is not the critical mass of students in the school for sustainable elective languages classes, and according to the principal, students tend to choose instead elective subjects that provide them with more direct interest and vocational relevance, such as technology/computer electives or industrial arts.

The early career Italian teacher feels isolated as the sole languages teacher at the school, and whilst other subject teachers are personally supportive of her, she perceives that they do not value languages highly as an academic subject, viewing it more as a ‘curriculum filler’. She has doubts about the value of teaching languages at the school, believing that if students do elect to study Italian beyond Year 8, it is not for academic reasons but for social reasons such as friendship networks. She questions whether students are sufficiently ‘studious’ or committed enough for the academic discipline of languages, and she has concerns that their level of English competence limits their ability to learn Italian. Furthermore, because students study 100 hours of Italian in Year 8, if they continue to study the language as an elective subject leading to their Year 12 HSC exams, they will have to study the more advanced Italian Continuers course, which she deems to be too difficult for students because they would be competing against other students who speak Italian at home (like her). Hence, she admits to actively discouraging students from this level of languages study.

The attitudes of students towards Italian appeared ambivalent. Students spoke of liking the teacher, but they did not articulate strong reasons for studying Italian beyond the general idea that one day it might be useful for travelling overseas or possibly meeting people with an Italian background. Parents, also, whilst being generally supportive of languages, often had other priorities for their children.



According to the principal, their priority was more about ‘getting through school.’

*Regional Selective High School: ‘a lot of our kids are going to live and work overseas when they finish’ (Principal)*

In the second area, the regional city, there is just the one academically selective high school, *Regional Selective*. It was formerly a comprehensive high school and became academically selective following the educational reforms of the 1988 conservative Liberal-National Coalition government. *Regional Selective*, as with our other selective high school (*Central Selective*), is highly competitive to gain entry to and has strong enrolments (756 students: 398 boys, 358 girls). It also has a very similar high SES rating (ICSEA: 74 per cent in the top quarter, 3 per cent in the lowest). It differs, however, in having fewer students speaking languages other than English at home (29 per cent), but this is due in part to its regional city location. Only one per cent of students are indigenous.

As with *Central Selective*, languages provision is extensive and there are strong similarities between the two schools. There is a Head Teacher of Languages and an important critical mass of full time and part time languages teachers. Four languages are taught – French, German, Japanese and Italian and these languages have been taught at the school since the early 1990s. In Year 7 all students undertake a ‘taster’ languages course, introducing them to three languages – French, German and Japanese. In Year 8 students must study at least one of these languages, and in subsequent years they can elect to study any of these languages up to Year 12 HSC level. Again, as with *Central Selective*, there are student cohorts in each of these languages at Continuers and the most advanced Extension level courses. The exception is Italian, which is introduced as an additional elective subject at Beginners level in Year 11.

Languages at the school are thriving. One of the languages teachers stated: ‘now we just have so many language classes we can't staff them. It's just going through the roof ... We need extra teachers.’ Overseas languages exchanges are a feature at the school, with regular trips for Year 10 and 11 students to France, Germany and Japan. They are highly popular, and at the time of the research, the prospect of the trip to Japan was seen as a key reason why so many students elected to study the subject from Year 8: ‘Next year we've got 120 kids in Year 8 and 91 have chosen Japanese. They all want to go to Japan in Year 10 - [we only] take 60!’ (Japanese teacher).

From the principal’s perspective, languages are a key academic subject because they relate directly to the future lives and careers of many students. She commented that many of the students would work overseas when they completed their schooling.

The Languages teachers recognise that their students are well suited to studying languages. One teacher commented that teaching at their selective high school was different to many other (non-selective) schools insofar as students and teachers loved learning languages and participation rates were high. Another teacher favourably compared her languages teaching at the selective school to her previous experiences of teaching German at university.

Similar to *Central Selective*, students and their families value the study of languages. Interviews with parents for example, indicate that many are internationally well travelled, have studied languages themselves, and live in a home environment often rich in languages. One parent, for example, explained that his mother spoke French as a first language and came from Belgium, and his father’s first language was Italian, and much of the family interactions involved French with his Belgium born grandparents who lived nearby. Another

parent commented on playing games with languages: ‘if we have a birthday we’ll try and sing it in as many languages as we can. Just dumb stuff like that that’s kind of fun.’ For many of these parents, languages are an essential aspect of everyday living in a culturally diverse society and they provide the opportunity to engage in a multicultural world.

*Regional Comprehensive High school: ‘a refuge, welfare, school of last resort’*  
(Principal)

*Regional Comprehensive High School* located several kilometres away has a much different school profile. The school has low enrolments (437 students; 242 boys 195 girls), and an SES distribution that sees 4 per cent of students in the top quarter and 56 per cent in the lowest quarter. These are close to the mirror opposite SES trend of *Regional Selective* (i.e. 74 per cent and 3 per cent respectively). Ten per cent of students are Indigenous (compared with one per cent at *Regional Selective*). There is a low percentage of students (14 per cent) who speak languages other than English, again reflecting the more ‘Anglo’ demographics of the regional area.

That *Regional Comprehensive* is a ‘residual’ high school struggling with enrolments and suffering competition from private and selective high schools is borne out by the Principal’s comment above (in the sub-title) that it is seen by local parents as a school of ‘last resort’ (see Black, Wright and Cruickshank, 2018: 353). The students who attend the school are local, predominantly working class students, who have little choice in the high school they attend.

There is just the one designated languages teacher at the school teaching Chinese (Mandarin) as the mandatory language to all Year 7 students. The Chinese teacher was formerly a German teacher who had retrained to teach Chinese. Unlike the languages teacher at *Central Comprehensive*, however, he is a very experienced languages teacher with a strong sense of agency. There is

also a small HSC French class and a Year 9 French elective, and these are taught by a designated ‘generalist’ teacher who has some languages qualifications. Chinese has only recently been introduced to the school with the belief that it will later be taken up by students as an elective subject. However, at the time of the research most students from Year 9 elected to study subjects of greater appeal to them, including sports and industrial arts.

*Regional Comprehensive* experiences many of the same difficulties as *Central Comprehensive* insofar as the ‘residual’ nature of the school means it lacks the critical mass of student enrolments to enable languages to prosper beyond the mandatory 100 hours. The principal commented that ‘the realities of the system’ were that student numbers and departmental ‘staff to student ratios’ largely determined what subjects could be taught. The difference at *Regional Comprehensive* however, is that the language recently introduced at the school, Chinese, is seen as a potential saviour for the school – an opportunity to increase the profile of the school, change its perception within the local community, and hopefully lift enrolments. It is promoted heavily by the principal and the Chinese teacher, and a contract has been signed with the Confucius Institute and the Department of Education to encourage the teaching of Mandarin at stage 4 level (Year 7 and 8) and beyond.

The principal and the Chinese teacher work together to present Chinese as a marketing opportunity for the school. The Chinese teacher commented:

I think it’s looking for a distinction; it’s looking for something to sell. I think when you’re looking at different products the different schools are selling, some schools are looking down the line of sports high schools, there are IT schools, performing arts schools. So, I think it’s looking for a niche. (see Black, Cruickshank and Wright, 2019: 357)

The principal expressed the view that Chinese was important at the school ‘to meet the future-proofing needs of our students out in the employment force ... it would set them up for employability over other people and that's important’ (ibid.). Essentially, he was tapping into the discourse promoted by Australian governments that the ‘Asian century’ would potentially provide trading and employment (i.e. human capital) opportunities (Australian Government, 2012). It is unclear whether the school community has taken on the importance of Chinese. While most students seem to enjoy their Chinese classes in Year 7, it has not translated into students electing to study the subject in Year 9. The one-year gap (i.e. in Year 8 no languages are taught) may be a factor in this. There is some evidence that students have taken up the mantra of ‘China’s our future, like come on’ (Year 9 student), but beyond a generalized view that Chinese is ‘something to back you up as a job career future thing’ (Year 9 student), few students seem to indicate a wish to study Chinese. Parents also appear mixed in their views on the study of languages at the school. While generally supporting languages, one parent stated: ‘Foreign languages are foreign to kids. They don't have to learn other languages. They don't necessarily hear other languages as such, unless your parents are foreign’ (see Black, Wright and Cruickshank, 2018: 357). Specific references to the value of Chinese were limited, and one parent indicated that in the best interests of her son, her curriculum priorities lay elsewhere: ‘... as I said, I tend to prioritise the reading, writing and arithmetic higher than the Chinese’ (ibid).

### **Discussion and conclusions – segregation and inequality in the school market**

In this paper, we have outlined the socio-educational profiles of four government high schools in two separate areas in NSW and provided a specific focus on the provision of languages in these schools. There are obvious similarities and differences in the schools. For similarities, the two academically

selective high schools (*Central Selective* and *Regional Selective*), despite the geographical distance between them, have a very close resemblance in relation to their students' high SES backgrounds, with the large majority falling within the top SES quarter (73 per cent and 74 per cent respectively, and just 3 per cent each in the lowest quarter). Recent research by Ho and Bonnor (2018) indicates that these school profiles are fairly typical of academically selective high schools in NSW. Both schools are thriving and entry to them is highly competitive. Languages provision is also similar and extensive, comprising mainly languages that have traditionally conveyed academic prestige in schools – French, German and Japanese (e.g. Teese, 2013; Teese and Polesel, 2003). Both schools have a Head Teacher of Languages, a rarity in contemporary government high schools, together with a critical mass of languages teachers that ensures the languages sections have a high degree of legitimacy within the schools. Languages are valued highly by all the key stakeholders – students, teachers and parents. Students are described as well suited to the academic rigours of languages study ('like a duck to water' according to one of the principals), and many students elect to study languages beyond Years 7 and 8 and they perform very highly in examinations. These 'good' students exhibit qualities such as sustained concentration and pride in scholastic attainment that are essential for academic success in 'hard' and highly structured subjects such as languages (Teese and Polesel, 2003). Many of their parents have studied languages and use them in their everyday lives. As explained elsewhere (Wright, Cruickshank and Black, 2018), for these predominantly middle class parents, languages are a key element of what has been termed 'civic multiculturalism,' a means of better understanding and respecting the 'other' in a diverse, globalised world. The importance that the schools and parents place on school exchanges and regular educational visits to overseas countries suggests many students are expected during their adult lives, as the principal of *Regional Selective* indicated, 'to live and work overseas.' This accords with

recent research which indicates that middle class families use overseas exchanges and languages study to advantage their children in international cultural and work contexts in what has been termed transnational human capital (Gerhards, Silke, and Carlson, 2017). The supportive role of parents and the ways in which academically selective high schools represent and articulate the values of parents suggest that these schools are effective agencies for the reproduction of middle class values and lifestyles. They are described by Ho and Bonnor (2018: 9) as ‘sites of privilege’, and from a social class perspective, these families are the ‘winners’ in the school market. Students from these schools are well prepared for prestigious universities and high status jobs. With a strong languages education, these are the students who will possess the ‘transnational human capital’ that ensures success and advantage in today’s globalised world.

There are strong similarities also between the two comprehensive schools (*Central Comprehensive* and *Regional Comprehensive*). Both feature students from mainly low SES backgrounds, comprising 39 per cent and 56 per cent respectively of students in the lowest SES quarter (and just 13 per cent and 4 per cent respectively in the highest quarter). Both schools also have low enrolments and can be termed ‘residual’ in so far as many local students have been ‘creamed off’ to private and academically selective schools, leaving these local comprehensives with a rump of largely working class, disadvantaged students. Both schools appear to have developed poor reputations in the eyes of local parents, variously described by the principals as undesirable and ‘tough’ in one school, and ‘a refuge, welfare, school of last resort’ in the other. Without the financial means and/or motivations of middle-class parents to provide private academic coaching or to send their children to a private school, these parents have little choice other than to send their children to the local comprehensive high school.

Languages provision has been relegated to a relatively lowly status in both comprehensive schools, with just one designated languages teacher in each school (though one also has a ‘generalist’ teacher with languages qualifications). It could be argued that they are employed primarily because languages are a mandatory component of the NSW curriculum in either Years 7 or 8, and that without this mandatory element, languages would not be offered as an academic subject at these schools. The low school enrolments and the resultant lack of critical mass of students make it very difficult for elective academic subjects like languages to survive the ‘numbers game’. There are efforts in *Regional Comprehensive* to promote Chinese as a ‘niche’ subject, a ‘marker of distinction’ in the school market (e.g. Smala, Paz and Lingard, 2013), which may attract more students to the school, but the success of this promotion remains unclear. At *Central Comprehensive* in particular, there seems to be the belief expressed by the principal, Italian teacher and other teaching staff, that languages ‘are not a priority’ for the students. Moreover, the focus is more on sporting and vocational electives that are perceived to provide greater interest and relevance for students. These elective subjects, however, are at the bottom of the curriculum hierarchy in terms of academic success and future higher education studies (Tranter, 2012). Languages are seen to be a difficult academic subject for students to succeed in, and teacher expectations of success are low, a long-recognised response to teaching poorer, working class students and/or students whose first language is not English (e.g. Haberman, 1991; Dunne and Gazeley, 2008). The irony however, is that the great majority of the students at *Central Comprehensive* are already competent speakers of more than one language, but spoken competence in community languages is viewed as a negative in the sense that students are perceived to lack English skills for academic success, and as a consequence the school prioritises the development of English literacy skills in the curriculum. In social class terms,



students at these schools are clearly the ‘losers’ in the neoliberal school market (Connell, 2013a and b).

In this paper, the differences outlined between the academically selective high schools and the comprehensive high schools are stark, both in terms of students’ socio-educational backgrounds, and in the provision of and attitudes to the study of languages. While both types of schools are government administered and funded, academically selective high schools are privileged and inaccessible to most students. Only students attending this form of government school – selective schools - have access to a valued and purposeful languages program as part of the academic curriculum. This is highly inequitable and reflects other studies that indicate the difficulties low SES students in Australia have in accessing an academic curriculum that leads to higher education studies (e.g. Tranter, 2012; Perry and Southwell, 2014; Polesel, Leahy and Gillis, 2018).

The reasons for the social class inequalities in the schools featured in this paper can be related in large part to the neoliberal educational reforms instituted by successive NSW state governments since the late 1980s, and in particular, school choice policies and the deliberate promotion and growth of academically selective schools. As these schools have increasingly gained popularity in a highly competitive, market-based education system, correspondingly, low SES comprehensive high schools have declined (Campbell, Proctor and Sherington, 2009; Campbell and Sherington, 2013). As low SES comprehensive high schools have become depleted of their high achieving students, as we have highlighted in the literature, this segregation of students brings together students with multiple disadvantages which has the effect of weakening the academic performance of the schools and damaging their reputation in the eyes of local parents.

The focus on how neoliberal reforms result in different and unequal types of schools encourages a research orientation that takes into account political economy (Block, 2017, 2018). In the contemporary era, leaving aside the inequalities associated with the growth of private schools in Australia (now comprising 15 per cent of school students, compared to 4 per cent in 1970 [ABS, 2018]), we need to ask why it should be that one large group of mainly working class students has very little access to, and little support for studying languages at one form of government secondary school – their local comprehensive high school. And at the same time, a smaller and very privileged group of students at another type of government secondary school – academically selective - enjoys a wide array of languages electives with strong support from all school stakeholders. This latter group is privileged in its access to an academic curriculum but at the expense of the former group.

From a Marxist, social class perspective, the inequalities between the two types of schools are both understandable and logical. Neoliberal reforms to education will inevitably exacerbate inequalities because education is functional to capitalism, and inequality is an inbuilt consequence of the relentless pursuit of profits (e.g. Hill, Greaves and Maisuria, 2009). Educational ‘winners’ in the school market require there to be educational ‘losers’ (Connell, 2103a/b), and in terms of languages education in government schools, it is primarily academically selective high schools that provide extensive, valued and purposeful languages programs. In the low SES comprehensive schools, students have very little opportunity to study languages beyond the mandatory minimum.

The social class inequalities outlined in this paper are unlikely to change while neoliberal ideologies prevail. Moreover, in the short term, at least in NSW, the inequalities are likely to increase. It should be noted that at the time of

preparing this paper, the leader of the recently elected conservative Liberal-National Coalition government in NSW, Gladys Berejiklian, announced that a new academically selective high school would be built in Sydney's south west, and she indicated she wanted several more such schools to be built. In response, Adrian Piccoli, the Education Minister (2011-2017) from the previous Liberal-National Coalition government and now a professor of education, confirmed that Australia, and NSW in particular, had one of the most segregated education systems in the OECD (Baker and Smith, 2019).

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> ICSEA refers to the Index of Socio-Educational Advantage which features in the national *My School* website on Australian schools. It is a school rating that allows the comparison of schools based on the occupation and educational levels of parents and population and housing census data. The median value is 1000. Details can be found at: [http://docs.acara.edu.au/resources/Guide\\_to\\_understanding\\_2013\\_ICSEA\\_values.pdf](http://docs.acara.edu.au/resources/Guide_to_understanding_2013_ICSEA_values.pdf)

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