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Under-supply of schooling in the gentrified and regenerated inner city

Cathy Sherry [a,*], Hazel Easthope [b]

[a] Faculty of Law, UNSW Australia, Sydney, NSW 2052, Australia
[b] City Futures Research Centre, UNSW Australia, Sydney, NSW 2052, Australia

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ABSTRACT

Governments and planners in the Global North are increasingly faced with the challenge of providing services for growing numbers of families in the inner city. Rather than quitting the city, couples are staying to raise children in gentrified, working class housing or in new medium and high density developments built pursuant to policies of urban consolidation and renewal. Difficulties have arisen when parents discover that inner city schools do not meet their expectations either in terms of quality or quantity. Problems with quantity are a consequence of government failing to anticipate the presence of families in new high density developments, particularly marked in Australia where apartments have never been considered appropriate housing for families. This article explores the actual and projected presence of children in inner Sydney and the pressure this has placed on school places. The government's ability to anticipate school demand is complicated by neoliberal education policies of rationalisation and 'school choice', which have reduced the number of inner city schools and created unpredictable movement of families between schools. Parent lobby groups have now forced the government to plan new schools, which is proving a complicated and expensive exercise in the high density, high value urban core. The conclusion of the research is that inner urban redevelopment must include sufficient public space and infrastructure not only for schools in the immediate future, but also for adaptive reuse for other, perhaps equally unanticipated, needs in the longer-term.

1. Introduction

A significant challenge facing cities in the 21st century in the Global North is the provision of infrastructure and services to meet the needs of increasing numbers of families living in the inner city. Traditional visions of family life centred on the separation of women and children from the overcrowded, commerce-driven city, and their relocation in spacious, safe, quasi-rural suburbs. As a consequence, infrastructure that served families, in particular schools, was constructed in suburban, rather than inner urban areas. From the late 20th century onwards, many cities witnessed the growth in couples eschewing suburbia, and choosing to remain in the inner city to raise families, taking advantage of the city's services, cafes, restaurants, cultural life, and proximity to work (Karsten, 2003; Boterman, Karsten, & Musterd, 2010; Butler & Hamnett, 2011; Billingham & Kimelberg, 2013; Rowe, 2014; DeSena, 2006; Gulson, 2011; Lilius, 2014). As these families are a subset of the gentrifying 'creative class' (Florida, 2005), some cities have implemented policies to entice middle-class families back to the inner city to aid urban revitalisation (Van Den Berg, 2013; Goodsell, 2013).

Inner city families are typically residents of two distinct forms of housing; older housing stock in which they have invested time and money improving (Butler, Hamnett, & Ramsden, 2013; Boterman et al., 2010), or new, often high rise developments, built pursuant to government policies of urban regeneration and consolidation (Karsten, 2003; Boterman et al., 2010; Whitzman & Mizrachi, 2012; Van Den Berg, 2013; Lilius, 2014).

While families who make the city their home value the city's commercial and cultural life, tensions have arisen when middle-class parents discover that services and infrastructure do not meet their expectations in either *quality* or *quantity*. Perceived problems with *quality* often arise in relation to schools, and amongst parents who have moved into established neighbourhoods. There will be existing schools, but middle class parents are anxious about the quality of education, the physical condition of the school, as well as the social background and family values of their children's peers. Middle class parents seek to solve these perceived problems through a range of strategies. Initially, parents opt out of the local school system sending their children to private schools or out of area public schools, but gradually, they 'shop' for schools within their local area (Butler & Hamnett, 2011; Butler et al., 2013; DeSena, 2006; Gulson, 2011), engage in collective efforts to change local schools through parent involvement (Butler et al., 2013; Billingham & Kimelberg, 2013), and/or work towards the creation of new schools (DeSena, 2006; Davis & Oakley, 2013). As parents' investment in the local area increases over time, they seem more inclined to exercise a 'voice' rather than an 'exit' strategy (Billingham & Kimelberg, 2013; Gulson, 2011) to solve the inner city school 'problem'.

* Corresponding author.
E-mail addresses: c.sherry@unsw.edu.au (C. Sherry), hazel.easthope@unsw.edu.au (H. Easthope).

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Problems with *quantity*, or the very existence of school services and infrastructure, have typically arisen in new inner city developments because governments and planners have not anticipated that families would choose this form of housing. In Amsterdam, a large-scale regeneration of the inner city occurred with 'under-planning' of childcare and schools, with one school resorting to a floating classroom on water to address its lack of space (Karsten, 2003). In Stockholm, a large, state-led inner city redevelopment became the subject of intense media criticism when the target market, older couples downsizing from the suburbs, did not move into the development, but rather families with young children, leading to belated planning for school places (Lilius, 2014). Lower Manhattan (MCB1, 2010) has experienced sharp rises in residential development, with corresponding, but not anticipated increased school demand. Like Hong Kong (Chan, 2001), Lower Manhattan has struggled to physically locate schools in an intensely high density, high land value environment. In Australia, the gentrification of inner Melbourne has led to a long-running campaign for a local, public high school (Rowe, 2014), and in Vancouver, poster-child for compact urbanism, many downtown schools are struggling to meet demand. The phenomenon of under-provision of schools in areas of new urban regeneration is illustrated by this admission from the Chair of the Vancouver School Board's planning and facilities committee:

> The changes in neighbourhood densities caught us a bit off guard. We've been surprised by the number of families with school-aged children deciding to stay and live in the downtown core. They used to start in the city and move to the suburbs, but that's not always the case anymore (Powers, 2013).

This article explores an absence of school planning in the context of gentrification and high density urban regeneration of the City of Sydney, the local council area encompassing Sydney's Central Business District and immediately adjacent suburbs. The article contrasts developer and government resistance to apartments as family housing and consistent 'child-blindness' in planning, with the actual and projected presence of children in apartments in the City of Sydney. It then explores the 'complexity and messiness' of education practices in inner Sydney (Gulson, 2011, p. 94), in the context of neoliberal policies of rationalisation and 'school choice', along with education department assumptions about the presence and school preferences of families in medium and high density housing. Finally, it documents two flashpoints of schooling undersupply in the inner city where intense parent lobbying led to decisions to open new schools, highlighting the logistic and financial challenges of new school construction in high value, high density urban cores.

The article seeks to add to literature on the presence of families in the gentrified and regenerated inner city and the difficulties governments have had anticipating their presence and service needs. In highlighting these challenges, the research establishes the need to accurately acknowledge the presence of families in non-traditional medium and high density housing, inside and beyond the urban core, and to anticipate, rather than retrospectively identify, their needs when building cities.

2. Methodology

The research was conducted through a review of policy documents, government reports and statistical data on housing development, demographics and school enrolment in the local council area of the City of Sydney over the past 25 years. As Australia has a three tiered system of government – Federal, State and local government – with education in the domain of State government and housing in the domain of both State and local governments, State and local government data and policies were the focus of research. One author attended a community meeting between the Department of Education and Communities (DEC) and local parents, and a public, online parent discussion was monitored. This discussion was established by a private research company, Straight Talk, which was engaged by DEC to conduct a community consultation on inner city schooling. Written reports produced by Straight Talk on community, Parents and Citizens and local principal meetings were also read (DEC, 2014a). Both authors attended a meeting with staff of the City of Sydney Council. Media articles on the inner city school 'crisis' were read and the public statements of a parent lobby group, CLOSE — Community for Local Options for Secondary Education, were monitored. International research on the intersection of education, gentrification and urban regeneration was reviewed to identify consistencies between emerging problems in education provision in Sydney and other cities that have experienced gentrification and/or regeneration in their urban core.

3. Setting the scene: families will not and should not live in apartments

For the entire 20th century the 'Australian dream' was the freehold ownership of a detached house on a quarter acre block in the suburbs (Davison, 1993). The 'dream' was championed by all governments, so much so that an antipathy to apartment living, particularly for families, developed to a level that bordered on paranoia. Apartments were said to 'destroy family life' and not be 'conducive to morality' (Dwyer, 1909, as cited in Butler-Bowdon & Pickett, 2007). Although apartment construction boomed, particularly in Sydney and Melbourne in the post-War period (Butler-Bowdon & Pickett, 2007) and in the late 20th century in Australia's five major cities pursuant to policies of urban consolidation (Victorian Department of Planning and Community Development, 2008; Queensland Department of Infrastructure and Planning, 2009; NSW Department of Planning, 2010; South Australia Department of Planning and Local Government, 2010; WA Department of Planning, 2010), assumptions on the part of governments and developers about the unsuitability of apartments for families persisted (Easthope & Tice, 2011; Fincher, 2004). The vast majority of apartments in Australia are one- and two-bedroom, in contrast to the vast majority of detached houses which have three or more bedrooms (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2013). As Woolcock et al. (2010, p. 183) note:

> Planners are planning for cities to accommodate singles, couples and the elderly. As far as the planners are concerned, family housing is already oversupplied in this new ageing city and needs little encouragement. As a consequence, contemporary strategic planning has almost become child-blind, with the new higher density centres being built essentially for the childless in mind.

The assumption that family housing is 'oversupplied' is based on an orthodoxy in Australian housing policy that owing to marked increases in smaller households, there is a 'mismatch' between existing housing stock and household size resulting in significant 'underutilisation' of properties; as a result, smaller households should be encouraged to relocate to smaller properties resulting in a more efficient housing allocation (Batten, 1999). The 'mismatch' argument has been criticised (Maher, 1995; Batten, 1999), with evidence that smaller households in Australia do not necessarily want, or choose, to live in smaller dwellings (Yates, 2001; Wulff, Healy, & Reynolds, 2004), and that older couples do not consider their homes 'under-utilised'. They have not 'down-sized', making their homes available for younger families (Judd, Olsberg, Quinn, Groenhart, & Demirbilek, 2010), limiting the supply of detached homes in established suburbs. Sydney is also one of the least affordable housing markets in the world, ranking third after Hong Kong and Vancouver, in a survey of 378 markets (Demographia, 2014). Regardless of government and planners assumptions about where families *should* live, many families could not buy or rent a detached house or townhouse, even if they wanted to, pushing them into the apartment market (Easthope & Tice, 2011, p. 431).

In greater Sydney a quarter of all households living in apartments have children compared to just over half of all households living in a