

Socio-economic Status and School System Enrolments

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Introduction

In 1996, 70.7% of all school students were enrolled in government schools in Australia (MCEETYA 1998: 11). The remainder, 29.3%, were enrolled in non-government schools divided between Catholic schools, with 19.6% of all enrolments, and Independent schools, with 9.7%.

These figures beg the question of who enrolls in which school systems. Indeed there is little information available that relates the backgrounds of students and their school system. Most people would assume that Independent schools enrol students from more affluent backgrounds than either Catholic or Government schools because the fees these schools levy are effective barriers to participation. This paper presents some findings of an interrogation of data relating to school system enrolment and socio-economic standing.

Methodology

Socio-economic status is a measure of an individual's or group's standing in the community. It usually relates to the income, occupation, educational attainment and wealth of either an individual or a group. These types of variables are summarised into a single figure or socio-economic index. There is no general agreement on the definition of socio-economic status and so different socio-economic indexes are constructed for different uses.

The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) constructed five such indexes based on the 1996 Census of Population and Housing called the Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas (SEIFA) (ABS 2033.0.30.001). These indexes relate to the socio-economic conditions in an area, the smallest of which is the census Collection District containing about 250 dwellings. Of the five SEIFA indexes the Index of Relative Socio-economic Disadvantage was chosen for this study. This index is derived from attributes such as low income, low educational attainment, high unemployment and work in unskilled occupations. All these are usually negatively correlated with educational attainment. The Socio-Economic Index Of Relative Disadvantage of each census Collection District was obtained from the SEIFA96 CD ROM.

Data on school system enrolment was obtained from 1996 Census figures supplied by the ABS on the CDATA96 CD ROMs (ABS 2019.0.30.001). The enrolment in school systems (Government, Catholic and Independent) was obtained for each census Collection District from the CDATA96 CD ROMs.

The two data sets were compared on the basis of each census Collection District. The data was divided into deciles of approximately equal school student populations ranked by socio-economic standing as indicated by the Index of Relative Disadvantage. The lowest socio-economic status decile has been labelled decile number 1. The enrolments in each school system were summed for each decile and divided by the total school enrolment of the socio-economic decile to give a proportional enrolment for each decile. This process was undertaken three times to present data for primary school enrolments, secondary school enrolments, and total school enrolments. To consider the distribution of enrolments within each school system the enrolment of school systems in each decile were divided by the total enrolment in each school system. An even distribution would yield

10% of enrolments in each decile. Variations from this show that enrolments are uneven across the socio-economic spectrum.

Results

Chart 1 presents the findings of the total school enrolments. In 1996, Government schools enrolled more students than non-government schools. The Catholic systems enrolled more students than Independent schools in each decile except for the highest decile. As socio-economic status increased the proportion of the total enrolment in Independent schools rose and the proportion of enrolments in Government schools fell. Catholic schools presented a similar pattern as Independent schools except for the highest socio-economic decile that had a lower proportion of total enrolments than the ninth decile.

Chart 1: Total School Enrolments

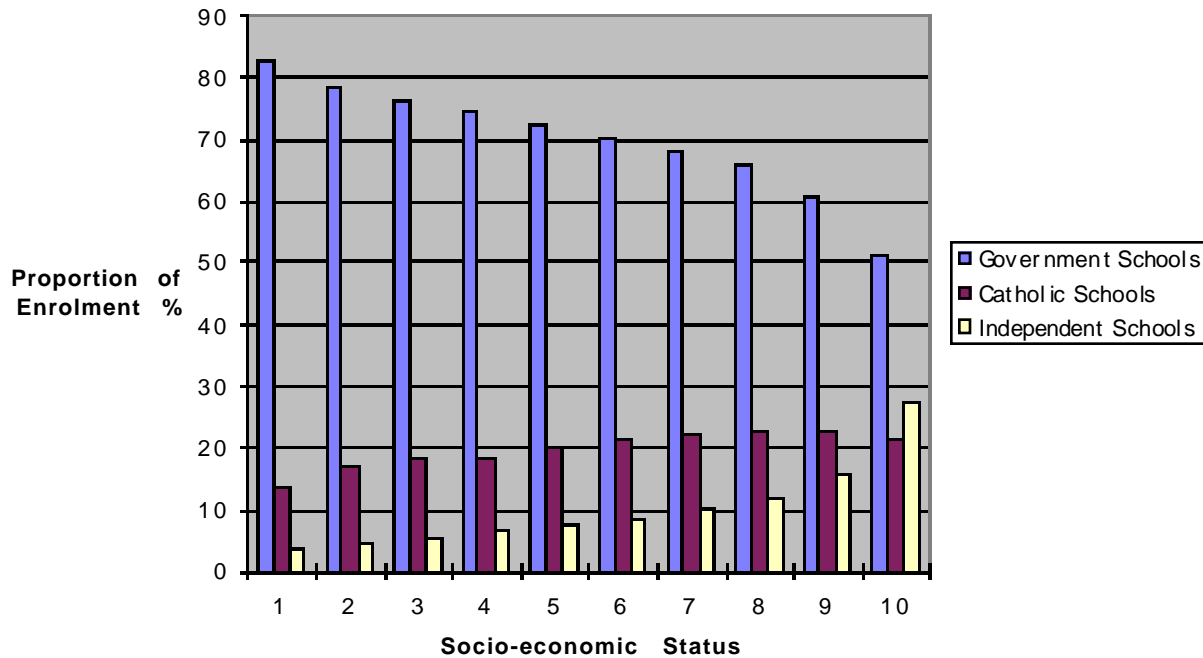


Chart 2 presents the findings as a proportion of school system enrolments. Government schools enrol slightly more of students from low socio-economic status backgrounds than from high socio-economic status backgrounds. Catholic schools are the reverse with more students from the high socio-economic status backgrounds than low. A large proportion of students enrolled in Independent schools are from high socio-economic status backgrounds.

Chart 3 presents the findings for primary school enrolments. These follow the same pattern as total enrolments except that Catholic school enrolments were higher for each decile.

Chart 4 presents the findings for secondary school enrolments. The similar pattern emerged as primary enrolments in the lowest few deciles. In the top decile the proportion of enrolments in Independent secondary schools were much higher than the proportion in Catholic secondary schools and slightly greater than Government secondary schools. Overall, Independent secondary schools enrolled a greater proportion of students than Independent primary schools; however, this was concentrated in the higher socio-economic deciles.

Chart 2: School Enrolments

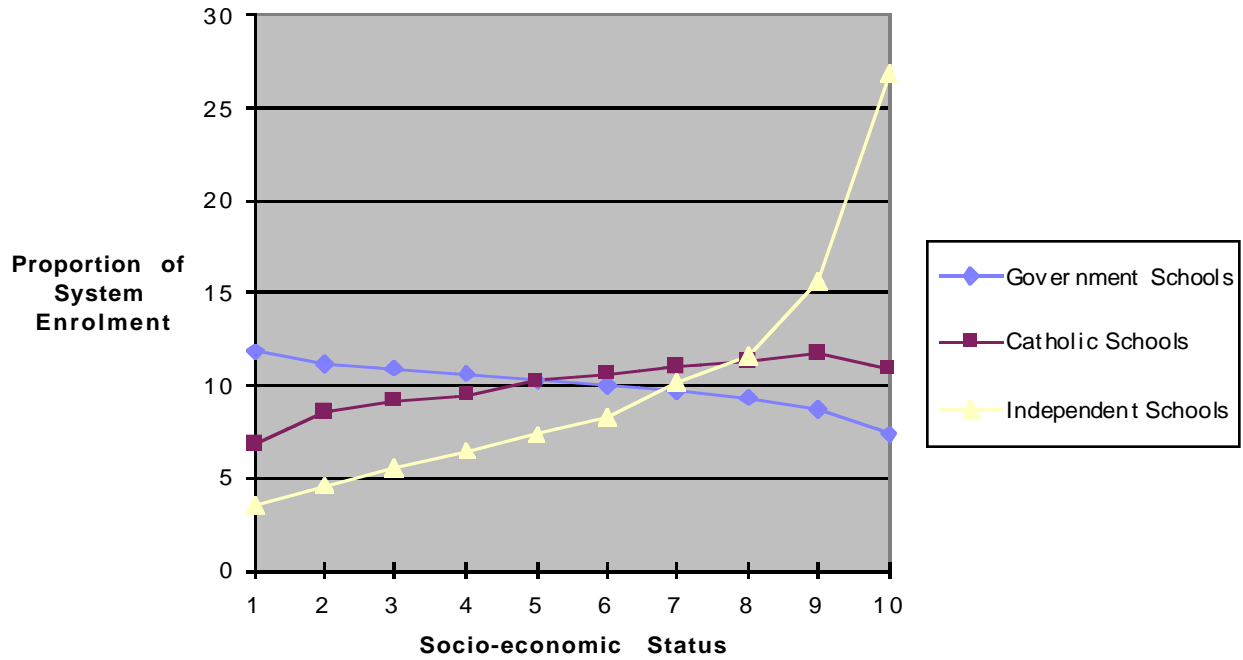


Chart 3: Primary School Enrolments

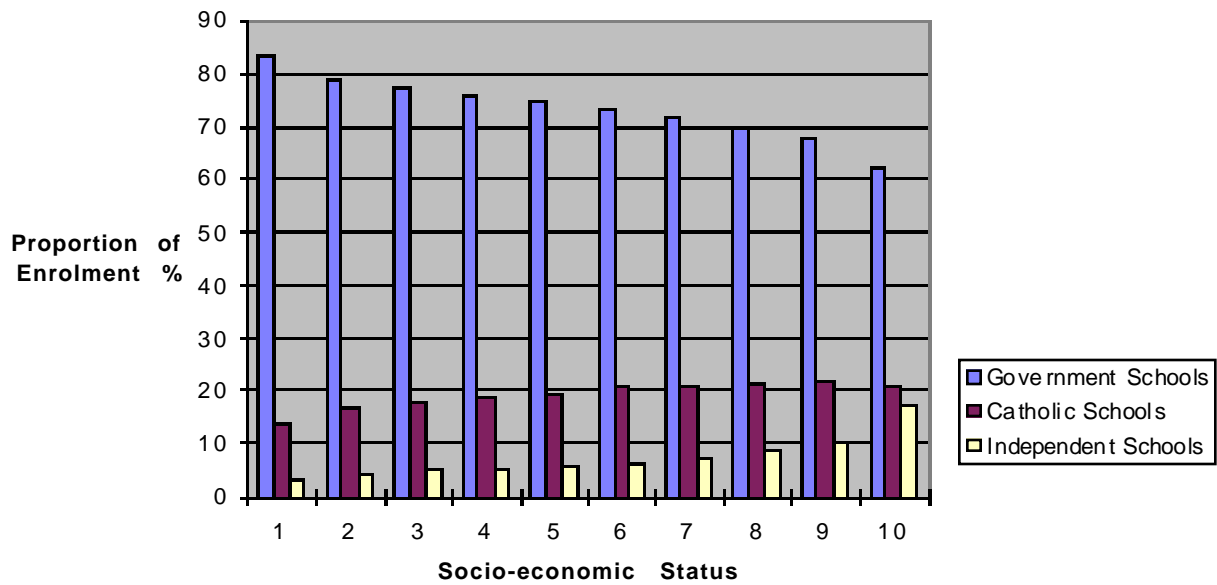
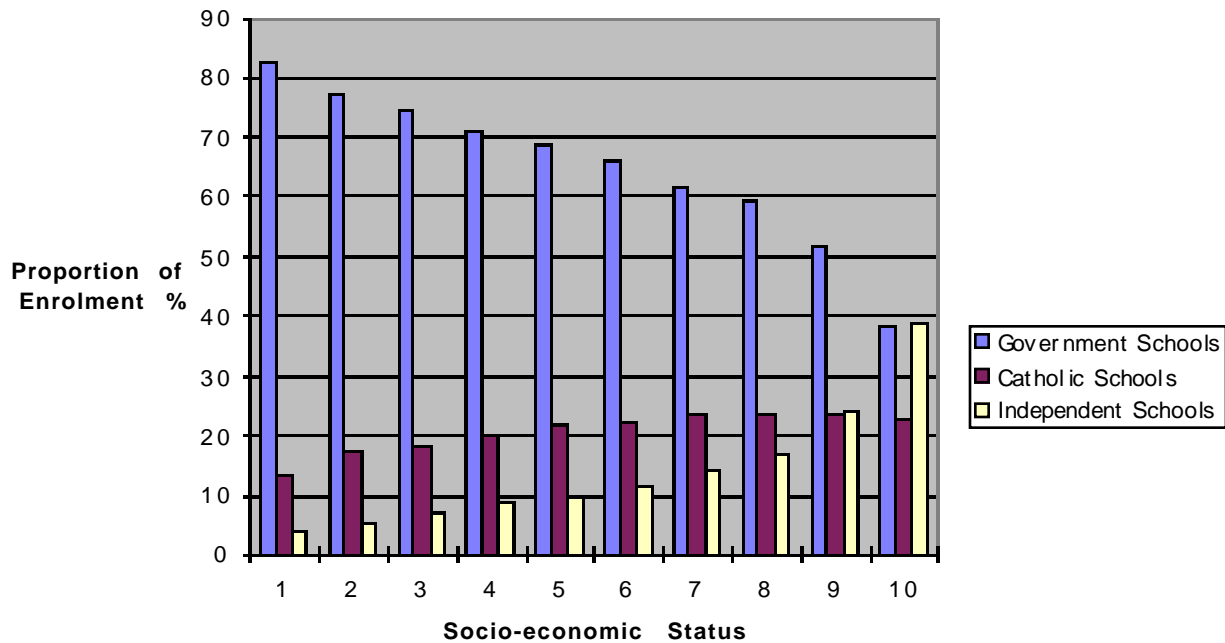


Chart 4: Secondary School Enrolments



Discussion

Socio-economic status plays a large part in influencing the choice of schools. The higher the socio-economic status the greater is the diversity of school types chosen as shown by school system enrolments.

Government schools enrol greater proportions of students from low socio-economic backgrounds and the majority of government school students are from the lower half of the socio-economic spectrum. The fact that Government schools are free, or at least have minimal fees, allows even the poorest student to enrol. Catholic schools, with their relatively low fees, also allow students from low socio-economic backgrounds to enrol. Catholic schools enrol similar proportions of students in each socio-economic decile though more of their students are from high socio-economic backgrounds than low. However, Catholic schools enrol lower proportions of students than Government schools in every decile.

In contrast, the type of school chosen by the most affluent families tends to be Independent schools. The bulk of Independent school enrolments is from high socio-economic backgrounds. In particular, Independent secondary schools enrol greater proportions of students than Independent primary schools. In part, this could be a reflection of greater retention in Independent schools in the post compulsory years. However, it is more likely that families that can afford to send their children to Independent schools do so because they perceive Independent schools to be better able to prepare their children for work and post school education, in particular university.

This interrogation of the available data does not account for state and territory variations. Victoria, for example, had a larger number of Independent schools that enrolled a greater proportion of the student population than any other state or territory. It is likely, therefore, that the pattern of school

system enrolments by socio-economic status by be quite different in Victoria than the national picture. This picture may be further complicated by the variations in state and territory government subsidies to non-government schools.

In addition, background variables such as gender and ethnicity have not been included in the analysis. To do so may provide a clearer picture of Government and non-government school enrolments provided socio-economic status is included in the analysis.

The recent increases in government funding of non-government schools and the abolition of the New Schools Policy occurred after data used in the above analysis was collected. These policy shifts may result in significant changes in the socio-economic composition of the school system enrolments.

References

Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) (2019.0.30.001) *CDATA96* Australian Bureau of Statistics, Canberra.

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