At the beginning of this book I argued that, in order to make sense of school choice, it is necessary to understand the social tensions produced by the mass expansion of participation in secondary education. School choice sits within a cultural logic that I have termed socially restrictive schooling. School choice, as a strategy for managing these tensions, replaces expansion through accommodation of new student populations (via curriculum diversification and streaming), with direct emulation of the most socially and academically selective settings. The export of traditional pedagogical models is backed by new technologies of surveillance and enforcement. The emulation strategy prevents “pollution” of restricted sites by remodeling selectivity in the clothes of the market. Of course, accommodation must inevitably take place, in hidden and coded ways, giving working-class schools a divided identity—attempting to pass themselves off as pseudo-private schools while working under the socially exposed conditions of the neighborhood comprehensive.

The school choice framework demands certain strategies for making sense of or “reading” schooling more widely. However, the framework does not always receive the reading that it requires in order to function as an organizational and ideological system. Parents with no engagement in the school choice project continue sending children to the local school. Those with minimal engagement see little difference between schools, while those who are more invested draw inferences based on subtle signals from schools and market flows, extrapolating their own likely prospects and best strategies. Overinvested parents—those who buy into the rhetoric completely—inflate the differences between schools into life-or-death contrasts. Yet even the most invested parents are skeptical of the value of school-ranking websites and marketing. As one Australian parent observed:

We see in the local papers and in our junk mail, the schools advertise now and they’re putting their best foot forward. I read through some of them and “we...
have this and we have this and we have that,” sometimes it’s all smoke and lights . . . I think too, a lot of it’s the luck of the draw with the teachers, you can have all the whizz bang things in the world and unless you’ve got a teacher that’s really attuned to the kids and on the ball then it doesn’t really matter. (Donna)

Donna picks up on a key dynamic within school choice regimes—that of the “attunement” between teachers and students, which is mediated by the symbolic order of the curriculum. Harmony and conflict between students and teachers is conditioned by the cultural and cognitive demands of the curriculum. What structures socially restrictive schooling, including school choice regimes, is a culturally conservative curriculum and a narrow competitive examination system. Where the purposes of schooling are narrowly defined, unity of purpose must be, by definition, an exclusionary concept.

Schooling cannot be considered as a technical institution in which some units are more efficient and effective and therefore more desirable. Rather, desirability is colored by the proximity of student populations to a cultural model defined by the habitus of historical and contemporary ruling-class fractions. This cultural model is not a neutral arbiter of quality, but rather a system whose structure and functions are most meaningful only for certain social groups (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990). Instead of efficacy in schooling being measured by technical capabilities, differences in its productivity for different social classes and groups are a function of distance from this cultural model. Such distance is experienced either through affirmation by schools of cultural identities (a process of reenforcement) or negation of them (a process of deculturation). However, these connections are not timeless or immutable, and they are subject to challenge and subversion when supported by broader social movements for change.

**The Curriculum of Socially Restrictive Schooling**

The defining characteristic of socially restrictive schooling is, therefore, the maintenance, or re-establishment, of socially narrow curriculum. While the curriculum as a whole may expand to include myriad options (as in Australia), it is the most traditional academic disciplines, and the most conservatively conceived of academic demands in newer subjects, that are rewarded (Teese, 2000). The unequal distribution of these rewards opens space for crisis narratives about exposed sites, ever more rigorous accountability and quality control mechanisms, and the exposure of education to privatization. School choice offers a palatable account for each of these outcomes.