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Factors that influence the decisions parents make when choosing a secondary school for their children

Rosemary Cahill
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Factors that influence the decisions parents make when choosing a secondary school for their children

Rosemary Cahill

**This portfolio is presented in fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of
Doctor of Education**

**Faculty of Education
Edith Cowan University**

April 2009

USE OF THESIS

The Use of Thesis statement is not included in this version of the thesis.

ABSTRACT

The impetus for this portfolio is the accelerating drift of Australian school students from state-run, free government schools to fee-paying independent and/or Catholic schools within the non-government sector. Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) data show that between 1996 and 2006, student enrolments in non-government schools grew by 21.5% compared with 1.2% in government schools (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2007). In this portfolio, a sociological lens reflective of the pragmatic paradigm is applied to the question of school choice in order to understand parents' thinking behind the choices they are making and, moving forward, how the funding and governance of schooling in Australia might lead to different school choices.

The portfolio is structured around a three-way school-choice model whereby parents' choices arise through the interaction of three dimensions: local options, global trends and personal circumstances. The portfolio incorporates a combination of primary and secondary research. The secondary research explores local and global dimensions of school choice while the primary research investigates the personal dimension.

The primary research is a case-study conducted in a precinct of metropolitan Perth in 2007. In the case-study, a survey was administered to the parents of all students who had just commenced their secondary schooling (entering year 8) at one of eight schools located within the case study precinct. Participating schools comprised a mixture of government, Catholic and independent sectors and, due to their shared proximity, were each others' main competition for students. While a high degree of agreement about what makes a 'good' school was found among participating parents, sector-specific variation was found in the sense of agency reported by parents and in the extent to which participating schools were perceived to offer several factors that were deemed to be prominent in 'good' schools. In each case, government schools lagged behind their non-government counterparts. Recommendations offer a pragmatic and empirically sound approach to arresting the drift of students away from government secondary schools.

DECLARATION

I certify that this portfolio does not, to the best of my knowledge and belief:

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I also acknowledge the patience shown by my husband, Tim Wilkinson and our children, Rory and Melody Wilkinson for leaving me alone to get on with my studies.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ABS	Australian Bureau of Statistics
ABC	Australian Broadcasting Commission
ACER	Australian Council of Educational Research
AEU	Australian Education Union
ALP	Australian Labor Party
AUT	Australian Union of Teachers
CEOWA	Catholic Education Office, Western Australia
DES	Department of Education Services (Western Australian)
DEST	Department of Education, Science and Training (Commonwealth)
DET	Department of Education and Training (Western Australian)
DOGS	Defence of Government Schools
EDWA	Education Department of Western Australia
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
ICT	Information and Communication Technology
IEUWA	Independent Education Union of Western Australia
K-7, K-12	Kindergarten to Year 7, Kindergarten to Year 12
LNSLN	Literacy, Numeracy and Special Learning Needs

MCEETYA	Ministerial Council of Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs
NESB	non-English speaking background
OBE	Outcomes Based Education
OECD	Organisation of Economic and Cultural Development
PISA	Program for International Student Assessment
PLATO	People Lobbying Against Teaching Outcomes
SPSS	Statistical Package for the Social Sciences
SSTUWA	State School Teachers Union of Western Australia
TAFE	Technical and Further Education
TEE	Tertiary Entrance Examination
VET	Vocational Education and Training
WACE	Western Australian Certificate of Education
WACOA	Western Australian College of Agriculture
WACOT	Western Australian College of Teaching
WASSEA	Western Australian State Schools Executives Association

SECTION ONE

INTRODUCTION

CHAPTER ONE: PORTFOLIO INTRODUCTION

Schools in Australia fall into three broad categories: government, independent and Catholic. All three categories include primary and secondary schools. Primary schools typically cater for children from four to twelve years of age while secondary schools cater for children to seventeen years.

Government schools are administered by state or territory government departments and are funded entirely from the public purse. Catholic schools operate under the auspices of the Catholic Church and are funded through a combination of church assets, public funds and fees levied against parents. Independent schools are administered by individual school boards and operate through a combination of public funds and fees levied against parents.

While Catholic and independent schools are subject to legislative regulation in the states or territories in which they are located, they are not directly administered by government departments so are collectively known as non-government schools.

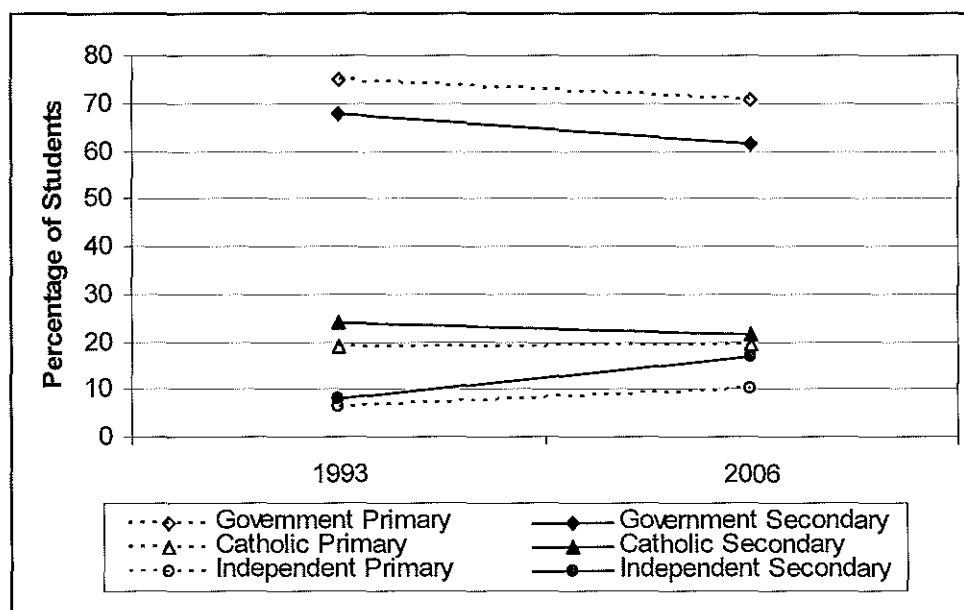
EVIDENCE OF THE DRIFT OF STUDENTS TO NON-GOVERNMENT SCHOOLS

Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) data show that between 1996 and 2006, student enrolments in non-government schools grew by 21.5% compared with an increase of only 1.2% in government schools (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2007). In the twenty years leading up to 2006, the number of government schools in Australia dropped from 7,589 in 1986 to 6,902 in 2006. During the same period, the number of

non-government schools increased from 2,496 to 2,710. All of this increase within the non-government sector occurred among independent schools; from 1986 to 2006, the number of Catholic schools dropped by 9 while the corresponding number of independent schools rose by 223 (ABS, 2007).

The shift from the government to the non-government sector occurs mainly as students move from primary to secondary schooling. Figure 1.1 (below) illustrates this point with ABS (1995, 2007) data that compare the proportion of Australian students attending different categories of schools in each of 1993 and 2006.

Figure 1.1: Comparison of school students attending Government, Catholic and Independent primary and secondary schools, 1993 and 2006



(Source: ABS, 1995 and ABS, 2007)

Figure 1.1 clearly shows the drift of students away from the government sector and the corresponding growth of market share among independent schools between 1993 and 2006. It also shows that within the non-government sector, independent schools

have increased their market-share at both stages of schooling in that period, particularly at the secondary stage, whereas the market share of students attending Catholic schools dropped at the secondary stage and remained stable at the primary stage.

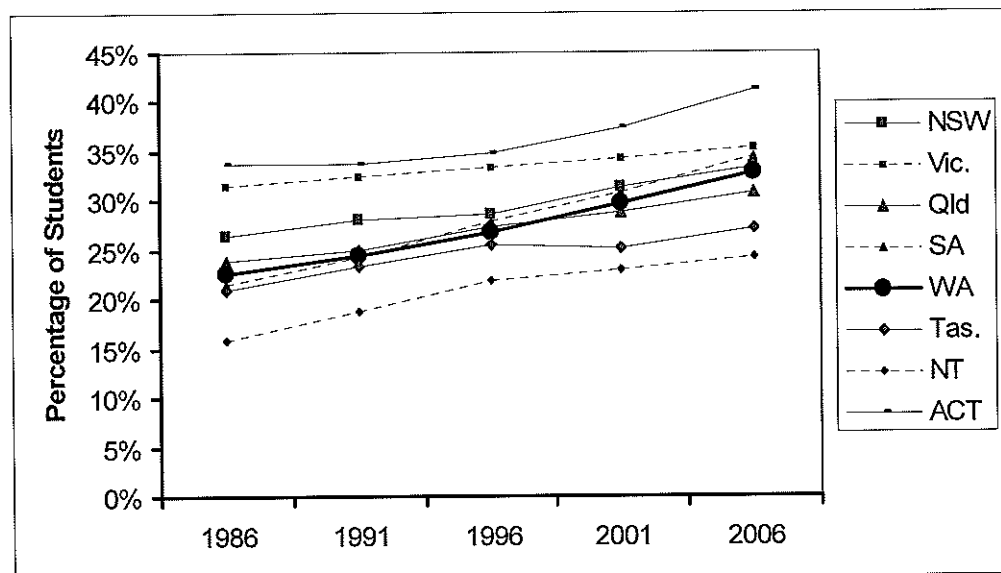
While it has long been the case that some government school students move to the non-government sector at the start of their secondary schooling, the steeper downward gradient of the Government Secondary line on the graph in Figure 1.1 (compared with the Government Primary line) shows that a large proportion the observed drift of students to non-government schools is happening at the transition from primary to secondary schooling. It follows that government secondary schools are being more severely affected by the exodus of students than are their primary counterparts. Accordingly, the focus of this portfolio will be on secondary schooling.

Burke and Spaul (2001, para. 3) claim that “of all the stages in schooling, secondary education is the most sensitive to both personal aspirations and societal demands”. Through the primary years, importance is attributed to children being happy and being surrounded by friends and caring adults who work closely with families to help children grow into confident, industrious and courteous young people (Bosetti, 2006; Corish, 2006; Davies & Aurini, 2006; Jackson-May 2006). In the secondary years, however, parental attention is more likely to be trained on achievement, discipline, work habits and career prospects (Beavis, 2004; Department of Education Services [DES], 2001; Freund, 2001; Australian Council for Educational Research [ACER], 2000; Young, 1998).

The drift of students from government to non-government schools has been observed in all Australian states and territories, but the magnitude and timing of that movement has varied across jurisdictions. Figure 1.2 (below) compares the proportion of students attending non-government schools in each state and territory over the past 20 years from 1986 to 2006. It illustrates a clear upward trend across all jurisdictions over the selected period, but also shows that the Australian Capital Territory has the

highest proportion of non-government school attendees, while the Northern Territory has the lowest. The graph also shows that over the selected period, the rate at which market-share grew for non-government schools in Victoria, Tasmania, New South Wales, Queensland, Australian Capital Territory and Northern Territory (ranging from 4 percent to 8 percent over the entire period) was less pronounced than was the case for each of South Australia (13 percent) and Western Australia (10 percent).

Figure 1.2: Proportion of school students attending non-government schools in each Australian state and territory, 1986 to 2006



(Source: ABS, 2006)

While government schooling is losing ground in all parts of Australia, this portfolio will focus on the situation in Western Australia in particular. School provision in Australia is a state responsibility and focusing on one state will enable exploration of state-specific issues alongside those that apply at national and global levels. The reason Western Australia has been selected in preference to South Australia (which appears to have a stronger drift of students away from government schools) is due to logistics:

the researcher lives in Perth, Western Australia so access to data from parents, policy sources, schools and local media has been facilitated by geographical proximity.

IMPORTANCE OF GOVERNMENT SCHOOL PROVISION

A pivotal assumption of this portfolio is that “a strong government school system is fundamental to the development of a socially-cohesive, stable and democratic society” (DES, 2001, p. 33).

The social importance of government school provision is a recurrent theme in research literature. Hargreaves (2003, p. 3) claims that “since the emergence of compulsory schooling ... state education has repeatedly been expected to save society”. Bonnor and Caro (2007), Burke and Spaul (2001), Lubienski (2006) and Young (1998) highlight the contribution that non-selective government schools play in establishing connections across disparate groups in Australia, the United States and Britain, while numerous researchers have noted the role that government schools play in the pursuit of equitable provision of schooling (Boomer & Spender, 1976; Bosetti, 2006; Caldwell, 2005; DES, 2001; Karmel, 2001; Saul, 2006; Vickers 2005).

If it is accepted that government schooling is important to the social health of the community, the current drift of students away from Australian government schools may imply adverse long-term consequences for the Australian community. This possibility was raised by members of an independent Taskforce commissioned by the Western Australian government in 2001 to review the state’s provision of schooling:

We are convinced that without stronger community commitment, backed up by the State and Commonwealth governments, there is a risk of government schools becoming unable to fulfil their fundamental role in sustaining a socially-cohesive, productive and just community. (Robson, Harken & Hill, 2001, n.p.)

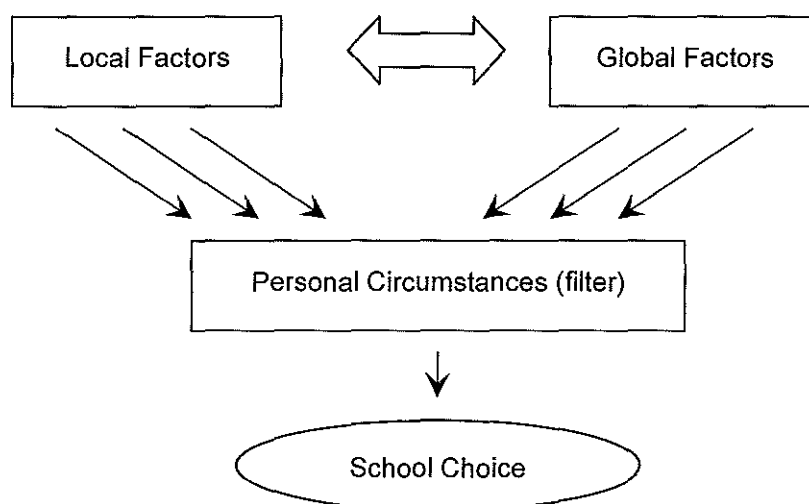
A counter-view, put by Friedman (1955), is that large government departments are too cumbersome to efficiently administer public schools. This argument implies that the exodus of students from government schools may stem from the lumbering nature of bureaucratic inefficiency.

While bureaucratic administration cannot be ruled-out as a factor contributing to the movement of students away from government schools, the fact that this movement has accelerated in recent decades and is common to all Australian states and territories suggests that factors beyond possible incompetence within a particular state/territory department of education seem to be at play. This line of reasoning is further supported by the fact that the exodus of students from government schools is not peculiar to Australia; it has also been reported in other Western nations including Britain, New Zealand, Canada, Greece, Argentina and the United States (Bosetti, 2006; Davis & Aurini, 2006; Fritz & Beers, 2002; Hargreaves, 2003; Ladd & Fiske, 2003; Lubienski, 2006; Narodowski, 2006; Saul, 2006; Walford, 2006). This suggests that while school choices are manifest as personal decisions made in the context of local conditions and options, there is also a pervasive global dimension to the choice-making process.

SCHOOL CHOICE: A COMPACT OF LOCAL, GLOBAL AND PERSONAL FACTORS

While parents across the Western world typically engage in the process of school choice as a personal and private matter (Campbell, 2005; Davies & Aurini, 2006; English, 2006; Kelley & Evans, 2004; McCarthy, 2007; O'Neill, 2008), the evidence suggests that a combination of local and global factors conspire to influence those personal and private decisions. This combination of factors gives rise to a model of school choice that characterises choice-making as a complex speculative process that occurs at the intersection of three inter-related dimensions: global factors; local factors; and personal circumstances. This three-way school choice model, illustrated overleaf in Figure 1.3, is the organisational framework adopted for this portfolio.

Figure 1.3: Key elements of the Local-Global-Personal School-Choice Model



Local factors relate to the governance, funding and legislative conditions that determine the number, diversity, location and cost of school options from which parents are able to choose (Bosetti, 2005; Campbell & Sherrington, 2005; Walford, 2006). Local factors are influenced by, but remain qualitatively separate from, global factors which relate to the hopes, aspirations and fears that parents have for their children and the role that parents expect schools to play in fulfilment of those hopes and fears (Bosetti, 2005; Davies & Aurini, 2006; Forsey, 2006; Walford, 2006). Personal circumstances filter the local options and global hopes and fears within the model. For some parents, this is the point at which preferences rub up against realities. Personal circumstances incorporate a range of factors including financial, educational, linguistic, religious and geographic circumstances, all of which serve to further enhance or limit the range of school choices that might be available to parents (Kelley & Evans, 2004; Mearthy, 2007; Ryan 2006; Symes & Gulson 2006).

Within the three-way school-choice model, parents arrive at their school choices by combining and (hopefully) balancing what they believe to be important/desirable (global factors), available/allowed (local factors) and feasible/comfortable (personal circumstances). These factors are evident in the following comment made by an anxious mother whose 12-year old daughter was sitting a selection test in Perth, in the hope of getting into a specialist government school program the following year.

It was so much easier when I was a kid. Back then, everyone in town just went to the local high school. My parents didn't get all this grief about "good schools" and "bad schools", and they definitely couldn't afford to send us to a private school. Now it's all pretty confusing with so many choices and high stakes attached to getting your kids into the "right" school. You know – a bad decision now could have a big effect on the doors that open for your kids in the future. People will say we've got rocks in our heads if we send our daughter to (our local high school) next year – I've heard it's a bit rough – so if she doesn't get into this specialist program, we'll probably send her to a private school. Which ever one we can get her into.

(Parent, September 24, 2006)

The comment encapsulates numerous local-global-personal factors that will be developed through this portfolio. Firstly, the tone of the comment implies an overall sense of anxiety. Evidence of parental anxiety associated with school choice has been reported by several researchers, all of whom link the anxiety to the seemingly inescapable obligation to choose, combined with the high stakes and uncertainties attached to those choices (Campbell, 2005; Cannold, 2007; Forsey, 2006; Freund, 2001; Vickers, 2005; Walford 2006).

The comment also demonstrates something of the Australian vernacular: that non-government schools are widely referred to as 'private' schools and government schools are understood to be the default 'public' or 'state' school option.

The first issue explicitly raised by the mother in her comment is the extent to which school choices have expanded in Australia in a generation. Twenty-five years ago when she entered high school as a student, school choice was largely a non-issue. There are three dimensions to the expanded choice she now faces as a parent:

- a rapid increase in the number and range of non-government schools (Symes & Gulson, 2005, Vickers, 2005);
- diversification of provision within the government school sector (Angus et al, 2002, Campbell, 2005); and
- relaxation of 'school zone' rules whereby a student's residential address had previously determined which government school he/she was allowed to attend (Angus, 1998, Forsey, 2006).

Another issue raised in the mother's comment relates to the fees of non-government schools. Through to the early 1970s when she attended a secondary school, non-government schools received very little public funding so their running costs were drawn almost entirely from private sources; usually a combination of church contributions and tuition fees (Burke & Spaul, 2001). Fees at prestigious high-fee independent schools were beyond the reach of most Australian families, while low-fee (mainly Catholic) schools struggled to survive (Karmel, 1973; Potts, 2005). At that time, parents who opted to send their children to low-fee schools did so primarily due to religious or philosophical convictions, and not on the assumption of superior educational outcomes (Department of Education Services [DES], 2001).

In 1973, the Australian Commonwealth Government sought to reduce the plight of poor schools with a needs-based program, administered by an Australian Schools Commission, providing financial aid to schools (Karmel, 2000; Rothman, 2003). A pivotal feature of this differential funding program was that it did not distinguish between government and non-government schools, but rather, between rich and poor schools (Aulich, 2001; Whitlam, 1973).

Since public funds first began to flow into non-government schools in the mid-1970s, successive Commonwealth and state governments have steadily increased the amount of funding they have provided to non-government schools (Bonnor & Caro, 2007; Macfarlane, 2003). By 2001, public funds paid for approximately 40 percent of the running costs of the most wealthy non-government schools and some of the poorest non-government schools are entirely funded through the public purse (Vickers, 2005). Not only has this level of public funding enhanced the quality of facilities, resources and programs that non-government schools are able to provide (Cannold, 2007; Vickers, 2005), but it has also enabled them to achieve these improvements without a commensurate increase in tuition fees (Symes & Gulson, 2005). This, combined with increased disposable incomes for most Australian households in the past thirty years – ABS (2005) data indicates that in the last decade alone, disposable incomes for most Australian households have risen by approximately 20 percent – has brought the cost of a ‘private school education’ within reach of many more Australian families (Rothman, 2003; Symes & Gulson, 2005).

During the recent past decades in which non-government school affordability and availability has increased, confidence in government schools has declined (Bonnor & Caro, 2007; Campbell, 2005; DES, 2001; Forsey, 2006; Freund, 2001). This is evident in the words of the mother (from the parent’s quotation given above) saying that people would think they had “rocks in our heads” if her family sent their daughter to their local government secondary school because it is reputed to be “a bit rough”. This implies that a major aversion to the local government school is that it is reputed to have a large proportion of unruly students who, at best, will disrupt her daughter’s classes and at worst, will bully her daughter or lead her astray. It might also imply a degree of concern about what people will think; some form of social pressure to send her daughter to a school that has more prestige than the local government secondary school.

The mother’s comment also reflects a deliberate strategy to school selection which she has decided to pursue for her daughter. In the first instance, she would like her

daughter to gain a place in a specialist program at a particular government school which is among a group of what she believes to be 'good' government schools in metropolitan Perth. Unfortunately for this mother, she does not live in the gazetted local area of any of these preferred schools, all of which are over-subscribed, so the only way for her daughter to gain access to one of those schools is to get into one of their specialist programs (Department of Education and Training [DET], 2007a). If her daughter is not accepted into one of those specialist programs, the mother will seek a place at a private school; "whichever one we can get her into". This final phrase suggests that while government schools are perceived to be of variable quality, non-government schools are considered to be universally 'good'.

LOCAL, GLOBAL, PERSONAL SCHOOL-CHOICE MODEL: A FRAMEWORK FOR THIS PORTFOLIO

The impetus for this portfolio is an accelerating drift of Australian school students from state-run, free government schools to fee-paying independent and/or Catholic schools within the non-government sector. The aim of this portfolio is to ascertain key factors contributing to this exodus of students and to identify what government school systems in Australia can usefully do to stem the flow. Specific questions driving this portfolio are:

- What factors influence the school choices that parents make and how are these factors contributing to the drift of students away from government schools?
- Which of these factors are within the scope of governments to change?
- How could government policy be altered to arrest the drift of students from the government school sector?

A sociological lens will be applied to the issue of school choice in this portfolio in an effort to more deeply understand parents' thinking behind the choices they are making and, moving forward, what changes to the current governance and funding of schooling might contribute to different choices. The approach taken will be reflective

of the pragmatic paradigm of social research (Creswell, 2003; Mackenzie & Snipe, 2006; Mertens, 2005), and will incorporate secondary research alongside (and not merely as background to) primary research findings in an effort to address the above questions. Key dimensions to the school choices currently being made by parents will be identified and deconstructed through analysis of national and international research, and then combined with findings from an investigation into the secondary school choices made by a selection of parents in metropolitan Perth at the start of the 2007 school year.

The approach taken through this portfolio will reflect an ethically reflexive sociology of education which is advocated by Gewirtz (2004). She argues against the position that social researchers are obliged to seek a neutral space from which to investigate social phenomena and that it is inappropriate for them to prescribe courses of action. Rather, Gewirtz (2004) claims that it is more appropriate for researchers to strive for transparency rather than neutrality. As such, they need to be explicit about the value assumptions that are embedded in their research, be prepared to defend their assumptions, acknowledge conflicting views that exist in the community and the practical dilemmas that these conflicting views create and “finally, take responsibility for the political and ethical implications of their research” (2004, p. 14).

Several value assumptions that underpin this research have already been declared. Firstly, that a strong government school system is central to the development and maintenance of a just, stable democracy (DES, 2001) and secondly, that unfettered expansion of non-government schooling will undermine the level of stability and egalitarianism currently enjoyed in most of Australia (Saul, 2006; Swan, 2005).

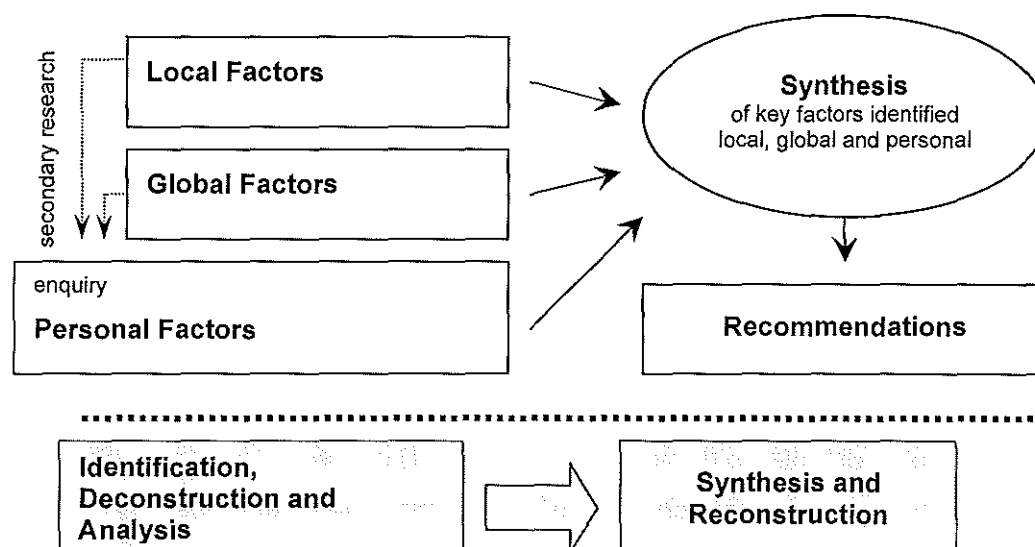
As stated, the aim of this portfolio is to ascertain key factors contributing to the drift of students moving from government to non-government schools. Further, through a small-scale enquiry, that the portfolio will focus on the situation in Western Australia, particularly as students progress from primary to secondary schooling, to ascertain

why the drift of students away from government schools is occurring and what governments might usefully do to arrest that drift.

It is anticipated that a more detailed analysis of current and emerging local, global and personal factors undertaken through this portfolio will help to resolve these questions. This will unfold within the pragmatic paradigm of social research (Burrell & Morgan, 1979; Creswell, 2003; Mackenzie & Snipe, 2006; Mertens, 2005).

The conceptual framework for this portfolio, illustrated below in Figure 1.4, provides the structure around which the portfolio will be organised.

Figure 1.4: Conceptual Framework for this Portfolio



Through the first phase of the portfolio (on the left-hand side of Figure 1.4) the intent will be to explore, identify, deconstruct and analyse the range of local, global and personal factors that influence the school choices that parents ultimately make for their children. Local and global factors will be considered through analysis of

secondary research while the personal factors will be investigated through a small-scale enquiry.

In the second phase of the portfolio (on the right-hand side of Figure 1.4), attention will turn to weaving findings from each of the local, global and personal dimensions together in an effort to distil the factors that seem most critical to parents' choice-making – especially those contributing to the drift away from government schools. Those factors will then be reviewed in an effort to determine which of them are within the scope of governments to change and how they might be altered to arrest the drift of students away from the government sector. In keeping with the framework illustrated in Figure 1.4, Sections 2, 3 and 4 of this portfolio each delve into a different facet of the local-global-personal school choice model.

Section 2, focuses on the local dimension of the school choice model. It is made up of two chapters, the first of which (Chapter 2) provides a historical account of Australia's dual system of school provision whereby government and non-government school sectors operate in parallel. Chapter 2 also details successive changes to state and Commonwealth school funding policies since the early 1970s. The second chapter in Section 2 (Chapter 3) focuses more specifically on the governance of secondary schooling in Western Australia and the impact of key structural, policy and legislative developments that have occurred over the past two decades.

Section 3 comprises one chapter (Chapter 4) which focuses on the global dimension of the local-global-personal school choice model. In Chapter 4, things that parents want/hope for their children (or wish to shield them from) through their schooling are explored through review of national and international research. This chapter includes exploration of how schooling and education are related, how the functions that schooling serves individuals and communities have changed over time, and how active engagement in the school choice process has become a prominent marker of being a committed and caring parent in Western society.

Section 4 is the centre-piece of this portfolio. It details an investigation into the personal factors that influence the school choices made by a sample of parents in metropolitan Perth as their 12 year old children moved from primary to secondary schooling at the start of the 2007 school year. Eight schools, all located within a five-kilometre radius of each other and comprising a mixture of government, Catholic and independent schools, agreed to participate in the enquiry. The enquiry used a parent survey comprising Lickert-scale and ranking items, and also invited qualitative comments to further enrich the quantitative survey data (Punch, 1998). Items within the survey were informed by secondary research about local and global dimensions of school choice. The items also probed the personal dimension through questions relating to financial and educational background and self-reported levels of agency among respondents.

In the final Section 5 of this portfolio, Chapter 8 weaves together and synthesises the primary and secondary research findings from preceding sections to seek resolution to the three questions driving this portfolio, articulated earlier at page 10.

Chapter 8 ends with several recommendations that, based on lessons drawn from careful synthesis the secondary and primary research detailed in this portfolio, offer a pragmatic and empirically sound approach to arresting the drift of students away from government secondary schools, thereby enhancing the quality and viability of school choice for all students into the foreseeable future.

SECTION 2

LOCAL DIMENSION

This section explores the local dimension of the global-local-personal school choice model. It maps-out the pragmatic context of school choice in Western Australia today in terms of what options are currently available to parents, and how this range of options arose.

This section comprises two chapters: History and Governance.

The History chapter sketches the establishment of two parallel schooling sectors in each Australian colony prior to Australian Federation in 1901, then leaps forward to 1964 when public funds were first provided to non-government schools at a time that coincided with rapid expansion of secondary school provision due to post-war affluence and demand (Angus et al, 2002).

The Governance chapter confines attention to the past two decades since 1987 which marks the release of Western Australia's *Better Schools Report* (Ministry of Education, 1987). The *Better Schools Report* marked the beginning of successive structural, curricular and legislative reform initiatives in Western Australia. The period since 1987 has also witnessed numerous Commonwealth-level changes to school funding and regulation, all of which have affected all sectors of schooling across Australia (Angus, 2000; Reid, 2005; Vickers, 2005).

The impact of the historical backdrop and the governance and policy settings within which secondary schooling is provided in Western Australian today are explored in this section in order to better understand how they influence and/or predispose the secondary school choices currently available to parents in Western Australia.

CHAPTER TWO: HISTORY

The earliest Australian schools were either endowed private schools (modelled on English grammar schools) or charitable church schools which focused as much on Bible studies as they did on literacy and numeracy (Burke & Spaul, 2001). Early colonial governments recognised the need for an educated populace, so became involved in the provision of schooling by subsidising charity schools and/or by setting up a small number of state-run schools (Aulich, 2003). Despite this supplementary government support, the quality and availability of schooling in the 1860s was variable, student attendance was sporadic and school outcomes were widely considered to be failing a growing nation-state (Birrell, 2001). This situation gave rise to a Royal Commission in the colony of Victoria which recommended the establishment of a centralised system of state-run schools which would be “free, compulsory and secular” (Aulich, 2003, p. 2) as a remedy to concerns that the existing supplementary funding arrangements “would lead to a two-tier system with public education as a second-class system, dividing citizens according to their wealth and religious affiliation” (Aulich, 2003, p. 2).

Key recommendations from the Victorian Royal Commission, including the decision that public funds should not be given to schools that choose to remain independent of the state-run school system, were enacted in Victoria in 1872. The Victorian model was subsequently adopted by other Australian colonies (Birrell, 2001).

An important feature of the Victorian model of state-funded school provision is that it did not preclude the continued, independent operation of a small number of ‘private’ schools that were able to function independently of public funds (Birrell, 2001; Reid, 2006). Nor did it prevent the Catholic Bishops of Australia from establishing their own Catholic school system to enable Catholic families to adhere to a decree that the Bishops issued in 1879 stating that the children of all Catholic families must regularly attend Catholic schools (Aulich, 2003; Potts, 2005). This

decree was not in response to poor educational outcomes or low attendance, but rather, concern among the Bishops that a large number of Catholic children were attending state-run schools and, in the process, were being placed "in proximate danger of perversion" (Potts, 2005, para. 10). It is noteworthy that Symes and Gulson (2005, p. 22) use similar emotive language in their criticism of the many low-fee non-government schools that are springing up today on the fringes of Australian cities with the claim that those schools market themselves as "the antithesis of the 'drugged', 'sexualised' and 'bedevilled' state school".

The model recommended in 1872 by the Victorian Royal Commission and subsequently adopted across Australia led to a dual structure of school provision which continues to this day whereby government and non-government school sectors operate in parallel. Further, the non-government sector comprised two groups: Catholic systemic schools and 'other' independent schools (Aulich, 2003; McCarthy, 2007; Reid, 2006).

At the beginning, the major distinction between the government and non-government sectors was that while government schools received public funds; non-government schools did not (Bonnor & Caro, 2007; Reid, 2006). In return for the public funding that government schools received, they guaranteed universal access to schooling for all school-aged children and implemented a state-controlled, quality assured curriculum. While the (from hereon, 'non-government') schools that chose to remain outside the state-run system were not pleased to lose access to the public funds that colonial governments had previously provided, their decision to remain outside the state-run system enabled them to retain their independence with respect to curriculum (including sectarian instruction), staffing, students, teaching, facilities and quality assurance (Aulich, 2003; Burke & Spaul 2001; Potts, 2005; Reid, 2005).

The absence of public funding for Catholic and independent non-government schools and the divergent strategies they took to ensure their viability had a major

bearing on the character each group of schools within the non-government sector has developed over time (Potts, 2005). The strategy taken by the Catholic sector was to rely on religious orders to staff its schools. This enabled systemic Catholic schools to operate at minimal cost to parents and ensured maintenance of a strong Catholic ethos which upheld equity, compassion and support for the down-trodden (Ryan, 2004). The non-Catholic non-government schools, many of which were affiliated with the Anglican Church or other Protestant Christian denominations, were not able to draw staff from religious orders in the same manner, so they were forced instead to charge high fees (Aulich, 2003). This limited these schools to high-status wealthy families and had the effect of making such schools more exclusive and prestigious (Aulich, 2003; Caldwell, 2005; Townsend, 2005).

By 1901 when the six British colonies in Australia federated and formed a central Commonwealth government, each colony already possessed a system of publicly-funded schools so when the Australian Constitution was agreed, it did not include Commonwealth powers pertaining to education (Burke & Spaul, 2001). Given the nation-building role that is often attributed to schooling (Durkheim, 1950 cited in Elwell, 2003), one might expect education to feature among the responsibilities vested in the central government of a new nation. Paradoxically, recollections from Australia's first Prime Minister, Henry Parkes (1892) suggest that this may have been the very reason education was omitted: while the decision for the six colonies to federate formalised their political, military and economic ties, it did not translate into, nor did it reflect, a unified national identity. Immediately after Federation, inter-state rivalries persisted. State governments maintained their state-centric focus on building communities, industries, security and infrastructure within their own spheres. Nation-state affiliations did not extend beyond state borders and state governments were keen to maintain control over education as a pivotal instrument of shaping the hearts, minds and skills of their own youth (Andrews, 1993; Arnold 2001). Burke and Spaul (2001, para. 7) cite a 1911 international review of education conducted by Monroe in which the American "observed that it

was 'perhaps unfortunate' that an education constitutional power had not been included in 'the act of federation' in 1901".

PUBLIC FUNDING FOR NON-GOVERNMENT SCHOOLS

Public funds first began to trickle towards non-government schools in the 1960s through State Aid programs introduced by state governments (Burke & Spaul, 2001; Aulich, 2003; Reid, 2005). This was quickly followed by Commonwealth grants, on a dollar-for-dollar basis, to assist with the development of science blocks in government and non-government schools (Burke & Spaul, 2001; Potts 2005).

Potts (2005) outlines a combination of factors that led to this significant change in government policy at state and Commonwealth levels. In part, it concerned seeking electoral advantage by the governments of the day but it also related to a funding crisis, especially in Catholic schools, which "could no longer rely on bazaars and fetes to fund increasingly costly schooling" (Potts, 2005, para. 16).

According to Potts (2005), by the 1960s, many Catholic schools were in serious danger of closure: the number of people entering religious orders (and becoming low-cost teachers in Catholic schools) had reduced to a trickle, the baby-boomer generation had reached school age, post-war migrant children (many of whom were middle-European Catholics) required schooling, huge class sizes were no longer acceptable and the cost of bringing aged school buildings up to modern standards had become prohibitive. This crisis came to a head in Goulburn, New South Wales in 1962 when the local Catholic primary school was instructed by health authorities to install three new toilets. The Bishop of Goulburn claimed that the school could not afford to meet this requirement, so he closed the school. This forced all of the school's students to seek enrolment at local government schools, which could not cater for the sudden influx. After a week the Catholic primary re-opened, but the political point had been made. The Prime Minister of the day, Robert Menzies, saw the electoral advantage to be gained over the issue and

changed Liberal Party policy to include State Aid for science blocks in non-government schools and Commonwealth scholarships for students in government and non-government schools (Australian Broadcasting Commission [ABC], 1997a).

The story of Goulburn Catholic School was selected for inclusion among the *TimeFrame* television series produced by the ABC because the producers of the series considered it to be a “turning point in Australian history – moments and events which changed Australia and its people from what they had been to what they would become” (ABC, 1997b, para. 2).

Burke and Spaul (2001) indicate that when the first round of State Aid to non-government schools and Commonwealth scholarships to students in all school sectors were first provided in the 1960s, the very fact that extra funds were finally flowing into schools was greeted with widespread relief by teachers and the wider community. In this context, the fact that the ‘no public funds to non-government schools’ principle had been breached did not attract much dissent. Burke and Spaul suggest that a major reason for this was that the amount received by each school was initially modest and was calculated according to a flat per-capita basis.

Not everyone, however, supported this significant (and quickly bi-partisan) shift in education policy. In 1965, opponents of State Aid founded the Council for Defence of Government Schools (DOGS). This group was concerned that public funding of non-government schools would lead to a reduction of funds provided to government schools (ABC, 1997a). They argued that the principle of education provision being “free, compulsory, secular, universal and public” (DOGS, 2007, para. 2) would be compromised by State Aid because public funding of church-affiliated schools would embroil the government in sectarian activities (Potts, 2001) and further, that equity of school provision would be compromised:

If we are to have a society in which all children get an equal opportunity in education, this can only be done by a free public system, controlled and funded by the taxpayers. (Stella Bath cited in ABC, 1997a, para. 14).

To test the legality of publicly funding sectarian-based schooling, DOGS mounted High Court action against the Catholic Bishop of Sandhurst in 1978. Potts (2005) reports that the DOGS case was lost by a 6-1 majority verdict, but the furore did lead to the inclusion of the following clause in the *Schools Commission Act 1973* (later replaced by the Schools Council) which, according to the Australian Education Union (AEU) “was conveniently lost and forgotten” (AEU, 2001, p. 1) when the Commonwealth government, under the previous Prime Minister, John Howard, abolished the Schools Council in 1999:

The primary obligation, in relation to education, for governments (is) to provide and maintain government school systems that are of the highest standard and are open, without fees or religious tests, to all children. (*Schools Commission Act 1973* cited by AEU, 2001, p. 1).

The amount of Commonwealth government funding provided to education – for universities, schools and early childhood – was again boosted from 1972 when, after more than two decades of conservative Liberal control of the Commonwealth government, the Australian Labor Party (ALP) came to power, led by Gough Whitlam as Prime Minister (Aulich, 2003; Burke & Spuall, 2001). As Whitlam proudly told a national convention of teachers organised by the Australian Teachers Federation just thirteen months after his government's election:

We have almost doubled Commonwealth expenditure on education; we have established a permanent Schools Commission to give aid to all schools, without distinction, on a ‘needs’ basis; we have assumed full financial responsibility for tertiary education and have abolished fees; for the first time we are giving assistance to teachers’ colleges and pre-school teachers’ colleges on the same basis as universities and colleges of advanced education; we are giving much more generous allowances to students and have more than trebled the number of teaching scholarships. (Whitlam, 1974, para. 7)

Data from the ABS reported by Burke and Spuall (2001) show that government spending on all sectors of education during the Whitlam years leapt to 6.6 percent

of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in 1975 compared with 3.7 percent in the mid-60s and 5.8 percent in the early-80s. Approximately 60 percent of this overall education expenditure is directed towards schools; the balance goes to the tertiary sector.

A key feature of the schools funding policy introduced by the Whitlam government was a differential allocative mechanism that Whitlam referred to as “distributive justice” (Burke & Spaul, 2001, para. 58) whereby, without distinction between the government and non-government sectors, schools with the lowest income/assets and the greatest needs received the largest amount of per-capita funding. Calculations used to determine each school's allocation were based on a formula that incorporated the socio-economic status of the student cohort plus the school's existing assets (Karmel, 2000). The allocative mechanism was central to recommendations contained in the first report on Australian schooling prepared by the Whitlam government's Schools Commission, and came to be known as the landmark *Karmel Report* (1973). The report recommended a departure from dollar-for-dollar grants (which the poorest schools could not afford) and flat per-capita allocations on the basis that:

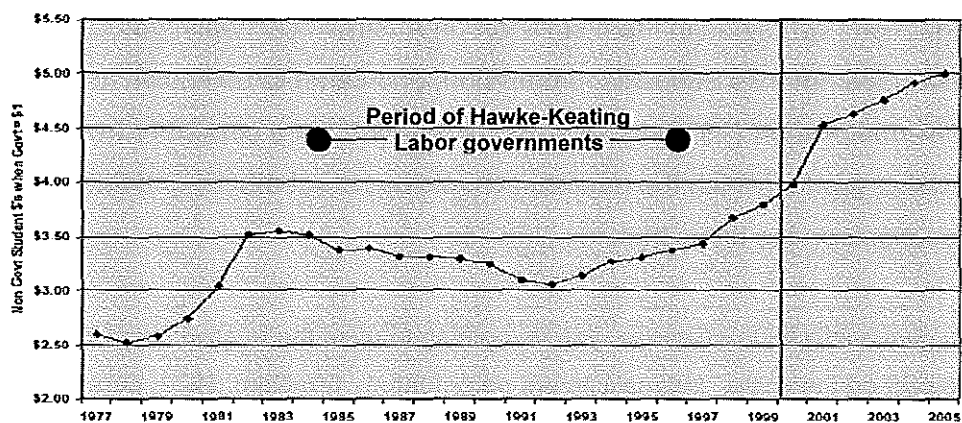
If you give a little bit to everyone, you do nothing to raise the relative standards of the lowest on the scale. Inequalities are perpetuated. (Whitlam, 1974, para. 9)

Successive Commonwealth governments have retained the principle of differential funding to government and non-government schools, but the formulae used by each new government to determine distributive weightings have reflected the prevailing government's view of a ‘fair go’ and each change of funding policy has therefore created relative winners and losers (Edgar, 1999). In general, past Labor governments (Whitlam 1972-1975, Hawke and Keating 1983-1996) have applied weightings that favour low-income, low-asset schools, while Liberal governments (Frazer 1975-1983 and Howard 1996-present) have introduced “corrective

weightings" (Aulich, 2003, p. 5) which have proportionally increased the amount of funds provided to more wealthy schools (Aulich, 2003, Burke & Spaul, 2001).

Figure 2.1 illustrates how the corrective weightings of Liberal governments have favoured the non-government sector. For every dollar of Commonwealth funds that has been spent per student in government schools between 1977 and 2005, the graph shows the corresponding number of Commonwealth dollars that have been spent per student in non-government schools. Superimposed on the graph is the period of the Hawke and Keating Labor Party Commonwealth governments from 1983-1991 and 1991-1996 respectively.

Figure 2.1: Ratio of Commonwealth per-capita expenditure on non-government students for every dollar of Commonwealth per-capita expenditure on government school students



(Source – AEU, 2001, p. 3)

Periods in the above graph of relative per-capita gains for the non-government sector coincide with Liberal governments – Frazer government up to 1983 and Howard government from 1996 – whereas a lengthy plateau occurred between 1983 and 1996 when Labor governments were in control of the Commonwealth government (AEU, 2001).

The graph at Figure 2.1 refers only to funding from Commonwealth sources. It does not show funding provided by the states to government or non-government

schools. The amounts that different states provide to non-government schools vary (Angus, 2000). In Western Australia, State Aid to non-government schools is calculated as a per capita grant based on 25 percent of the average per-capita cost of educating a child in a government school (DET, 2006). This average cost has risen in recent years as the ratio of high-need, high-cost students in government schools has increased (Edgar, 1999; Vickers, 2005; DES, 2001).

There are two major reasons for the increasing ratio of high-need, high-cost students in government schools. Firstly, the larger government sector has more established and substantial support mechanisms for such students and their families (Lucey & Reay, 2002, Mukherjee, 1999). Secondly, these students are less readily accepted into over-subscribed non-government schools that can afford to be selective without compromising their access to public funding (AEU, 2001; Bonnor & Caro, 2007; DES, 2001; Ryan, 2005; Vickers, 2005,).

A constant and growing challenge – and unavoidable cost – for government schools is that they are obliged by statute to take all students:

... irrespective of social background, economic circumstance or location ... (and)
... must expand, contract and adjust according to movements in the location and size of the population and the changing nature of students in particular locations
(DES, 2001, p. 33)

The very ability of private schools to be selective and weed out disruptive and/or failing students significantly contributes to their attractiveness, particularly in secondary settings, where parents do not want their adolescent children to be mixing with the 'wrong crowd' (Forsey, 2006; Symes & Gulson 2005). This point is illustrated in the following exchange between the researcher and a colleague:

"The key factors for me when choosing a school for my kids were pastoral care and time on task. I knew both these factors were going to be better at the non-government school we chose for our kids."

When probed about the 'time on task' element, the colleague elaborated:

"Disruptive students weren't allowed to stay at my kids' school, so lessons were not being constantly interrupted".

"So what school did the disruptive students go to?"

"Well, I guess they went to a government school".

(Exchange between colleague and researcher, 10 September 2008)

In 2000 when Dr David Kemp was the Liberal government's Commonwealth Minister for Education, Training and Youth Affairs, he claimed that Commonwealth generosity towards all schools (government and non-government) since the mid-1990s had "enabled some states to limit their investment in government schooling" (Kemp, 2000, p. 18). He further suggested that some states had come to rely on the drift of students from government to non-government schools as a mechanism to shift costs away from their own schools. Two years later, his successor, Dr Brendan Nelson, highlighted savings to the public purse achieved through support of the non-government sector claiming that if all non-government students switched to government schools, it would cost states an extra \$3 billion per year (Nelson, 2003).

Australian Bureau of Statistics (2005) figures show that the wealthiest non-government schools in Australia receive approximately 45 per cent of their running costs from public sources (the balance comprising tuition fees and private donations) while the poorest non-government schools receive all of their funding from public sources. In recent years, there has been a marked increase to the number of non-government schools in the low-wealth range (Burke & Spaul, 2001; Symes & Gulson, 2005). It follows that a growing proportion of non-government schools draw an ever-increasing proportion of their operating costs from public sources (Vickers, 2005).

As the level of public funding for any given non-government school approaches 100 per cent, a key point of difference that has historically separated that school from schools within the government sector is lost: that of privately-sourced funding

(Reid, 2005; Townsend, 2005). A crucial difference that remains, however, is the extent to which the non-government school is able to maintain its independence from centralized state control (Aulich, 2001; McGaw, 2000; Reid, 2005).

Aulich (2001) examined regulatory and accountability requirements that apply to non-government schools in Australia and compared them with arrangements for public and private schools in other parts of the world. He noted that many of the current requirements for Australia's non-government schools were established some decades ago when the amount of funds were significantly smaller. Overall, Aulich found that regulation of Australian non-government schools is relatively low and that financial and educational accountability requirements imposed on government schools are comparatively more stringent. He concluded that:

The relatively low level of government regulation of private schools in Australia has given them a competitive edge over public schools, thereby diminishing the equality of educational opportunity and encouraging large numbers of middle and upper class families to abandon public schools in favour of private schools.
(Aulich, 2001, p. 8)

It should be noted that while the level of government regulation of non-government schools may be comparatively low, parental scrutiny of the school and its teachers through school boards and regular contact at the 'classroom door' is relatively high because paying customers expect to see value for money (Holmes, 2006b).

The rationale used by past Australian Liberal governments to provide public funds to non-government schools reflects the argument put by the American economist, Milton Friedman (1955) who suggested that market forces, through parental choice, should be allowed to shape school provision. He claimed that while public education is essential to democratic society and a strong economy, governments should extract themselves from actual school provision. In place of governments, private providers should be encouraged to establish schools and compete with each other for market-share, thus ensuring quality, efficiency and variety of service.

In recognition of the community benefits derived from public education, Friedman argued that governments should contribute to the cost of schooling but, given the corresponding individual benefits that are also derived from schooling, parents should also help to pay.

The rationale used by Australian Labor governments for providing funds to non-government schools also reflects the principle of choice, but not in order to stimulate competing school markets. Rather, to achieve equality and widespread opportunity through distributive justice (Whitlam, 1973). This was manifest in the Whitlam years with free higher education and proportionally greater levels of funding to low-income schools, a policy that unintentionally “resuscitated Australia’s dual education system” (Burke & Spaul, 2001, para. 63) and ensured the survival of many non-government secondary schools through the 1980s.

Numerous researchers are critical of the differential funding formula currently used by the Commonwealth government to determine allocations provided to government and non-government schools (Aulich, 2003; Bonnor & Caro, 2007; Burke & Spaul, 2001; Campbell, 2005; DES, 2001; Preston, 2000; Reid, 2001; Symes & Gulson, 2005; Vickers & Singh, 2005). They claim that the policy drives competition and duplication between schools and sectors that have previously been highly collaborative, and drives deeper gaps between rich and poor. These concerns have also been voiced by state government school systems, claiming that Commonwealth funding policies are consigning government schools (secondary in particular) to a ‘residual’ or ‘sink school’ status catering mainly for the poor (Caldwell, 2005; DES, 2001; WASSEA, 2007).

These concerns are supported by data reported by Mukherjee (1999) which show a direct relationship between socio-economic status and non-government school enrolments. In the secondary context, over 60 percent of students from the highest socio-economic decile attend non-government schools while over 80 percent of students from the lowest decile attend government schools. The economically

skewed nature of the non-government school population was reiterated in 2003 by the then Commonwealth Minister for Education, Science and Training, Dr Brendan Nelson, in a statement he made to counter the suggestion that independent and Catholic schools are the bastion of the wealthy in Australia:

ABS statistics show that one in every five children who come from families with an annual income of less than \$20,900 attends a Catholic or independent school. ... (and) ... Nearly fifty per cent of students who come from families with an annual income of over \$104,000 attend a state government school. (Nelson, 2003, para. 12)

If an inverse analysis is applied to the figures quoted above by Dr Nelson, it could be said that while 80 percent of children from low income families attend government schools, the same schooling sector serves less than 50 percent of children from high income families. Further, as noted by Campbell (2005) and Forsey (2006), middle class families who send their children to government schools invariably live in more affluent suburbs where the local government school enjoys a good reputation whereas there has been “an exodus from (government) schools ... located in the poorer parts of town” (Forsey, 2006, p. 26).

SECONDARY SCHOOLING IN WESTERN AUSTRALIA

The early history of schooling in Australia focused on a grounding in basic reading, writing and arithmetic but the parallel functions that schools served to engender conformity and a healthy work ethic among the working class were never far from the surface (Wight, 2003; Parkes, 1892; Potts, 2005). It follows that the first state schools in Western Australia had modest aspirations and catered primarily for the children of working class families, providing a form of schooling that reflected the nomenclature of the legislation under which they operated: the *Elementary School Education Act 1893* (Bartlett, 1972). In contrast, the first secondary schools in Australia were mid-nineteenth century institutions established by private and

church interests to cater for older children from middle and upper class families, preparing them for entry into universities (Angus et al, 2002) initially in England and later, in Sydney and Melbourne. They were based on English grammar schools and set the secondary schooling standard to which the government sector aspired several decades later when state governments established their own secondary schools. (Angus et. al, 2003).

By the start of the twentieth century, demand for a more skilled workforce in Western Australia was only partially being met through post-primary programs provided by elementary schools and the Perth Technical College which was established by a coalition of public and business interests in 1900 (Burke & Spaul, 2001). This training bottle-neck, in combination with political agitation from civil libertarians who urged governments to broaden schooling options for working-class children reached a tipping point in 1906 when the Directors of Education from each state across Australia met and advocated government provision of secondary schooling on the basis that:

Working class children were entitled to secondary and university education and the state had an obligation to extend that access ... the restriction of a secondary education to the relative few who could attend existing private schools did not serve the interests of the modern State. (Angus, et al, 2003, p. 12)

By 1913, each Australian state had established at least one government secondary school. In Western Australia, Perth Modern School was established in 1911. All of these government secondary schools were state-subsidised, fee-paying institutions to which entry was gained through academic selection (Angus et al, 2003). The original intent was for these schools to provide a broad, comprehensive curriculum incorporating vocational streams alongside the academic, but the selected clientele (students and their parents) preferred the academic streams, and the high-status academic courses were also favoured by the schools' principals (Angus et al, 2003).

These (first government secondary) schools adopted the rituals of the prestigious private schools designed to build 'character' – prefect systems, form captains, school songs. Thus, (such schools, including Perth Modern School in Western Australia) ... became the poor man's versions of the public (non-government) school. (Angus et al, 2003, p. 15)

From the outset, a key function of government secondary schools was to prepare students for teacher training and other tertiary education which is why the establishment of government secondary schools in each state closely coincided with the establishment of state universities (Angus et al, 2003). In the case of Western Australia, Perth Modern School's establishment in 1911 was quickly followed by the University of Western Australia in 1913. This close link was also manifest by universities taking a pivotal role in the process of secondary school exit examinations (Angus, 1998; DES, 2001). This continues to influence the final two years of secondary schooling today whereby the high status, high stakes school exit assessments are still configured as 'tertiary entrance examinations' rather than as broader assessments of school learning (DET, 2001; Robson, 2005).

Between 1911 and the start of the Great Depression in 1924, the Western Australian government school system established four more government secondary schools; one in each of Kalgoorlie, Bunbury, Albany and Northam (Angus et al, 2002). During this period, the claim has been made that selective government secondary schools did "little to advance mass educational opportunities or socially inclusive and democratic secondary schooling" (Burke & Spuall, 2001, para. 65) but that a high level of success was achieved in this regard by non-selective regional secondary schools because they offered (and there was significant take-up of) vocational programs for non-academic students alongside more academic programs for students with commensurate aspirations and abilities. This model of schooling, which Burke and Spuall (2001, para. 63) refer to as "the multilateral or omnibus high school" became a popular model of government

secondary school provision, reflecting the comprehensive schooling model spreading across Britain at the same time (Angus, 2001; Young, 1998).

From the mid-1920s, the Great Depression and then the First and Second World Wars limited the growth of government secondary schooling in Australia (Burke & Spuall, 2001; Angus et al, 2002). The times of austerity not only hit state education budgets, but also affected non-government schools “whose overall enrolments collapsed by nearly 20% between 1930 and 1934” (Burke & Spuall, 2001, para. 45) due to reduced family incomes. It is noteworthy that in some parts of Australia, “government schools in many mortgage belt areas are experiencing dramatic increases in student numbers, attributed in part to interest rate rises and pressure on family budgets” (ABC, 2008, para. 2) but this has not occurred in Western Australia which is experiencing an on-going resources boom and is being protected from the economic down-turn observed in other parts of Australia (ABS, 2008).

The situation changed quickly after the Second World War with population growth through post-war migration and the baby-boomer influx (Potts, 2005). It was also a time of sustained economic growth across Australia, coinciding with the realisation among many Australian families that secondary education not only provided a pathway to further education, but also improved employment prospects (Angus et al, 2002). This was a period of rapid growth for government secondary schooling, not least because the government sector had sole access to the funds that were flowing into state coffers as a result of the strong post-war economy (Burke & Spuall, 2001).

After 1945 State secondary education is defined by the magnitude and pace of its physical expansion and the genuine attempts to introduce from overseas practice a comprehensiveness in location, curriculum and culture, for at least the 12-15 years old cohort (Burke & Spuall, 2001, para. 61).

Angus et al (2002) observe that while government secondary schools derived significant benefits from the post-war economic boom, primary schools remained the 'poor cousin'. In part, this uneven attention was a by-product of gradual increases to the school leaving age through the 1950s and 1960s. Not only did this mean that secondary schools had to expand to cater for larger numbers, it also created a group of (largely disaffected) students at secondary school, many of whom would previously have left school as soon as they could (Young, 1998). Most of these conscripted students attended government schools (Bonnor & Caro, 2007; Burke & Spuall, 2005; Campbell, 2005), prompting the need for government secondary schools in particular to develop new programs and methods to engage these students.

Of all the stages in schooling, secondary education is the most sensitive to both personal aspirations and societal demands. (Burke & Spuall, 2001, para. 13)

Many of the government secondary schools that were built in Western Australia during the 1950s and 1960s continue to operate in their original buildings and are now shabby and dated (WASSEA, 2007). Requests by school administrators to renew or replace these buildings compete for public dollars with every other government school in the state, and with pleas for governments to improve hospitals, roads and other public infrastructure (Vickers, 2005). In contrast, many of Western Australia's independent schools boast newer buildings and more modern facilities. Vickers (2005, p. 269) claims that "many private schools now offer opulent facilities that contrast sharply with their public sector competitors". This is partly because more than half of these schools are less than 20 years old (ABS, 2006) but is also due to their resource base. Vickers (2005) cites research by Watson (2003) which found that in addition to recurrent grants from state and Commonwealth government sources, "in 27 percent of private schools, the fees *alone* exceed the average resources per student in a government school" (Vickers, 2005, p. 269, original emphasis). Further, the relative independence of non-government schools enables them greater scope to appeal for special-purpose

funding from (often wealthy) alumni, school communities and governments to build or acquire improved facilities according to their own analysis of needs. Similar flexibility is also available to Catholic schools, but their school communities tend to be less wealthy (Potts, 2005; Kelley & Evans, 2004) so funds for capital works can be as difficult to secure for Catholic schools as they are for government schools.

Over the past two decades, the number of non-government schools that cater for secondary students across Australia has increased by almost 33 percent, whereas the corresponding number of government schools catering for secondary students has dropped by more than 4 per cent (ABS, 2006). Within the non-government sector, most of the growth has occurred among independent schools, as illustrated below in Table 2.1.

Table 2.1: Number of Government, Catholic and Independent Schools in Western Australia in each of 1986, 1996 and 2006

	1986	1996	2006	Percent increase 1986 to 2006
Government	730	764	771	5.61%
Catholic	148	149	159	7.43%
Independent	85	106	137	61.18%

(ABS, 2006, Table 1)

While the above data do not provide a break-down by primary and secondary schooling levels, the ABS (2006) does report that from 1986 to 2006, the number of primary schools in Western Australia increased by only 4.28 percent. It also reports a 13.11 percent increase over that period in the number of secondary schools in Western Australia and a large increase – 30.72 percent – in the number of Western Australian schools that combine primary and secondary provision. While the ‘combined’ schools tally includes government district high schools and remote community schools, nearly all of the 30.72 percent increase over the past two decades has been in the form of low-fee non-government K-12 schools in metropolitan fringe suburbs and large regional centres (Symes & Gulson, 2005).

Another issue relating to the funding of government and non-government schools relates to duplication of provision. Vickers (2005) refers to a Ministerial Review conducted under the Hawke Labor government in 1983. The Anderson Review found that the cost to government of establishing a new non-government school includes not only direct capital grants and recurrent funding from state and Commonwealth sources, but also indirect costs “which include increases in the per capita costs of educating each student in nearby public schools as these schools shrink and lose their economies of scale” (Vickers, 2005, p. 272).

In response to the Anderson Review, the Hawke government initiated a *New Schools Policy* to limit duplication (Anderson, 1993; Vickers, 2005). In 1996, the Howard Liberal government discarded this policy and since then, the establishment of new non-government schools – and their entitlement to Commonwealth and state funding regardless of any duplication they create – has been regulated only by their ability to demonstrate criteria for school registration in each state (Vickers, 2005; Symes & Gulson, 2005).

With reference to ABS (2006) data in Table 2.1 (above), it is clear that the rate at which government schools were established in Western Australia dropped after the *New Schools Policy* was dropped in 1996 (compared with the rate before 1996) whereas the rate at which Catholic and independent schools were established increased after 1996.

Symes and Gulson (2005) note that many of the non-government schools which have been established over the past 20 years are small, low-fee K-12 evangelical Christian schools located on the fringe of most Australian cities. These schools are able to survive because the current Commonwealth funding formula benefits schools with a high proportion of low-income families. Symes and Gulson (2005, p. 22) claim that these schools are attractive to parents “whose motives are not necessarily Christian but who wish to ‘buy into’ some form of ‘private’ education for

their children", including the traditional Christian values they espouse and their ability to exclude undesirable students. Unfortunately, the small size and limited economies of scale within many of these schools means that they are not able to offer the breadth of academic and vocational curriculum that may be desirable for their diverse cohorts (Forsey, 2006).

The most recent development in government secondary schooling in Western Australia has seen a return to selective placement of gifted and talented students in various specialist academic and arts-related programs in several government schools. This includes the reinstatement of Perth Modern School as a selective secondary school reserved for students with exceptional academic abilities and John Curtin College of the Arts as a selective secondary school for students with exceptional talent in the arts: media, ballet, dance, drama, music and music theatre (DET 2006b). Gifted and talented program provision in these selective schools is supplemented by extension programs that operate alongside mainstream provision in a further sixteen government secondary schools, all of which are located in or close to metropolitan Perth. In addition, several government secondary schools have initiated their own specialist programs in pursuits ranging from cricket, soccer and basketball through to marine science and aviation (DET, 2007).

Selective schools and supplementary specialist programs are likely to benefit the minority of students who gain places in the programs they offer but the very nature of selection means that most students do not get selected (Campbell & Sherington, 2004). Also, the reputations of the majority of government secondary schools that are not chosen to run specialist programs could be further undermined because they will not attract specialist teachers and may also lose their most capable students to those specialist schools (Townsend, 2005). It follows that a possible down-side of selective specialism is that the achievements and accolades of a few "islands of excellence" (WASSEA, 2007, p. 2) in an ailing government sector will deflect attention from the unselected majority of students who have to do their best in their regular, unspecialized school (Bonnor & Caro, 2007; Milburn, 2005).

NATIONAL GOALS OF SCHOOLING

While states and territories across Australia have responsibility for the provision and administration of schooling in each jurisdiction, several researchers have been critical of school provision across Australia for having lost its way (Bonnor & Caro, 2007; Reid, 2005; Saul, 2006; Townsend, 2005). These accusations are despite the fact that a shared set of National Goals for Schooling was formally ratified in 1999 by the Ministerial Council of Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA) comprising education ministers from Commonwealth, state and territory governments (MCEETYA, 1999).

The national goals comprise three multi-point statements. The first emphasizes the role schools are expected to play in securing Australia's economic future; the second outlines the range of knowledge and skills that students will need now and into the future; and the third focuses on the need for schools to uphold and promulgate principles of social justice (MCEETYA, 1999).

In 2001, a Labor Government came to power in Western Australia and immediately commissioned a taskforce, led by Professor Alan Robson, to review the structures, services and resources supporting government schools in Western Australia. The Robson Taskforce framed a total of 58 recommendations, the first of which emphasized the unique role government schools serve in the establishment and maintenance of a "socially-cohesive, productive and just community" (Robson, Harken & Hill, 2001, para. 3) and specifically referred to the National Goals of Schooling. The first recommendation of the Taskforce was:

That the State government affirms through amendment to the *School Education Act 1999*, the values and principles that provide the foundation for the establishment of government schools in Western Australia ... and within the context of the Statement of National Goals of Schooling, ... seeks stronger support from the Commonwealth government to promote better understanding

within the community about the society-building role that government schools play in our democratic society and ensure that government schools are properly resourced to fulfil this role. (DES 2001, p. 2-3).

Inclusions (and exclusions) to the National Goals of Schooling are not the object of analysis here. Rather, attention is being trained on the fact that, in contrast to the prominence afforded the National Goals in recommendations from the Robson Taskforce, no direct reference is made to the National Goals in current planning documents from the Department of Education and Training (DET, 2008). For example: "Our goal is a strong public school system that earns the respect of the community for the quality of the education it offers" (O'Neill, 2008, p.2) implies that the ultimate goal of the department is to win public confidence – student learning and/or how public investment in government schools will benefit the community are notably absent from that goal. Likewise, the purpose of the department has been framed in terms of individual (rather than community) benefits: "to ensure that all public school students leave school well prepared for their future" (DET 2008b, p.2). This stated purpose predisposes the broader community to also frame its thinking about school provision as a personal commodity rather than as a community investment (Caldwell, 2005; Emerson, 2006; Okuma-Nystroem, 2005). A final point about the National Goals: analysis conducted by Angus, Olney, Ainley and Caldwell (2004) concluded that, at current levels of resource provision for schools across Australia, the national goals are too costly to implement in any case.

CHAPTER THREE: GOVERNANCE

The backdrop for the governance of schooling across Australia is dominated by the fact that education remained a state responsibility when the Australian constitution was proclaimed in 1901 (Aulich, 2003; Burke & Spaul, 2001). Despite this, the Commonwealth government provides significant funding to non-government schools and to government school systems, and almost entirely funds university provision across Australia (McGaw, 2000). As the amount of funding that the Commonwealth government gives to schools has steadily grown, so too has the amount of policy leverage that the Commonwealth government has exercised in relation to aspects of school provision (Vickers, 2005). According to Angus et al (2003), the states have long been wary of the Commonwealth government undermining their relevance and power by assuming control of a suite of state responsibilities, including school education:

From early on (when state Education Ministers formed the Australian Education Council in 1936), the state ministers debated the pros and cons of seeking Commonwealth funding for school education, wary of losing control of their state systems of education, yet desperate for augmentation of state funds from Commonwealth revenues. (Angus et al 2003, p. 41)

The former Labor Prime Minister, Gough Whitlam, claimed that there was no question about the Commonwealth government's responsibility for education, particularly for the tertiary sector, and that the only opposition to be found was among "fanatical circles" (Whitlam, 1974, para. 5). Whitlam was dismissive of the states' opposition to his centralist reforms when both Labor and non-Labor state governments resisted his attempts to gain greater control over schools during the 1970s (Hancock, 2003). The former Liberal Prime Minister, John Howard, was also characterised as a centralist in the context of policies relating to industrial relations, health and education (Grattan, 2007; Colebatch & Tomazin, 2005; Howard, 2005).

One example of the policy leverage exercised by the Commonwealth government in the current funding quadrennium (2004 – 2008) is the Literacy, Numeracy and Special Learning Needs (LNSLN) program which provides annual funding to schools and school systems (Department of Education, Science and Training [DEST], 2004). Receipt of LNSLN funds hinges on schools and education systems agreeing to conduct and report population testing of literacy and numeracy at each of Years 3, 5, 7 and 9 every year (DEST, 2007a). A range of other funding programs depend on performance in these tests, so the content of those tests assume elevated importance and skew the curriculum to reflect test items, possibly at the expense of state-mandated curriculum (Meiers, 2004). More recent foci for Commonwealth policy leverage have included the articulation and teaching of Australian values (Leech, 2006), nationally consistent school exit examinations (Masters, 2006), and the requirement that all schools have a flagpole (Colebatch & Tomazin, 2005) and teach prescribed Australian history (DEST, 2007b).

In a review of public funding of Australian non-government schools, Aulich (2002) suggests that the nomenclature of 'grants', 'assistance' and 'subsidies' is no longer appropriate in the current funding climate. In 1967 when the amounts of state and Commonwealth funding given to government and non-government schools were modest and when "governments were more concerned with issues of distributional equity than with issues of control and accountability" (Aulich, 2002, p. 3) such terms properly described the nature of funds provision. Since then, however, the funding has dramatically increased, has become recurrent and is now the main life-source for many non-government schools, but Aulich (2003) claims that accountability requirements have not expanded to match these changes. He concludes his analysis with the following statement:

It seems clear that the regulatory regime applied to public funding of private schools in Australia is not congruent with those that apply both internationally and locally, with respect to public providers. As regulatory regimes for public

providers of education tighten along with those concerning public services more generally, it can be argued that regimes for private providers should move in the same direction. (Aulich, 2003, p. 8)

A similar argument was made by Professor Barry McGaw when he was education director of the Organisation of Economic and Cultural Development (OECD). From his privileged international perspective, McGaw (2004, cited in Vickers 2005) stated that:

Australia is unique in the extent to which non-government schools are able to combine private resources with government funding to achieve a substantial advantage over the government system. (McGaw 2004 cited in Vickers 2005, p. 271)

GOVERNMENT SCHOOLING: UNIFORMITY AND BUREAUCRACY

Another key feature of the governance of school provision in Western Australia is that since its establishment in 1893, the Western Australian government school system, administered by the Education Department (more recently known as the Department of Education and Training), has been characterized by centralization (Angus, 1998; Burke & Spaul 2001; Wight 2003). Numerous rules and standards were introduced to enforce uniformity, efficiency and fairness across the varied schools over which the Education Department assumed control, many of which had previously been run by local boards (Angus, et al, 2002).

During this early period, there was a huge growth in departmental regulation. A myriad of rules and regulations were issued on almost every conceivable topic through gazettes and circulars. (Angus et al, 2002, p. 24)

Parish (1989, para. 7) claims that this was typical of Australian government school systems at the time which were “excessively rigid, discouraging the exercise of

initiative by parents and teachers alike, stifling innovation, and making for conformity and mediocrity.”

While numerous amendments to Regulations occurred and new directives were introduced to remain abreast of changing circumstances over the years, in 1999, the legislative basis for the provision of schooling in Western Australia dated back to the *Education Act 1928* and the associated *Education Regulations 1960*.

The shortcomings of an overly centralized school system and the dated nature of the state's regulatory framework became increasingly evident through the 1970s and 1980s, leading to a comprehensive review of the Western Australian government school system in 1986 and the release of the *Better Schools Report* (Ministry of Education, 1987). Planned governance, structural and operational changes that followed in subsequent months and years in response to the *Better Schools Report* were designed to devolve as much authority as possible to schools (Angus, 1998).

Devolution was the focus of reform for many large organizations at the time, the rationale being that the people best placed to efficiently manage services are those closest to their clients, enabling greater flexibility and responsiveness to local needs and opportunities (Gilbert, 1991). Angus (1998, p. 35) suggests that the possible effects of devolution on systemic schools can be portrayed along a continuum:

... at one end of the continuum, locally managed schools may acquire attributes of independent, privately run schools; at the other end of the continuum, they may be required to do some of the mundane administrative work previously undertaken on their behalf by bureaucrats, possibly without ever having been consulted about the redistribution of work.

In Western Australia, central bureaucrats retained significant authority over the day to day management of schools (Angus, 1998). While this was perceived by

schools as reluctance on the part of bureaucrats to let go, Angus notes that some of these restrictions were the result of legal constraints that limited the extent to which the Minister, through the Education Department, was able to give free rein to government schools.

Angus (1998) also notes that devolution of key staffing decisions to schools was resisted by the State School Teachers Union of Western Australia (SSTUWA) out of fear that individual teachers and schools – especially those in rural and less desirable metropolitan locations – could be disadvantaged. Where government school principals wanted the authority (like non-government principals) to select their own staff and negotiate non-standard conditions such as staff-student ratios, job descriptions or administrative roles, all of these reforms were opposed by the SSTUWA. Today, only a minority of government schools in Western Australia may select their teachers on merit (WASSEA, 2007). Remaining staff appointments occur through random appointments (i.e.: the next teacher on the list of available teachers is appointed to the next school on the list with a vacancy) made by public servants working in the Department's staffing section, or as the result of teacher transfers whereby teachers who work in less desirable and/or rural locations earn 'transfer points' which later enable them to secure a job in a more desirable school (DET, 2007).

The above account of staffing arrangements in government schools contrasts with the situation in non-government schools in several ways. Firstly, non-government schools enjoy significantly more scope to determine their own staffing needs and incumbents in relation to student-to-staff ratios, areas of specialization, levels of pay (above standard award rates if they wish), staff qualifications and grounds for termination. They can advertise positions and choose people to fill those positions – including the pivotal role of principal. Up until recently, non-government schools have also been able to employ as teachers people who do not possess formal teaching qualifications. Enactment of the Western Australian College of Teaching (WACOT) Bill in 2003, however, prohibits this practice because under that Bill, all

persons working as teachers in Western Australian schools must be members of WACOT, and membership requires an approved formal teacher qualification (WACOT, 2007).

One of the greatest challenges facing the government school system in Western Australia today is a shortage of teachers. Throughout 2007 and 2008, there have been approximately 40 vacant teaching positions in government schools across the state (McGowan, 2008). This shortage is set to worsen in coming years: in 2005, the average age of government school teachers was approximately 49 years with over half of them expected to retire by 2020 (DET, 2005c). Also, a large proportion of teacher graduates stay in the profession for only a few of years before moving into other careers that are better paid or have a lower work-load (DET, 2005c). While non-government schools are not immune to the teacher shortage, they do have greater scope to exclude students who are very disruptive and are a major source of teacher stress (McGowan, 2008; Ryan, 2006) and they have more scope to negotiate pay and conditions with individual teachers. Both these factors enhance the capacity of non-government schools to attract and retain teaching staff (Campbell, 2005; Symes & Gulson, 2006).

While many teachers at non-government schools are members of the Independent Education Union of Western Australia (IEUWA) which negotiates minimal pay and conditions on behalf of its members, non-government schools are able to exceed those base levels to attract and retain exceptional staff – a luxury that is not available to government schools (Angus, 1998). Further, pay and conditions pursued by the IEUWA invariably match those that have first been negotiated by the SSTUWA with the government school system (ABC, 2008a).

Pay scales negotiated by the SSTUWA for staff in Western Australian government schools are based on qualifications, years of experience and additional duties. There is no provision for individual schools within the government sector to provide extra pay or more favorable conditions to individual teachers according to skills or

effectiveness (Bishop, 2007). There is also a widespread understanding that it is almost impossible to dismiss under-performing teachers from government schools (Angus, 1998; Forsey, 2006; WASSEA, 2007). This contributes to an impression in the wider community that teachers in the non-government sector are better – because the poor ones can more easily be sacked and the better ones can earn more pay – compared with those in the government sector (Townsend, 2005).

In the decade following the *Better Schools Report*, revision of legislation, policies and procedures proceeded in an effort to better reflect the intent of more localized and flexible management of government schools. This led to the proclamation of a new *School Education Act 1999* and *Regulations* in 2000 (State Law Publisher, 2004). The *School Education Act 1999* provided for the continued parallel provision of education outside the government school sector either through non-government schools (which must be registered by the state's Minister for Education) or home-schooling (authorised and overseen by a delegate of the state's Minister for Education).

A significant point of conjecture arising from debate over the *School Education Act 1999* related to whether parents should be required to contribute to the cost of their child's schooling at government schools. The Liberal Party held government in Western Australia at the time and, reflecting neo-liberal arguments put by Friedman (1955) that parents should *contribute* to the cost of their child's schooling, the penultimate draft of the *School Education Act 1999* permitted government school principals to determine a compulsory charge for certain school activities and consumables. The Labor Party's education spokesman's counter-argument reflected greater concern with equity and access:

Various activities will not be available to some of the children at school because they will not have the money. The more we ratchet up the fees, the bigger will be the problem. ... A financial component should not exclude children from education in Western Australia. That must be understood clearly throughout government and the Education Department. (Carpenter, 1998, p. 406/1).

This debate was resolved with a clause that permitted government school principals to determine a *voluntary* contribution which parents would be encouraged to pay, but non-payment could not be used as grounds to exclude a child from activities that are central to the school's teaching and learning program. Further, the annual total for the voluntary contribution that principals were allowed to request was capped in regulations at \$60 for pre-compulsory students and \$235 for compulsory students (State Law Publisher, 1998).

The ideological significance of this resolution was taken up later by the Robson Taskforce (DES, 2001) which, in *The Report of the Taskforce on Structures, Services and Resources Supporting Government Schools* it recommended that the state government amend the *School Education Act 1999* to legislate that: "government schools are open to all Western Australian children regardless of social background, economic circumstances and location" (DES, 2001. p. 3). While the government subsequently endorsed all recommendations from the report, those legislative amendments have not yet been made.

The *School Education Act 1999* was an attempt to streamline the legislative footprint to deal only with matters that needed to be in law. Associated policies and procedures, to be developed and modified as required, now complete the regulatory framework applicable to government schools (DET, 2007). As Angus (1998) notes, however, it is an organisation's meta-rules and its culture that really regulate what administrators and other staff feel able – and expected – to do. In this regard, it is noteworthy that the last three times there has been a change of government in Western Australia, a new Director-General of Education has been appointed a few months later. This pattern is likely to feed a sense of vulnerability among senior public servants within the Department of Education and Training and is likely to contribute to the claim made by government secondary school principals that they are constantly frustrated by "the micro management of their work by bureaucrats and politicians" (WASSEA, 2007, p. 2). These comments suggest that

regulatory efforts over the past two decades since the *Better Schools Report* to devolve authority and resources to schools have not significantly changed the meta-rules that apply to government schools in Western Australia.

SCHOOL ZONES

One clause from the *Education Regulations 1960* that warrants particular attention because of its enduring effect on government schools today (Forsey, 2006) relates to school zones.

In Perth and regional cities with two or more secondary schools, the government school to which families were allowed to send their children was determined by their residential address. Every school had a formally gazetted 'school zone' and families who chose to send their children to a government school had to send them to the school allocated to their residential zone. If families wanted to send their children to a different government school, they had to gain special permission from the Education Department (Angus, 1998; Forsey, 2006). To avoid unwieldy precedents and to maintain fair treatment of all, public servants at the Education Department did not give such permission lightly (Angus 1998).

Forsey (2006) speculates that school zones may have contributed to the mindset that has Western Australian parents choosing first between 'government' or 'non-government' when selecting schools for their children. When school zones were rigidly applied, parents who were not keen on the local government school did not have the option of an alternative government school – the only alternative was to send their child to a non-government school which was not subject to school zone restrictions.

School zones continue to apply today, but only to prevent non-local students from enrolling at a government school that is fully-subscribed by local students. Under current regulations, government schools guarantee a place to all eligible students

who live within their gazetted local area. Having met this obligation, government schools may accept students from outside their local area until they reach capacity. In cases where the school is over-subscribed, a strict and transparent policy relating to specialist programs, siblings and distance from the school must be applied to determine which students can be enrolled at the school (State Law Publisher, 1998). These rules are the basis for the comment made by the mother who is quoted in Section 1: she knows that if her daughter does not gain a place in the specialist program at the over-subscribed government school of her choice, her daughter will not be allowed to go to that school at all because she lives outside its gazetted local area.

CHANGES TO POST-COMPULSORY SCHOOLING IN WESTERN AUSTRALIA

In 2003, Western Australia's government school system amalgamated with the state's Technical and Further Education (TAFE) to form the Department of Education and Training (DET). The amalgamation was intended to facilitate greater collaboration and articulation between school, vocational and tertiary education options in Western Australia and to enable a more seamless transition from one sphere of education to the next (Bateman, 2003; DET, 2005).

While the amalgamation of school education and TAFE had little direct impact on non-government schools, it prompted many government secondary schools and TAFE colleges to explore new ways to share resources and expertise, jointly developing programs in which students could simultaneously be enrolled at school and at TAFE (DET, 2005).

One example of such a school-TAFE partnership is the Western Australian College of Agriculture (WACOA), which caters for upper-secondary students in years 11 and 12 at six residential campuses in rural locations in the state's south-west. It is a multi-campus college which formed through the amalgamation of six agriculture schools that were established by the government school system during the 1950s.

It "is unique in providing a blend of secondary education and vocational training" (DET, 2007b, n.p.). WACOA exemplifies a "focused learning organisation" that is advocated by Keeves (2006, p. 8) who argues that while each Australian state needs to retain a strong education system, the comprehensive schooling model is no longer adequate for the changing needs of students, communities or industries.

Different groups of students have different needs, different interests and different capacities to succeed at the post compulsory level of schooling, in post-secondary educational institutions, and in life-long learning programs. At the upper-secondary school level, different types of 'focused learning organisations' are needed. (Keeves, 2006, p. 8)

The culture of secondary schools and TAFE colleges, however, differ quite a lot, not least because secondary schools have traditionally catered for students from 12 to 17 years of age while TAFE colleges have routinely worked with students older than 17 years (Rothman, 2003). Schools are more overt in their attention to pastoral care, working with parents as well as with students, and have processes in place to control discipline, attendance and handing in assignments. In contrast, TAFE colleges assume a higher level of independence and personal responsibility among their students (Keeves, 2006; Young, 1998). Accordingly, the school-TAFE amalgamation in Western Australia has required "fine-tuning" (Bateman, 2003, para. 5), not only as two large government organizations have combined, but also to work through the logistics of sharing students between individual schools and TAFE colleges.

An important issue that does not appear to have been addressed in research is the extent to which Western Australian parents are likely to embrace the broadening of seamless learning possibilities through their children's upper-secondary school years. It is unclear whether they will welcome these changes, or if they will view the additional freedoms and responsibilities of a college environment (compared with the control and support that is typical of schools) as a further deterioration of the quality of education available to their children through government schools.

Two further legislative changes in Western Australian in recent years, which apply equally to government and non-government secondary schools, warrant attention. The first relates to changes to the school leaving age, while the second concerns the establishment of a government body to oversee the curriculum in all Western Australian schools.

Over the recent few decades, significant effort has been directed towards raising the rate at which students choose to remain at school after the age of 15 years because economic research indicates that students who leave school early earn substantially less than those who remain until the end of year 12 (Marks, 2004; Vickers, 2005; Government of Western Australia, 2006).

As school retention rates have gradually improved in recent decades, it has been necessary for government secondary schools to direct significant time, energy and resources into catering for students with divergent abilities, dispositions, and interests (Angus et al, 2002; Campbell, 2005; Keeves, 2006; Vickers, 2005). In contrast, non-government secondary schools have been largely shielded from the need to diversify due to two pivotal characteristics of non-government schools. Firstly, they are able to exclude disaffected and/or disruptive students who do not 'fit' the school – as opposed to government schools which have been forced to change to 'fit' all of their students (Campbell, 2005; Vickers & Singh 2005).

Public schools were expected to discipline students the same as private schools but could not use the same types of penalties, such as expulsion (Hiatt, 2007, p. 2)

Secondly, the more homogeneous student bodies that are often found in non-government (especially independent) schools have enabled them to focus on and consolidate a narrower 'traditional' curriculum which many parents find attractive (Beavis, 2004; Campbell, 2005; Forsey, 2006), not least because it is tailored to prepare the majority of its students for university entrance (Holmes, 2004b, Marks,

2004). Meanwhile, government schools have expanded their VET provision (Rothman, 2003), but at significant cost because such diversity of provision is more expensive (in terms of equipment and personnel) than consolidation around narrower mainstream provision (Keeves, 2006).

As the drift of capable and/or diligent students to non-government schools has gathered pace in recent years, the received wisdom that those schools are better at getting students into university than are their government school counterparts has approached reality (Campbell, 2005) and the diversification argument is more widely "interpreted by parents as Government schools 'giving up' on university entrance" (Marks, 2004, p. 43).

One example of this development is Balga Senior High School, a government secondary school located in a low socio-economic area of Perth. In 2002, the school courted controversy when the decision was taken to drop Tertiary Entrance Examination (TEE) options from the suite of courses offered to students in years 11 and 12, preferring instead to focus on vocational options.

In response to the diverse needs of the student population, Balga SHS proudly hosts numerous innovative programs which include Mainstream, Swan Nyungar Sports Education Program, Intensive English Centre, Education Support Units, Young Parents Program, No Dole Program, Balga Youth Program, Police Rangers, Aspirations, and a comprehensive VET Program. (Balga Senior High School, 2007, para. 2)

The following year, the government school in a neighbouring suburb with a similar socio-economic profile performed well in TEE school rankings. In-house review of these results led to speculation that the better-than-expected scores from the neighbouring school may have been because many of Balga Senior High School's more capable students (who could not afford a non-government school) moved to the neighbouring school which was still offering TEE courses, thereby increasing the proportion of capable students at that school (Albert, 2005).

From a legislative perspective, the notion of deciding whether to stay at school until the end of year 12 or to leave after the age of 15 has recently been redefined in Western Australia with changes which require that, from 2008, young people must be either 'earning or learning' until the end of the year in which they turn 17:

The Premier said that as of this year (2007), 16-year-olds must be at school, studying full-time at TAFE, in a traineeship, an apprenticeship or employed in a job with genuine career prospects. The school leaving age would be raised to 17 in 2008 ... The Carpenter Government will employ an extra 280 extra staff to help tailor education and training programs to meet the needs of the thousands of students who were expected to have dropped out of school this year.. (Government of Western Australia, 2007, para. 3).

The above media statement from the Western Australian government refers not only to an extension to the compulsory years of schooling, but also acknowledges the need for additional staff to cater for the increased number of students and the diverse needs and interests those students bring to school. Just as the burden for larger numbers of students who previously 'dropped out of school' fell mainly to the government sector through the 1960s and 1970s (Angus et al, 2002; Campbell, 2005; Vickers, 2005) that burden is likely to again fall to the government sector in the decade to follow, accentuating the need to re-think upper-secondary school provision within the government sector (Keeves, 2006).

Another school-age-related issue which is currently on the horizon of Western Australian school provision is a decision recently made by the Catholic Education Office of Western Australia (CEOWA) to change the start of secondary schooling in its systemic schools from Year 8 to Year 7 from the start of the 2009 school year (CEOWA, 2007). This change may have implications for government primary schools as a sizeable portion of their Year 7 cohort may finish their primary schooling at the end of Year 6.

ESTABLISHMENT OF THE CURRICULUM COUNCIL

Another significant legislative change that has occurred in Western Australia in recent years relates to the establishment in 1997 of the Curriculum Council to set and oversee curriculum for all Western Australian schools.

The Curriculum Council is a government body with legislated authority to direct all education providers in Western Australia (including home-school providers) to implement a Curriculum Framework which “sets out what all students should know, understand, value and be able to do as a result of the programs they undertake in schools in Western Australia” (Curriculum Council, 1998, p. ii). Prior to establishment of the Curriculum Council, non-government schools in Western Australia were free to design and implement their own curriculum, though most based their teaching and learning programs on curriculum materials developed for government schools by the Education Department of Western Australia (EDWA) and on TEE examination requirements for years 11 and 12.

The Curriculum Council includes representatives from government and non-government school sectors as well from teacher unions, industry, parent bodies and universities. It is responsible for:

The development and implementation of a Curriculum Framework for schooling which, taking account of the needs of students, sets out the knowledge, understandings, skills, values and attitudes that students are expected to acquire; provide for the development and accreditation of courses of study for post-compulsory schooling; and provide for the assessment and certification of student achievement. (Curriculum Council, 2006, para. 2)

Curriculum has been a significant point of discussion in recent years in Western Australia, primarily around the extension of outcomes-based education, an approach that has come to be known across Western Australia as ‘OBE’. The Curriculum Framework comprises thirteen overarching outcomes around which

teachers are required to base their teaching programs as students proceed from kindergarten to year 12.

The introduction of OBE for primary schooling (kindergarten to year 7) and the first half of secondary schooling (as far as year 10) from 1997 was met with mild resistance among some teachers who raised concerns about greater workloads and the need for additional training and support to incorporate change, but those objections were built-into enterprise bargaining agreements reached with the SSTUWA and so OBE stayed 'under the radar' as far as the wider community was concerned. The subsequent extension of OBE into the upper-secondary years of schooling as the basis for up to 50 new courses that students during years 11 and 12 can study towards a new Western Australian Certificate of Education (WACE) was a different matter. Even before trials began for the new courses in 2005, OBE attracted sustained media, teacher and parent attention, mostly reflecting concerns that the proposed courses lack rigor and that the assessment regimes were unfair (People Lobbying Against Teaching Outcomes [PLATO], 2005).

A major rallying point for opposition to OBE in Western Australia was a group that called itself People Lobbying Against Teaching Outcomes (PLATO), which implies (intentionally or otherwise) alignment with a classical paradigm of learning. While PLATO lists Western Australian teachers from government and non-government schools among its founding committee, most of its early media releases (PLATO, 2005) directed enquiries to Kevin Donnelly, a Melbourne-based consultant who is a long-term critic not only of OBE, but also of government schools across Australia (Doherty, 2004; Donnelly, 2004; Vickers, 2005). PLATO has been an active lobby-group with numerous media releases, hand-outs for parents and teachers, bumper stickers and a discussion board on its website (PLATO, 2007).

While the focus of PLATO's opposition has been the new WACE courses and OBE assessment procedures associated with those courses, their opposition has often spilled-over to criticism of the Education Minister, the Curriculum Council and the

government school system – despite the fact that government schools, like their non-government counterparts, can only influence curriculum through their voice on the Curriculum Council. The government sector occupies three places on the Curriculum Council while the non-government sector occupies two (Curriculum Council, 2006). Other places are occupied by community, tertiary, teacher and employer representatives.

Despite the opposition of PLATO and public debate (for and against OBE) that has ensued on talk-back radio and in newspapers over an extended period since 2005, the introduction of the new courses of study within WACE has proceeded.

According to the Curriculum Council's website (2005, para. 5):

The new WACE will:

- be flexible and won't lock students into pathways
- have one system of curriculum with consistent standards and one system of assessment
- keeps the best features of the current system, like Vocational Education and Training (VET).

The fact that VET was chosen to exemplify the current system's best features is noteworthy for several reasons. First, it counters the "strong, discipline-based approach to school subjects" that is advocated by Donnelly (2004, p. 3) and PLATO. Second, it challenges the idea that years 11 and 12 are mainly about the TEE. Third, it foregrounds learning territory that is a relative strength of the government sector, that is, VET (ACER, 2002; Rothman, 2003), in preference to the TEE learning territory which has long been dominated by non-government schools (Kelley & Evans, 2006). In the context of school choice, it is possible that all three of these reasons conspire to link the perceived problem of OBE with the perceived problem of government secondary schools to further undermine the public perception of both.

In Western Australia today, government and non-government schools have been drawn into a competition – for funds, students and status – that neither sector sought. Funding policies of the Commonwealth government are directed towards maximising individual choice by supporting private provision, but market forces are encouraging the private sector to consolidate the narrow band of provision at which they already excel, leaving the government sector to continue to do more things and cater for more diverse cohorts with proportionally less resources. This has led to widespread dissatisfaction with schools in general, and government secondary schools in particular.

SECTION 3

GLOBAL DIMENSION

In this section, the focus of attention is the global dimension of the global-local-personal school choice model. It contains a review school choice research from different corners of the Western world in order to explore commonalities among the hopes, aspirations and fears that parents have for their children and the part that parents expect schools to play in their fulfilment.

The term 'choice' is used differentially in research literature from North America and from Australia, New Zealand and Britain. In most North American literature, the main point of 'school choice' relates to whether parents should be permitted a range of government-funded school alternatives (through vouchers, tuition tax credits, charter schools and educational management organisations) *or* whether the regulated allocation of children to local public schools according to their residential address should persist (Cooley, 2006; Davies & Aurini, 2006; Jackson-May, 2006; Levin & Belfield, 2003; Lubinski, 2006). Much of this North American literature focuses on the ideological polemic of school-choice advocates *versus* school-choice critics. In contrast, the right for parents in each of Australia, Britain and New Zealand to choose from a range of government and non-government school alternatives is well established (Burke & Spaul, 2001; Reid, 2005), so school choice research literature from these countries focuses more on factors that play a part in the act of choosing (Angus 2000; Ball, 2003; Campbell, 2005; Forsey, 2006; Freund, 2001; Groundwater-Smith, 2001; Kelley & Evans, 2004; MacIntosh, 2007; McCarthy, 2007; McQueen, 2000; Ryan, 2005; Vickers, 2005; Walford 2006).

Despite the different nuances to the concept of school choice from these two spheres of research, similar themes resonate among the authors cited above. To a greater or lesser extent, they all touch on issues of agency, equity, marketisation, social cohesion, individualisation and a constant struggle between public and private good.

CHAPTER FOUR: CHOOSING CHILDREN'S FUTURES

An important starting point for this chapter is the assertion that "schooling is about changing people" (Popkewitz, 2007:64) and the associated inference that, for better or worse, different schools produce different changes (Fullan 2001). It follows that parents who choose to send their child to one school in preference to another are – consciously or otherwise – making decisions that will have a bearing on the person their child will become (Berger & Luckman, 1966; Davies & Aurini, 2006; Forsey 2006; Keddle, 2007; Saul, 2006; Symes & Gulson, 2005; Walford 2006).

CONCERTED CULTIVATION

A prominent theme emerging from the school-choice research to be laid out here is that some parents approach the task of choosing a school for their children as a crucial and systematic process, while other parents view it as the next logical step in their children's schooling and are content to follow the path of least resistance (Campbell, 2005; Davies & Aurini, 2006; Walford 2006). English (2006:23) claims that in some circles, parents feel that "one aspect of their performance as parents can be measured by their ability to provide the right kinds of opportunities for their children through schooling". For these parents, school choice is an anxious, high-stakes decision (Campbell, 2005; Vickers, 2005). Importantly, researchers from each of Britain, Canada and Australia have found socio-economic differences in relation to the approaches parents take: a watchful, worried and tactical approach is prevalent among middle class parents, while a more detached and/or carefree approach is prevalent among working class parents (Ball, 2003; Campbell, 2005; Davies & Aurini, 2006; Vickers & Singh, 2005; Walford 2006). The strategic approach to childrearing which the above researchers associate with middle class parenting has been described by Lareau (2002, p. 12) as a deliberate process of "concerted cultivation". Laurea (cited by McNulty, 2005, para. 4) characterises this socio-economic difference

as follows: "middle-class parents see their child as a project, while working-class and poor families put a lot of energy into getting through the day and keeping their children safe."

According to Davies and Aurini (2006, p. 2), concerted cultivation refers to the "assorted ways in which today's middle class parents are structuring their children's lives" with a regime of extra-curricula activities including music, gymnastics, dance and tennis lessons from an early age, leading into extra reading and mathematics coaching and strong advocacy for their child throughout his/her schooling. Australian social researcher, Hugh Mackay (2007, n.p.) describes such parents as "helicopter parents, always hovering nearby". He suggests that one factor contributing to this dogged behaviour is that today's middle class parents generally have only one or two children, so all of their parenting energies and anxieties are concentrated on those one or two. In contrast, at least in Australia, working class families with lower levels of education tend to have more children and are more likely to operate as single parents, so their parenting efforts and energies are necessarily diluted and spread more thinly (Mackay, 2007).

Davies and Aurini (2006) point to two parental dispositions which are especially suggestive of concerted cultivation when it comes to school choice: a strong level of agency among parents, and an elevated sense of authority about their children's needs and abilities, sometimes in defiance of advice from teachers and other experts. A third element relates to the commodification of learning and schooling which has created an expectation among parents that one has to pay for quality; if something is free, it is probably of questionable quality (Blunden, 2005). An extension to this phenomenon is that "when you *buy* a service, then you absolve yourself of personal responsibility for its delivery" but simultaneously compound your responsibility for choosing wisely (Blunden, 2005, p. 48).

Parents, not government, shoulder the consequences for their good or poor choosing, and market forces determine what constitutes good or poor choice plans. (Bosetti, 2005, p. 436)

It is important to note that Davies and Aurini (2006) denote concerted cultivation as a middle-class phenomenon which is not frequently observed among working class families in Canada (S. Davies, personal communication, December 12, 2006). Campbell (2005) and Freebody, Ludwig and Gunn (1995) have pointed to ways in which parenting and schooling pathways taken by some Australian families in low socio-economic communities have sometimes been portrayed as neglectful when a lack of alternatives or a lack of knowledge are equally plausible explanations. Walford (2006, p. 8) has formed a similar view of the situation in Britain:

Choosing a school has now become a complicated process where local knowledge, interest in education, and a degree of motivation of parents and children have become vital indicators of successful acceptance of a child into a leading school. Children and families where there is a low level of interest in education simply do not give this process sufficient attention.

British research conducted through the 1990s and reported by Walford reinforces the claim that concerted cultivation is particular to well-educated middle-class families. One British study which specifically focused on class differences regarding school choice was conducted by Carroll and Walford (1997, cited in Walford 2006). It involved interviews with parents from two economically contrasting areas of Britain. The study compared the extent to which working class and middle class children were given a role in choosing the secondary school they would attend. Carroll and Walford found "strong support to the idea that delegation of responsibility to the child was closely class related" (Walford, 2006, p. 12) with middle class parents thinking of school choice as a high-stakes decision with long-term consequences, and something that is beyond the scope of their pre-adolescent children. In contrast, working class parents were more likely to honour their child's preferences. Three reasons for working class parents to privileging their child's preferences were identified by Carroll

and Walford: the parents felt their child had greater expertise in matters of schooling; they felt it was right to respect their child's wishes; and they did not want to be 'pushy' parents.

Walford (2006, p. 9) observes that these findings among working class families do not match the British Government's view of 'good' parents "as active consumers weighing the various possibilities and coming to a rational decision on behalf of their children". The middle-class approach reflecting concerted cultivation, however, coincides exactly with that version of 'good' parents.

Accounts of school choice research conducted in Australia frequently portray parents as active consumers who weigh-up various options (Campbell, 2005; English 2006; Forsey, 2006; Freund, 2001; Holmes, 2006b; Ryan 2005), but none of this research specifically compares the choice-making processes of middle and working class families. One possible explanation for this gap in the Australian research is that drawing class boundaries in Australia is highly contested (Campbell, 2005).

As a proxy for comparing different classes within society, numerous Australian researchers have instead cross-tabulated socio-economic data with school destination data (Beavis, 2004; Campbell, 2005; Kelley & Evans, 2004; Vickers, 2005). Such cross-tabulations have consistently revealed that families at the upper end of the socio-economic scale are likely to send their children to independent non-government schools. Families that occupy a lower position on the socio-economic scale are likely to send their children to government or Catholic schools. It has also been found that few socio-economic differences separate families who choose government and Catholic schools (Beavis, 2004; Kelley & Evans, 2004; Price, 2007).

School destination data alone, however, provide a limited view of the choice-making processes that lead to those destinations. Is it the case that a large proportion of parents at the low end of the socio-economic scale actively *choose* the local government school, or does that school destination come about because there are no

viable alternatives and/or the range of options is not well understood? For example, Stewart (2006, p. 18) reports that a scheme established to help parents in Kent, Great Britain, to navigate school choice is “most used by people from the middle classes rather than people from disadvantaged areas” because people in disadvantaged areas are preoccupied with the daily challenges of here and now, and are less concerned with finding out which school will give their child the best opportunities into a distant future.

Frequent reference to spectre of the government sector in Australia becoming a ‘residual’ system (Bonnor & Caro, 2007; Campbell, 2005; DES, 2001; Price, 2007; Vickers, 2005) implies that government schools are increasingly populated by the children of families who lack alternatives and/or have a low level of agency, but this is at odds with claims that Australian parents exercise a high level of agency (Beavis, 2005; Forsey, 2006).

Claims of universally high levels of agency among parents with respect to school choice need to be tempered by the possibility that parents with a high level of agency have self-selected their participation in much of the school choice research that has been conducted to date. It remains unclear whether similar levels of agency are exercised across the socio-economic spectrum in Australia and elsewhere. The lack of clarity on this issue is problematic because, as Walford (2006, p. 13) points out, it can exacerbate inequalities:

That parents who show the least knowledge or interest in the education of their children are most likely to ‘choose’ the nearest neighbourhood school, while others who already offer their children advantages are likely be more knowledgeable and discriminating, leads to potential segregation and further disadvantage for those children already disadvantaged.

Features of what Walford (2006, p. 13) referred to as ‘good’ parents (that is, those who take an active role in their child’s education and in decisions about the schools he/she will attend) were observed among the Canadian parents who were the focus

of a study conducted by Davies and Aurini (2006). In the Canadian study, the target group comprised parents who had chosen to send their children to fee-paying non-government schools. Davies and Aurini used demographic data to profile the socio-cultural nature of this parent group, then focus groups to delve further into the basis for choosing a non-government school.

Davies and Aurini (2006) refer to their target group as 'middle class parents'. Retracing the difficulties raised by Campbell (2005) about the idea of an Australian middle class, it is interesting to note that, despite the shared historiography of Australia and Canada (Bosetti, 2006), Davies and Aurini do not retreat from referring to a Canadian 'middle class' – possibly because Davies and Aurini do not attempt to delineate the middle class group as distinct from a 'working class' group. The only form of comparison Davies and Aurini draw is with parents who opt to send their children to government schools. In this sense, choosing to send your child to a non-government school could almost be taken to be an identifier for 'middle class'.

Davies and Aurini (2006) found that Canadian parents who choose a non-government school for their children have distinctly higher levels of education and occupational status, slightly higher levels of income and a significantly more strategic approach to school screening and monitoring than is evident among parents who opt for government schools. The high level of agency among these parents and the way in which they actively seek and use information about school options coincides with findings about middle-class parents in Britain (Walford, 2006) and in Australia (Campbell, 2005; Forsey, 2006;). It also contrasts markedly with the approach taken by working class parents in Britain and with conclusions drawn from the Australian context by Connell (1985, 2003, cited by Campbell 2005, p.4):

Parents operating from different social classes and in different schools use schools and their teachers differently. In the wealthier, corporate schools, there tends to be an empowered status for the parent, engaging school and teachers as complicit agents in the raising and education of their children. In many state

schools, the distance is greater between parent and school with parents and children more likely to be the objects of alienating discourses of power.

Parental education and occupational status were also identified as pivotal school-choice factors in separate Australian studies undertaken by Beavis (2004) and Kelley and Evans (2004). In the latter study, multivariate analysis of nationwide demographic data was used to construct a model that quantified the extent to which school choice could be predicted by various aspects of socio-economic class (occupational status, income and parental education) and culture (religious affiliation, rural versus city, political affiliation and ethnic identity). In their analysis, Kelley and Evans treated government schools, Catholic schools and independent schools as three separate choices. They found that, all else being equal, the single greatest predictor of Australian parents choosing an independent school is a high level of parental education. Their multivariate analysis controlled for economic circumstances, so while a positive correlation was found between parental wealth and independent school selection, Kelley and Evans note that high wealth often stems from high occupational status, which in turn is the result of being highly educated. They concluded that the pivotal factor is parental education.

When Kelley and Evans applied multivariate analysis to the groups of parents who choose Catholic *versus* government schools, they found no significant difference in their socio-economic profiles (income, education and occupational status). They found that the key predictor of choosing a Catholic school is whether the family identifies as Catholic – even among families who rarely go to church – though this effect strengthens with higher rates of church attendance. Also, despite the fact that many independent schools have (mainly Anglican) church affiliations, they found that religiosity is a very minor factor in choosing a non-Catholic independent school.

As an aside, there is evidence that divisions exist within the Catholic sector in Australia whereby some market-oriented Catholic schools are striving to improve their competitive edge, while others are advocating a return to the Catholic ethos of equity

and serving the down-trodden (Price, 2007; Ryan, 2005). Such a division was also noted by Canadian researcher, Lynn Bosetti:

Those with a mission to provide education to underserved communities and disadvantaged families are most likely to cooperate with public schools and less likely to be a competitive threat because they target students who are expensive and hard to educate. Market-oriented schools are rooted in competitive markets and tend to adopt a corporate approach to the management of schools ... they engage in market research, aggressively advertise, monitor competitors, and target the average middle-class student. Bosetti (2005 p. 438-9)

The study conducted by Beavis (2004) involved a total 609 telephone interviews with even numbers of parents who had chosen government, Catholic and independent secondary schools in different states within Australia. Beavis set out to investigate factors (family background, finances and perceptions of schools) that influence the selection of government or non-government schools. His study was supported by the *Sydney Morning Herald* newspaper group (which, itself, suggests how topical school choice is among Australian parents today) and the Australian Council of Educational Research (ACER).

One of several family profile variables that were common to the studies conducted by Beavis (2004) and by Kelley and Evans (2004) was political orientation. Both found that party politics has little bearing on whether or not a Catholic school is chosen, but is an important difference separating parents who choose government *versus* independent schools; Liberal/National party voters are more likely to choose an independent school for their children, whereas Labor voters are more likely to choose a government school. Table 3.1 overleaf details the party political preferences divulged by parents involved in Beavis's study, broken down by school sector. It shows a symmetrical reversal of Labor *versus* Liberal/National orientations separating parents choosing government and independent schools.

Table 3.1: Political party preferences of Australian parents by school sector

	Sector			Total
	Government	Catholic	Independent	
Labor	46.2%	35.3%	22.8%	40.0%
Liberal/National	28.1%	38.8%	46.7%	33.5%
Other	25.7%	25.9%	30.4%	26.5%

(Source: Beavis 2004:np)

Kelley and Evans (2004) found the same pattern of preferences, but extended their analysis to include trade union membership. This led to their conclusion that “a Liberal family where the father is not a trade unionist would be 11 percentage points more likely to send their children to an independent school than a Labor family with a trade unionist father” (Kelley & Evans, 2004, p. 39). They further surmise that the correlation between political orientation and government *versus* independent school choice might signal a more profound difference between the two groups pertaining to “social networks and in attitudes and values” (Kelley & Evans, 2004 p. 40).

The study conducted by Beavis (2004) reiterated the high education levels among parents who choose independent schools. It also indicated that most Australian parents expect to have a say in the school their children attend, which implies a high level of agency among Australian parents – though (as with other Australian research noted earlier), Beavis did not specifically investigate whether differences existed on this issue between middle class and working class parents.

Beavis found that the school’s reputation regarding academic levels, school culture and security are important to parents, but that the single most important factor, and the basis upon which many parents choose a Catholic or independent school (over a government school) is the perception that ‘traditional values’ are more likely to be upheld in Catholic or independent schools. The term ‘traditional values’ was used by Beavis as a collective that included “discipline, religious or moral values, the traditions of the school itself, and the requirement that a uniform be worn” (Beavis, 2004, n.p.).

CONSERVATIVE MODERNISM

The importance attributed to traditional values reflects the phenomenon of "conservative modernism" (Apple, 2001, p. 24) sweeping middle-class parents as a defence against the rapid pace of social, technological, political and economic change. It is manifest as what Ball (2003, p. 168) describes as a "fearful, alert and strategic" approach to child-rearing that has become typical of middle class parents and what Symes and Gulson (2005, p. 19) refer to as a "mood of moral conservatism" sweeping Western communities as people yearn for the old and the familiar, including forms and rituals of schooling that parents recognise, trust and understand (Apple, 2001; Hargreaves 2003; Young 1998). It also resonates with the "renewed past" image of Australia which Inayatullah (2006, p. 116) describes as being "based on today's leaders looking back at the 1950s as the ideal era ... as we continue into the future, the identity would be renewed through technology, but the white picket fence will remain. Nostalgia for the past, strong moral values and male leaders are pivotal to this future".

One might expect that, during these uncertain times, government schools could be seen as a safe and dependable haven, however Forsey (2006) suggests that modernity – or more particularly, the way that modernity continues to evolve – may explain why this is not the case. With reference to a conceptual schema developed by Beck, Bonns and Lau (2003, cited by Forsey, 2006), Forsey describes how Western society has moved beyond the first modernity which produced the welfare state, and exists now in a second phase of modernity which is witnessing the disassembly of the nation-state and the welfare system because those institutions are now viewed as restraining forces. In their place, there is "increased emphasis on the emancipation of the individual" (Forsey 2006, p. 6) as people who previously needed the welfare system and its institutions have become accomplished to the point that they seek more flexibility and feel a greater sense of authority about what they need and their capacity to choose who to get it from. Forsey notes that the very predictability and broad success of past institutions has, paradoxically, provided the platform from which many of today's parents are equipped to pursue alternatives.

The school alternatives that are proving most attractive to today's parents are those that offer 'traditional' values, content and procedures. Several researchers have pointed to the irony of this situation. Neglect and abandonment of public institutional services has weakened their capacity to ensure collective security, so individuals have been forced to construct their own security mechanisms and, in the process, have looked to the past for security in the familiar (Bosetti, 2005; Hargreaves, 2003). The collective security of strong public institutions has been superseded by the individual security of amassing personal resources because in the minimal-regulation climate of a competitive neo-liberal world, it is a case of 'each to his own' (Blunden, 2006; Maddison, 2005; Popkewitz, 2005,).

The private school becomes a means of protecting children against some of the many uncertainties of life in post-welfare Australia, including inadequate government schools (Campbell, 2005, p. 8).

Non-government schools have been better placed than their government counterparts to meet the growing demand for traditional approaches to curriculum, teaching and school structures (Campbell, 2004; Vickers & Singh, 2005). This is partly because they are not subject to what Freidman (1955, p. 2) called the "dead hand of bureaucracy", and so are able to respond more quickly to market forces (Angus, 1998; Gilbert, 1991). It is also because most non-government schools have maintained a conservative and traditional approach to the trappings and the substance of schooling, curriculum and teaching, while it has been necessary for the government sector to diversify and embrace new approaches due to the growing diversity of its student population (Burke & Spaul, 2001; Rothman, 2003) – something that has been variously described as both a virtue (Brennan, 2001; Hargreaves, 2003) and a flaw (Donnelly, 2004).

Paradoxically, several researchers (Araujo, 2007; Bosetti, 2005; Ryan, 2006; Vickers & Singh 2005) point to instances where market pressure to produce excellent results within a narrow and conservative version of school success has resulted in teachers

being “risk-averse, inhibiting their creativity, flexibility and sensitivity to the contextualised nature of teaching and learning” (Vickers & Singh, 2005, p. 235-6) because “markets do not encourage risk-taking and innovative classroom practices” (Bosetti, 2005, p. 437). The paradox here is that while non-government schools have greater regulatory scope to offer diverse programs and approaches, market forces dictate that they stick with tradition (Holmes, 2006b), so instead of marketisation leading to a wide range of service options, it has resulted in numerous providers competing with each other to provide the same service (Maddison, 2005).

Parental demands for a return to traditional curriculum, values, standards and uniforms has also led to changes in government schools. This is especially evident in locations with high concentrations of middle class families and where the local government school has a reputation as being an “island of excellence” (WASSEA, 2007, p. 2) within the government sector. According to Symes and Gulson (2005, p. 19), “increasingly, the better performing parts of the (government) sector are straitjacketed by educational bureaucrats and middle class parents who wish to protect it from further degradation.” One might point to the decision in Western Australia to reinstate Perth Modern School as a fully-selective school for academically talented students from 2007 as one such example.

While criticism of middle class parents is implied in the above quotation from Symes and Gulson, other researchers portray the strategic actions taken by middle class parents as a moral dilemma for those parents, and view their motives with sympathy (Campbell, 2005; Davies & Aurini, 2006; Forsey, 2006; McCarthy, 2007).

Through interviews with parents who had moved their children from government to non-government schools (and *vice-versa*) in Perth, Western Australia, Forsey (2006) found that parents who decide to move their children to a non-government school do not automatically subscribe to neo-liberalism and the single-minded pursuit of personal benefit. Rather, moving children to non-government schools “produced some level of discomfort (for parents) as they reflected upon the broader issues of the common good

and social justice" (Forsey, 2006, p. 18). In most cases, the decision to leave the government sector was based on concerns about disruptive students who lack ambition, limited academic and extra-curricular opportunities and/or inadequate teachers – and a perception that all these factors are less problematic in non-government schools.

Campbell (2005) cites an analysis of middle Australia conducted by Pusey (2003) and the finding that many families feel let down by public institutions, including government schools. Campbell (2005, p. 8) argues that "the middle class is being driven out rather than choosing to leave" government schools, and that claims of a heightened level of agency among the middle class are misguided because the top option for many of these parents – a quality local government school – is becoming increasingly elusive.

The desire to support the institutions of a civil society are undermined by the imperative of doing the best possible by their children in a dangerous world. Sending one's children to a private or select government school becomes a positive though resented response to cut-backs in the public sector. (Campbell, 2005, p. 8).

In focus groups conducted with Canadian parents, Davies and Aurini (2006, p. 16) found that "many new concerted cultivators and (non-government) school choosers are likely to adopt these practices for imitative reasons of what is proper as much as anything else. Only some of this 'investing in the future' is well-thought out or calculated with precision." They go on to suggest that this imitative behaviour has come about because, in recent years, the moral boundaries associated with choosing a non-government school have shifted. Where such choices were previously associated with consumerism, exclusivity and elitism, they are now more likely to be framed "within the morally-laden talk of responsible parenting" (2006, p. 13). Further, this new framing is gaining ascendancy to the point that "older and formerly established forms of parenting appear as 'uncaring' or 'uninvolved'" (2006:14) which resonates with Campbell's (2005, p. 1) observation that parents who send their children to government schools are sometimes portrayed as "neglectful".

Despite this strong tendency for highly educated parents across the Western world to send their children to non-government secondary schools, a substantial sub-set of this group continues to choose government schools. On closer analysis, researchers have found that the common thread that binds this sub-group is that the government school to which they send their children is, reputedly, an 'island of excellence' within the government sector – either a selective government school or a government school located in an affluent suburb with a high concentration of highly educated, high-wealth and high-occupational status families (Campbell, 2005; Davies & Aurini 2006; Forsey, 2006; Vickers & Singh, 2005; Walford 2006).

In summary, research consistently shows that a majority of well educated (and by extension, high-occupational status, high-wealth) parents approach their parental responsibilities, including school choice, as a strategic process of concerted cultivation (Davies & Aurini, 2006). Further, that most of the decisions they make for their children reflect conservative modernism (Apple, 2001), embracing traditional values which eschew the daring, scientific progressivism of the previous generation. Instead, they look to a renewed past (Inayatullah, 2005) to ensure safety and stability for their children as the Western World proceeds through this age of anxiety (Hargreaves, 2003).

Despite strong agreement in relation to these trends among middle class parents across the Western world, questions remain regarding what they expect their children to gain from attending a non-government school, or conversely, what they are shielding their children from by avoiding their local government school?

Four recurrent responses to the above questions emerge from the research: maximising opportunities for achievement; seeking high quality teachers; seeking a familiar and/or desirable socio-cultural environment; and minimising exposure to disruptive behaviour.

MAXIMISING OPPORTUNITIES FOR ACHIEVEMENT

Scores in school exit examinations are widely taken as an indicator of secondary school achievement, reflecting on individual students and on the schools they attended (Araujo, 2007; Bradley, Draca & Green 2004; Marks, 2004; Ryan, 2005). The taken-for-granted nature of the link between learning and exit scores masks several issues regarding school achievement (Vickers & Singh, 2005). The first relates to the argument developed by Illich (1970) that schooling and learning are oppositional concepts. According to Illich (1970, para. 2), being schooled trains and rewards compliance, leading pupils “to confuse teaching with learning, grade advancement with education, a diploma with competence, and fluency with the ability to say something new”. Less radical renditions of this argument maintain that while exit exams provide an indication of some of the skills and knowledge developed in schools, they are designed to test for what was taught, which does not always coincide with what is important to the student or his/her life beyond school (Hargreaves, 2003; Young, 1998).

The perceived crisis in education is compounded by an acute lack of consensus regarding the goals and purpose of education. Members of our pluralistic society are increasingly mobile and unrooted and share fewer common beliefs, cultural references, and practices. They live and work in a global knowledge economy where intellectual capacity and education credentials have currency. In such a context educational reform centered on an economically driven conception of the self-interested individual empowered to choose schools in a competitive education market is very appealing. Many parents view the educational success of their children to be too important to be left to the chance outcome of the open competition of the public education system and prefer to seek educational advantage for them through independent or specialist schools. (Bosetti, 2005, p. 435-6)

While parents feel equipped to support and/or cajole their children and their children's teachers to strive for better achievement and to gain higher scores, few of them feel the need to interrogate the relevance or importance of the learned content and processes that are contributing to those scores (Davies & Aurini, 2006; Hargreaves,

2003). This issue was investigated by Jackson-May (2006) who made the observation that parents who report satisfaction with charter schools in the United States often equate academic quality with "better education and high quality instruction" (2006, p. 28). Jackson-May probed what parents meant by 'better education and high quality instruction' and found a compact of affective characteristics including smaller class sizes, greater personal contact and familiarity with the teachers, a sense of belonging, and one-to-one attention. She concluded that parents' perceptions of 'better education and high quality instruction' reveal a "perception gap where the positive expressions parents recount appear to be directly related not to academics but to the way they feel as part of the school" (Jackson-May, 2006, p. 28).

Schools are acutely aware of the fact that high levels test scores are not enough in this competitive environment in which a good education is a valuable commodity (Blunden, 2005; Brennan, 2001; Holmes, 2006b; Macintosh, 2007; English, 2006). They know that publicising achievements is almost as important as gaining them (Harney, 2005; Holmes, 2006a; Jackson-May 2006); and that predicting and promulgating the types of achievements that parents value the most enables schools to focus their efforts and elevate their market share (Harney, 2005; Holmes, 2006; Ryan, 2005).

In the current climate of conservative modernism, schools are under pressure to go back to 'the basics' and to conduct and report standardised test results (Donnelly, 2004; Kemp, 1999; Meiers, 2005). The elevated status of standardised test scores forces schools to focus more explicitly on skills and knowledge 'covered' in the test, possibly at the expense of equally important aspects of the curriculum that are not prominent in the test, leading to a test-specific narrowing of the curriculum (Marks, 2004; Reid, 2005; Ryan, 2005; Wiggans, 1999).

Regardless of the form achievement takes or how it is assessed, there is strong evidence that "schools produce unequal outcomes for students of different

socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds" (Vickers & Singh, 2005, p. 234) whereby high-socioeconomic students consistently outperform their low-socioeconomic peers. Achievement data from the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) conducted by the Organisation for Economic and Cultural Development (OECD) show that while the overall performance of Australian students compares well with their international peers "there is a large gap between the highest and the lowest performing students in Australia" (Macintosh, 2007, p. 56) and that the size of this gap is greater in Australia than elsewhere. Further, Western Australian Literacy and Numeracy Assessment (WALNA) data shows that a disproportionately high number of students whose WALNA results are routinely lower than their peers are Aboriginal and/or come from schools with a low mean family income and/or low mean levels of parental education (DET, 2006).

There is significant pressure in many Western nations for regulations to authorise the publication of school performance data relating to various standardised tests to help inform parents' school choices (English, 2006; Stamoulas, 2006; Walford, 2006). Concerns have been raised, however, that publication of such 'league tables' would not account for the different starting points and challenges faced by students of different backgrounds and abilities (Araujo, 2006; Cooley, 2006; Davies & Aurini, 2006; Gillard, 2008; Hargreaves, 2004).

Bradley, Draca and Green (2004) considered the relative merits of publishing raw population-test data for Queensland schools *versus* similar data that had been adjusted to account for socioeconomic factors. They focused on the extent to which raw *versus* adjusted data provided an accurate account of schools' capacity to 'add value' to student achievement as defined in those tests. They found striking differences between the raw and adjusted sets of data. Further, they found that the raw data amplified the gap that exists between schools located in high and low socioeconomic areas, suggesting that Australian schools are not making great progress in closing the gap identified in PISA.

“raw league tables understate the performance of schools in disadvantaged socio-economic areas and overstate the value added to students in high socio-economic areas” (Bradley, Draca & Green, 2004, p. 284).

When this is set against Beavis’s (2004) finding that, after traditional values, the second major consideration in choosing a school is the school’s academic reputation, it becomes clear that a school’s capacity to attract a large proportion of high-socioeconomic students and to establish a solid academic reputation are mutually sustainable, self-fulfilling attributes (Jackson-May, 2006). Further, schools on the ‘outer’ of this self-fulfilling cycle find it extremely difficult to break in (Araujo, 2007; Bosetti, 2005; Campbell, 2005).

SEEKING HIGH QUALITY TEACHERS

Parental assumptions that teachers within non-government schools are of higher quality than those in government schools have been reported by each of Buckingham (2004), Forsey (2006), Jackson-May (2006) and Walford (2006). There is little empirical evidence to either support or rebuff this perception for Australian schools but data below in Table 3:2 clearly show that, over the past twenty years, student-to-teacher ratios in Australian non-government schools have dropped further than in government schools. The lower student-to-teacher ratio is likely to enable more individualised attention in non-government schools, a factor which Jackson May (2006) found to be highly desirable among parents.

Table 3.2: Comparison of Student-to-Teacher ratios in Australian government and non-government secondary schools, 1996 and 2006

	Government schools	Non-government schools
1996	12.8	12.8
2006	12.2	11.8

(Source: ABS, 2006, Table 4221.0)

Lower student-to-teacher ratios are also highly attractive to teachers who are reporting record-low levels of morale due to heightened workloads, demands for greater accountability and abusive or unresponsive students (Donnelly, 2004; Hiatt, 2007; Townsend, 2005; WASSEA, 2007). An approach taken by many teachers to reduce this stress has been to leave the profession (DES, 2001) while others seek positions in schools that have excellent facilities, can expel disruptive students, have parents who take an active role in their children's education and a low student to teacher ratio. That is, they seek a position in a non-government school (Forsey, 2006; Vickers & Singh, 2005).

In a competitive environment in which there is a teacher shortage (Hiatt, 2007b) and teaching jobs in non-government schools are more attractive than in government schools, it is to be expected that over time, the best teachers will radiate towards non-government schools, thereby fulfilling the current perception that teachers in non-government schools are of higher quality (Buckingham, 2004; Jackson-May, 2006; Lubienski, 2006; WASSEA, 2007).

SEEKING A FAMILIAR AND/OR DESIRABLE SOCIO-CULTURAL ENVIRONMENT

There is considerable agreement that the key characteristic that lends reputedly 'good' schools their elevated status in the eyes of most parents is their socio-cultural environment (Beavis, 2004; Bradley, Draca & Green, 2004; Buckingham, 2004; English, 2006; Forsey, 2006; Freund, 2001; Harney, 2005; Jackson-May, 2006; Lucey & Reay, 2002; McLeod & Yates, 2006; Walford, 2006). This stems not only from perceived alignment of the values, atmosphere, work ethic and ways of the school with those of the home (Forsey, 2006), but also from cases in which the socio-cultural environment of the school is something to which parents aspire, but do not necessarily maintain at home (Walford, 2006; Harney, 2005).

Some parents lack confidence in their own ability to teach their children right and wrong and feel they have less time to lay down an ethical framework for their children, less time to teach them values ... they believe independent schools are tougher on issues of discipline as children from an early age challenge parent authority. (Harney, 2005, p. 34)

Gauging the true character, culture and values of any complex social institution is extremely difficult, so parents look to various proxy indicators (English, 2006; Forsey, 2006; Jackson-May, 2006). According to English (2006, p. 23) "Parents connect the look of the school with its performance and its ability to realise students' potential" and the appearance and behaviour of students while in uniform in public is vitally important in this regard. This argument is supported by McLeod and Yates (2006) who found that students in secondary schools are acutely aware of how their personal appearance advertises their school in public. They also found that the extent to which a school's uniform reflects conservatism and tradition correlates closely with the overall tone of the school and that the reintroduction of school uniforms in many Australian government schools in the last decade is an attempt to reassert "traditional forms of conformity and control ... (which) reflect a broader global trend influenced by the ascendance of neo-liberal philosophies" (McLeod & Yates, 2006, p. 105).

Popkewitz (2007) discusses how neo-liberal, individualistic cultural practices have come to dominate cosmopolitanism in today's Western world. Cosmopolitanism is an evolving construct, continually redefining the range of behaviours, values and dispositions that society considers to be acceptable and normalised. An important feature of cosmopolitanism is the fact that it is a comparative construct "in that the very qualities of the 'reasonable person' create maps of its opposite: those who do not 'fit' the normalised qualities of the cosmopolitan thus stand outside as Others" (Popkewitz, 2007, p. 64).

Being consigned as an Other is not desirable for individuals, but the very existence of Others is a necessary point of comparison from which cosmopolitanism derives

meaning (Popkewitz, 2007). Popkewitz points to *No Child Left Behind* legislation in the United States to illustrate this point:

The child who is left behind is one that does not embrace the cosmopolitan mode of life that includes lifelong learning, 'problem solving', collaboration, and continuous innovation and choice that mark the autonomous, unfinished cosmopolitan. (Popkewitz, 2007, p. 77)

Through lack of alternatives or parental neglect, it is widely recognised that Others are over-represented in government schools (Campbell, 2005; Jackson-May, 2006; Vickers, 2005; Walford, 2006) and that they jointly shape the socio-cultural environment of their schools accordingly (Lucey & Reay, 2002). Cosmopolitanism stigmatizes the cultural practices of Others, regardless of the face-value merits or flaws of those practices. As Popkewitz (2007) notes, it is not the cultural practices themselves that consign them low status; rather, the stigma stems from the fact that they are prevalent among Others and that they deviate from practices associated with the current cosmopolitan.

You have a real cultural thing and a social aspect of what it means to send your kid to a private school, even if it's low cost ... There's a bit of a social stigma attached to sending your kid to a local State school. (Campbell & Sherington, 2004 p. 23, cited in Vickers 2005, p. 273)

The stigma associated with government schools contrasts with the relative prestige of many non-government schools. It also relates to the long-standing tradition of the 'old school tie' whereby one's school background is the basis for social connections that extend well beyond one's school years (Lucey & Reay, 2002). To say "we went to school together" is to claim a particular insight to the person's past and a shared history that is not so readily established by other social links such as "we used to work together" (Swan, 2005, p. 178). The fact that the 'old school tie' phenomenon still functions in Australia today is evident in the biographical profiles provided for speakers at a *No Ticket, No Start - No More!* conference in Canberra (H.R Nicholls

Society, 1989). Despite the fact that all of the speakers had significant expertise and experience in business, politics and/or academia over many years, most of their profiles began by citing the secondary school they had attended several decades ago while they were still in their teens. Nine were non-government grammar or Catholic schools, one was a country government school and only three did not specify a school.

One positive by-product of government schools becoming a collection point for Others was identified by Reid (2005) who found that the socio-cultural diversity of government schools in Australia over several decades has significantly contributed to the positive attitude that most Australians hold about its multicultural landscape. A less optimistic extension of Reid's finding however is that, as more and more middle class children by-pass their local government school, the role those schools can play as socio-cultural meeting points will be diminished (Bonnor & Caro, 2007; Swan, 2005). It is further tarnished by accusations from senior Australian politicians including the previous Prime Minister, John Howard, that government schools are "too politically correct and too values neutral" (cited by Leech, 2006, p.46).

Across the Western world, the trend for middle-class children to be over-represented among those moving to non-government schools means that children 'from different sides of the track' are less likely to share the same classroom or playground during their formative years, thus contributing to an increasingly segregated community (Bradley, Draca & Green, 2004; Campbell, 2004; Campbell & Sherington, 2004; Lucey & Reay, 2002; Macintosh, 2007; Swan, 2005; Walford, 2006; Wolf, 2007). On this basis, the Australian Labor politician, Wayne Swan (2006), argues that Australia's claims to egalitarianism are wearing thin as deep divisions have started to form along economic, ideological and spatial lines. He claims that opportunities for children who live in different circumstances to mix and get to know each other have diminished; they now live in different suburbs, play in different teams and go to different schools. The only time they meet is on the sporting field where they are mutually demonised as "the opposition" (Swan, 2006, p.160).

MINIMISING EXPOSURE TO DISRUPTIVE BEHAVIOUR

Choosing a school that offers a desirable socio-cultural environment is related to avoiding schools that are known (or perceived) to contain a lot of disruptive students.

“the school that reflects good behaviour is a school that instils good values”.
(English, 2006, p. 23)

When reputations for discipline and student behaviour in government and non-government school sectors are compared, the government sector fares consistently poorly (Campbell, 2005; DES, 2001; Hiatt, 2007a; Leech, 2006; Lubienski, 2006; Ryan, 2005). Numerous researchers have attributed a major portion of this poor reputation to the fact that government schools across the Western world are required to cater for all students who seek enrolment, whereas other relatively ‘independent’ schools (charter schools, self-managing schools and non-government schools) are able to be more selective (Araujo, 2007; Bonnor & Caro, 2007; Bosetti, 2005; DES, 2001; Keddle, 2007; Kelley & Evans, 2004; Macintosh, 2007; Townsend, 2005; Vickers, 2005; Wolf 2007).

Public schools must accept all students, irrespective of their academic ability and behavioural characteristics, and have limited capacity to expel unruly students.
(Macintosh, 2007, p. 55)

Forsey (2006) found that avoiding disruptive behaviour is frequently cited as the reason for moving from one school to another and stated that “it is particular government schools that cause people the greatest concern” (2006, p. 15). Likewise, Jackson May (2007) found that the main detraction from local schools in the United States was a perceived lack of discipline. She asked the parents of children in charter schools whether they would return their children to the local public school if it significantly lifted its academic results. She also asked if they would return to the local public school if it established a more disciplined environment. The majority said “no” to improved academic scores and “yes” to a more disciplined environment “leading to the

supposition that a disciplined environment may be a more influential factor than academic achievement" (Jackson-May, 2007, p. 34).

While schools in the government sector must accept 'all-comers', schools in the non-government sector are able to be more selective, not only about the students they enrol, but also about their geographical location. For high-status, over-subscribed schools, the idea of 'school choice' takes on a new meaning because it is as much about schools choosing their students as it is about parents choosing schools (Forsey, 2006; Townsend, 2005; Vickers, 2005). Several researchers refer to the non-government sector in Australia 'creaming off' the best students (Bradley, Draca & Green, 2004; Kelley & Evans, 2006; Vickers, 2005), leaving the government sector to cater for more challenging/more costly students and more costly and less desirable locations (DES, 2001; Forlin & Tierney, 2006).

Numerous Australian researchers have concluded that the net effect of all the above is that an increasing number of parents find their "desire to support the institutions of a civil society are undermined by the imperative of doing the best possible by their children" (Campbell, 2005, p. 8) and that this has led to the steady drift of students away from government schools across Australia (Bonnor & Caro, 2007; Cannold, 2007; Lucey & Reay, 2004).

The purpose of this portfolio is to investigate the local, global and personal factors that appear to influence the school choices being made by parents in Australia and how they are contributing to the drift of students away from government schools. Having outlined in Section 2 a range of local factors that have operated in recent decades, and discussed in Section 3 a range of global factors at play in Australia and other western contexts, attention will turn in Section 4 to an investigation of a particular case of choice-making in a particular, unremarkable part of metropolitan Australia where real 'here and now' school choices have to be made every year by parents who seek to balance imperfect options against the many hopes, fears and aspirations they hold for their children.

SECTION 4

MAKING CHOICES

The point was made in Chapter 1 that the overall research effort to be developed through this portfolio would reflect the pragmatic paradigm, combining secondary and primary research to address questions about the drift of students away from government schools.

This section of the portfolio details the primary research that was conducted. This primary research will augment the secondary research discussed in Sections 2 and 3 to build a more complete picture of the Local-Global-Personal School-Choice Model introduced in Chapter 1 and illustrated in Figure 1.3.

The primary research specifically probes how parents' personal circumstances operate within the local and global milieu to arrive at school choices for their children. In particular, it investigates school choices made by a group of parents as their 12 year old children commenced secondary schooling at the start of 2007 in a range of government, Catholic and independent schools in Perth, Western Australia.

This section comprises three chapters: Methodology, Good Schools; and Choosing Schools.

The **Methodology** chapter details the rationale for the enquiry, the sample group, the approach taken to conduct the enquiry, development of the instrument that was used, and procedures employed in analysis of the data it yielded.

The **Good Schools** chapter draws on survey data and applies a broad lens to explore what parents look for when gauging the relative appeal of different secondary schools. Features that parents most readily associate with being a 'good' school are

likely to reflect the hopes, fears and aspirations that parents hold for their children, and hint at the part they expect schools can play in their fulfilment.

In the **Choosing Schools** chapter, the focus narrows to probe the decision-making process that respondents undertook when choosing a school for their own children. It draws on survey data to explore respondents' impressions of the secondary schools that they ultimately chose for their children, and circumstances that led to those school choices.

CONTEXT FOR THE ENQUIRY

It was noted in the introduction to this portfolio that schooling across Australia is administered by eight separate state and territory governments, each with funding and regulatory responsibilities within their own jurisdictions. While pervasive similarities relating to school provision exist across all states and territories – including the fact that the drift of students from government to non-government schools is occurring in all jurisdictions (see Figure 1.2) – important differences also apply. For this reason, the investigation within this portfolio focuses on secondary school provision in one state in particular, that is, in Western Australia.

An important and well-established feature of school provision in Western Australia is that parents have always been allowed to exercise a degree of choice about the schools their children attend. If parents do not like their local government school, they have always had the option of sending their children to a non-government school, as long as they are willing and able to pay the fees (Burke & Spaul, 2001). Also, the historical lack of school choice within the government sector through the application of school zones has moderated in Western Australia in recent decades and was discussed briefly in Chapter 2. Parents who have reservations about their local government school may now enrol their child in a government school outside their gazetted zone, so long as that school has vacancies (Forsey, 2001; Angus, 1998).

Since the 1970s, the range of non-government school options available to parents has exploded, initially due to the provision (and steadily increasing amounts) of public funds (Burke & Spaul, 2001; Karmel, 2001; Reid, 2005; Vickers, 2005) and more recently because a Commonwealth policy that limited the establishment of new schools was removed in 1996 (Vickers, 2005; Symes & Gulson, 2005). The public funding of non-government schools has not only enabled the establishment of many new non-government schools in the past thirty years (ABS, 2006), but has also enabled those schools to limit their fees, placing them within financial reach of many more Australian families than was previously the case (Kelley & Evans, 2004; Symes & Gulson, 2005; Vickers, 2005).

The net effect of local changes to education funding and governance at state and Commonwealth levels (Anderson, 1993; Angus 1998; Caldwell, 2005; DET, 2001; Karmel, 2001; Symes & Gulson, 2005; Vickers, 2005), combined with more global changes to the values, aspirations and fears of parents across the Western world (Apple 2001; Bosetti, 2005; Davies & Aurini, 2006; Forsey 2006; Hargreaves 2004; Jackson-May 2006; Keddle 2006; Walford 2006) is that the proportion of Australian children attending non-government schools has steadily grown over the past thirty years (ABS, 2006; Symes & Gulson, 2005).

The focus of the enquiry was three-fold: what factors had drawn parents to the school they ultimately chose for their child, the extent to which they felt free to choose from a range of school alternatives, and what they looked for as indicators of a good school.

CHAPTER FIVE: METHODOLOGY

OVERVIEW

The enquiry outlined in this chapter is a case study designed to probe the main factors influencing the secondary school choices made by a group of parents in metropolitan Perth at the start of 2007. This case study is central to this portfolio because it investigates and illuminates, through data collected from a sample of parents, how school choices are filtered or enhanced by personal circumstances.

A case study is an appropriate methodology to use for this enquiry because parents typically engage in school choice-making by comparing the virtues of one school against those of another (Forsey, 2006; Groundwater-Smith, 2001, Holmes, 2005). Further, the schools they include in this comparison are typically schools that are local to their place of residence, so are typically located in neighbouring suburbs (English, 2005; Holmes, 2005, 2006).

Skate (1988, cited in Punch 1998, p. 145) defines a case study as follows:

A case study is a study of a bounded system, emphasizing the unity and wholeness of that system, but confining the attention to those aspects that are relevant to the research problem at the time

In the case of this enquiry, the boundary for the study was the physical location of all eight participating secondary schools: within a five kilometre radius of each other in a precinct of metropolitan Perth. Their physical proximity meant that the decision to send a child to one of the participating schools necessarily entailed by-passing other schools participating in this study. This created the opportunity to compare parental responses to several schools that were each others' direct competitor and enabled the investigation to probe the reality of weighing one authentic school option against another.

According to Bell (1999, pp. 10-11):

The great strength of the case-study method is that it allows the researcher to concentrate on a specific instance or situation and to identify, or attempt to identify, the various interactive processes at work.

The point of interaction that was of greatest interest in this study was how parents weighed the relative merits and feasibility of one participating school against those of another participating school. Other points of interaction that were of interest in this case study included the question of how parents' views regarding what makes a 'good' school interact with their impressions about the schools they ultimately chose for their children, the question of how the responses of parents who chose one school-type interacted with the responses of parents who chose a different school-type, and the question of how parents' personal circumstances interacted with their preferences to enhance or constrain their options.

A recurring criticism of case studies is that their findings cannot be generalized. While Bell (1999), Denscombe (2007) and Punch (1998) agree that caution needs to be taken with claims of generalizability from case studies, they all point to situations in which claims beyond the particular case may be warranted. To make this point, Punch cites the use of case study as a pedagogical technique in law and medicine and argues that if each case was entirely unique, there would be no transfer of knowledge from one case to the next. He also distinguishes between the levels of confidence derived from scientific experimentation and the comparatively tentative naturalistic generalizations which may be supported through case study.

Denscombe (2007, p. 42) notes that "the extent to which findings from the case study can be generalised to other examples in the class depends on how far the case study example is similar to others of its type".

While there is no intention to claim broad generalization of findings from this case study, the particular 'case' of schools being studied here meets the 'similarity of type' test to which Denscombe refers (above). This particular case comprises a typical mixture of government, Catholic and independent schools located in a typical Australian metropolitan precinct. Indeed, a key criterion for choosing the particular precinct that makes up this case was its typicality and the fact that it did not include suburbs with extreme levels of wealth or poverty.

An important factor limiting claims of generalizability from this case, however, stems from the possibility of selection bias among respondents. No mechanism was used to gauge whether the proportion of responses received from particular sub-groups (such as non-English speaking parents, single parents, Aboriginal parents or low-income parents) reflected the proportion these sub-groups represented within and across the participating schools.

The data-collection instrument used in the case study was a small-scale quantitative survey mainly comprising Likert-scale and forced-choice items (Punch, 2003) along with provision for respondents to volunteer additional open-ended comments. Qualitative techniques for data collection are more typical of case studies, but according to Bell (1999, p. 10), "no method is excluded" from use in a case study. Quantitative surveys enable direct comparison of one variable with another and exploration of similarities and differences across respondents (Creswell, 2003; Denscombe, 2007).

The essential idea of the quantitative survey is to measure a group of people on the variables of interest and to see how those variables are related to each other across the sample studied. (Punch, 2003, p. 22)

While the range of data likely to emerge from written-response quantitative surveys will generally be limited to the range of issues raised in survey items, a contrasting advantage of quantitative surveys is that they help researchers to gauge the relative

importance of key variables and to determine the quantum of feeling that individual respondents hold for various issues (Creswell, 2003; Punch 2003). The capacity to gauge relative importance was an important factor in selecting a quantitative survey as the key means of data collection in this case study because the process of school choice is understood to involve a fair amount of trading one priority off against another (Campbell, 2005; Freund, 2001; Gewirtz, 2004). The inclusion of space for respondents to offer additional comments also afforded respondents the opportunity to raise issues that may not have been anticipated in the design of the survey.

Another important feature of surveys is that they offer a cost and time-efficient way to collect data from a relatively large number of respondents (Denscombe, 2007). With respect to this case study, this particular feature made it possible to canvass the views of many more parents than would have been possible through interviews or other researcher-intensive methods of data collection.

The analysis of data arising from the survey was based on descriptive statistics in which various factors and groups were compared with each other to detect patterns (Denscombe, 2007). Key findings and patterns were then related back to secondary research discussed in Sections 2 and 3.

Relating to the preparation and conduct of a quantitative survey, Punch (2003, p. 23) articulates “four major decisions” that researchers need to be make. Essentially the decisions relate to:

- Research Questions - what question/s the study will set out to resolve,
- Data Collection - how data will be collected in terms of instruments and procedures,
- Sample Group - from whom the data will be collected; and
- Data Analysis - how the data will be analysed to address the question/s the study set out to resolve.

The above sequence of research decisions has been adopted as the sequence for elements of this methodology chapter.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Clearly, more and more Australian parents are by-passing their local government secondary school in favour of a fee-paying non-government secondary school, presumably because they believe the non-government school they have chosen for their child is better in some way and that it warrants the additional expense. What remains less clear, however, is why and what parents are looking for, attracted to and/or wishing to avoid when choosing a secondary school for their child.

Specific questions addressed through the enquiry are as follows:

- What do parents perceive to make a 'good' school?
- What level of agency do parents feel able to exercise in relation to school choice?
- What factors limit or enhance parents' levels of agency?
- To what extent do the actual school choices that parents make match their image of a 'good' school?
- How do the responses of parents who choose one school-type compare with the responses of parents who choose a different school-type?

It was anticipated that when responses to the above questions were analysed in the context of the local and global aspects of school choice explored in Sections 2 and 3 respectively, a clearer picture would emerge in relation to the broader quest of this portfolio. That is, why the drift of students from government schools is occurring, what trigger factors may be within the scope of governments to change, and how governments might go about effecting such changes to ensure the long-term viability of government secondary schooling in Australia.

DATA COLLECTION

Details about *how data were collected* go hand-in-glove with details about *from whom data were collected*, but for the sake of organisational clarity, it has been necessary to focus one at a time on each of these research decisions. Reflecting the sequence of research decisions articulated by Punch (2003) and listed earlier, an account of *from whom* and (later) *data analysis* will follow this description of *how data were collected*.

Data Collection: Instrument

As stated before, the chosen method of data collection for this case study was a small-scale written-response Parent Survey designed to investigate the factors that influence secondary school choices, particularly with respect to what constitutes a good school (what parents look for, are attracted to and/or avoid) and the extent to which their responses indicate a strong sense of agency.

A copy of the Parent Survey is provided in Appendix 1. It was printed on A3 size paper, folded in half to form a four-page, A4 pamphlet with pages 2 and 3 sharing the center-fold.

Taking counsel from Punch (2003), items within the survey closely matched the case study questions identified on the previous page. Reflecting the fact that the case study is designed to contribute to a broader research effort across the whole portfolio, the items also draw on issues identified in prior research previously reported in Sections 2 and 3.

The survey comprised four parts:

- FAMILY BACKGROUND – income, parental education and family size.
- HAVING CHOICES – sense of agency, age/stage of child when the school was chosen and any factors that limited their options.

- YOUR YEAR 8 CHILD'S SCHOOL – Likert-scale items asking parents to reflect on the school in relation to thirty factors pertaining to Appearances, Reputation, Logistics, Curriculum, Family Values and School Approach and Values.
- GOOD SCHOOLS – revisited the same thirty factors, but this time in response to "what factors are key indicators of a GOOD school".

Survey Part 1: Family Background

Questions 1 to 4 inclusive provided a demographic platform for the analysis of school-specific questions that followed in the survey.

Research consistently shows that Australian parents with high levels of education and income are more likely than low-education, low-income families to send their children to non-government schools (Beavis 2005; Kelley and Evans 2005; Symes and Gulson 2005). Further, parents who themselves attended non-government schools are more likely to send their children to non-government schools (Kelley and Evans 2005).

Question 1 asked parents to indicate their family income as one of five bands: *Under \$30,000; \$30,000 - \$70,000; \$70,000 - \$100,000; \$100,000 - \$140,000; and Over \$140,000*. This question was included to determine whether a positive correlation between high family-income and choosing non-government schools was evident among the parents participating in this enquiry.

Question 2 focused on parents' education and asked Parent 1 and Parent 2 to separately indicate which educational institutions they had attended, if only for a short time. The options included the following: *primary school; government high school; private high school; university; technical college*. This question was coded as two separate items for each parent: school background (government *versus* non-government) and further education (school *versus* university *versus* technical college).

Question 3 asked parents about the number of siblings their Year 8 child had because the trend of reduced family size is most prevalent among middle class Australia (McKay 2007). McKay associates this phenomenon with a hovering style of parenting akin to the concerted cultivation described by Lareau (2002). It was anticipated that a link may exist between family size and school choice.

Question 4 asked whether this was the first time respondents had sent a child to this particular school. This question was included because the original intent of this research was to follow-up with a second survey later in the school year to determine the extent to which parents' initial impressions and expectations of the school matched their experience of the school over time. Past experience with the school would colour parents' impressions and expectations, so it was important to have data on this issue prior to follow-up. The decision was made to focus only on data from this initial survey, however, so Question 4 was largely superfluous to the analysis reported here.

Survey Part 2: Having Choices

Questions 5, 6 and 7 focus on levels of agency (Bourdieu, cited in Davies and Aurini 2006) with respect to school choice. Beavis (2005) found consistently high levels of agency among Australian parents with respect to school choice, whereas Campbell (2005) claims a degree of reluctance among some Australian parents who are opting for non-government schools, suggesting that the reason some of them are taking this path is that a decline in the quality of government schools has left them with few alternatives.

Question 5 asked parents about the extent to which they felt they had a choice and offered four response options: *No choice*; *More than one option*; *Several options*; and *Lots of options*.

Question 7 further probed this issue in relation to five issues that had been identified in the research literature as possible constraints to parental choice:

costs, waiting lists, competition for specialist programs, daily travel requirements and child's own preferences. Parents were asked to indicate the extent to which each of these factors limited the range of school choices available to them, using a three-point scale: *This was not a limitation for us*; *This limited our options a bit*; and *This was a huge limitation for us*. Respondents were also invited to specify any other factors that limited their choice.

Question 6 was qualitatively different, focusing on the timing of parents' choice-making. There were several reasons for this question. Firstly, long waiting lists for some of the more prestigious non-government schools requires that, to guarantee a place at the school, parents have to register their child with the school (which includes paying a non-returnable fee). Some parents take this step when their children are still babies, which implies engagement with the choice-making process long before their child's particular needs or talents can be known or have a bearing on the decision. Secondly, in an effort to attract students, many secondary schools target the parents of final-year primary students in neighbouring primary schools with marketing campaigns (English 2006; Holmes 2006). It was unclear, however, whether the timing of these marketing campaigns coincides with the timing of the choices made by a majority of parents, nor whether patterns of difference on this issue applied across various groups.

Survey Part 3: Your Year 8 Child's School

This section contained only one question, the multi-item Question 8 which probed parents' impressions about their own Year 8 child's school: things they like (a lot or a bit) and/or things they do not especially like. The purpose for this question was to probe the extent to which parents across these schools, plus parents in each school group, were positive about the schools to which they sent their children as they embarked on their secondary school careers. It was assumed in this question that parents' choice-making was likely to follow school factors they found attractive and shy away from factors they perceived to be draw-backs. It could not be assumed that the school parents ultimately chose was the school with the most attractions because

their personal circumstances may have precluded such a choice. It was further anticipated that this question would reveal the extent to which parents in each school group were prepared to (or forced to) compromise the factors they like or dislike about a school when making their choice.

Question 8 asked parents to rate the relative desirability of their own Year 8 child's school in relation to thirty school factors which had been derived from the research literature. The thirty school factors were organized into five groups: Appearances, Reputation, Logistics, Curriculum, Family Values and School Approach and Values. Table 5.1 below details research antecedents and/or the rationale for inclusion of each factor within the list of thirty.

Table 5.1: Antecedents for Thirty School Factors

Survey Wording of School Factor	Rationale for Inclusion in Parent Survey	Relevant Research
APPEARANCES		
Appearance of students	McLeod and Yates (2007) found that students in secondary schools are acutely aware of the importance attributed by schools to personal their appearance. They also interpret the reintroduction of school uniforms in government schools as an effort to arrest the decline of government school reputations and to demonstrate a greater level of compliance and discipline among their students. Other researchers who identified student appearance and the use of uniforms as factors that reflect on the school included	English, 2005; Forsey, 2006; Harney, 2006; Holmes, 2006; McLeod & Yates, 2007
Appearance of staff	This was included to further explore the importance attributed to personal appearance, in particular, the extent to which the reported expectations relating to the appearance of students were extended to include staff.	Nil
School brochures	Schools routinely commit time and resources to the preparation, printing and distribution of brochures, so this factor was included to gauge the extent to which such materials (and the information they contained) influenced the choices parents made.	Harney, 2006
Facilities at the school	Numerous Australian researchers commented on the relative age and shabbiness of many government schools compared to the opulence of many non-government schools. Others noted the relative ease with which non-government schools can raise special-purpose funds (through government grants and private bequests) to install new facilities while government schools must join lengthy waiting lists for upgrades and improvements. Forsey (2006) quoted several parents who expressed concern about the age and quality of facilities at their local government school.	Angus, 2001; Bonnor & Caro, 2007; Campbell, 2005; Cannold, 2007; Forsey, 2006; Potts, 2004; Symes & Gulson, 2005; Vickers 2005; WASSEA, 2007
School appearance – buildings, gardens, layout	Related to the above factor, but broadened to include care and maintenance of facilities and the aesthetic appearance of the school.	English, 2005; Harney 2005; Holmes, 2006

Table 5.1: Antecedents for Thirty School Factors (continued)

Survey Wording of School Factor	Rationale for Inclusion in Parent Survey	Relevant Research
REPUTATION		
Reputation of student behaviour	<p>Student behaviour and discipline was a prominent factor in the research literature, not only in relation to disruptive classes, but also bullying and/or a sense of personal vulnerability in schools with a reputation for poor student behaviour (Forsey 2006). This is a potentially significant factor separating government and non-government schools in Australia because unlike non-government schools, government schools are required to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • accept 'all comers' within their schools (Reid 2006); and • report in the public domain the number of suspensions and exclusions enacted every year (DES 2001) 	Araujo, 2007; Beavis, 2004; Bonnor & Caro, 2007; DES, 2001; English, 2005; Forsey, 2006; Holmes, 2006; Jackson-May, 2006; Keddie, 2007; McLeod & Yates, 2007; Reid, 2005; Ryan, 2005; Vickers, 2005; Walford, 2006.
Media reports about this school (or this type of school)	Several articles reviewed from the literature were prepared by marketing experts with advice to schools about managing their media image and their reputation in the community.	Harney, 2006; Hiatt, 2006, 2007; Holmes, 2006
School's track record in Tertiary Entrance Exams (TEE)	Research shows that a school's record of student achievement is prominent among the factors parents consider in a school. While parents seek a range of indicators in relation to student achievement (Davies and Aurini 2006), a key mechanism supporting between-school comparison in Western Australia is performance in the exit examinations undertaken by secondary students in their final year of schooling – the TEE. These exams have a tradition of prestige and importance (Angus <i>et al.</i> 2002) and each school's results in the TEE are routinely published in the state's only daily newspaper (Marks 2004).	Angus <i>et al.</i> 2002; Beavis, 2004; Bosetti, 2005; Campbell, 2005; Campbell & Sherrington, 2004; Davies & Aurini, 2006; English, 2005; Forsey, 2006; Jackson-May, 2006; MacIntosh, 2007; Marks 2004; Rothman, 2003.
School reputation – according to "inside" information from other parents/friends	Several researchers emphasise the marketing power of 'word of mouth' commendations and criticisms, and the need for schools to carefully manage their reputation.	English, 2005; Hiatt, 2006; Holmes, 2006; Jackson-May 2006.
School's track record in Vocational Education and Training (VET)	While the TEE traditionally dominates the curriculum for academically-oriented students, VET courses are cast as the pathway for students seeking practical and vocational careers. Results in VET are published alongside TEE results, but they attract less attention in the media and are not attributed the same level of prestige (Marks 2004). Part of the rationale for outcomes-based education in WA was that it would enable a broadening of the senior secondary curriculum to incorporate VET courses, but this was widely resisted and perceived as a diminution of rigour (Donnelly 2004).	Keeves, 2006; Marks, 2004; Rothman, 2003
Reputation of teachers	The quality of the teachers, their pedagogical skills, levels of commitment and the depth of relationships they build with students and parents were all identified as factors parents consider. Jackson-May (2006) suggests that while some parents refer to 'school achievement' as an important factor, this is actually a proxy for the level of connectedness they feel with the school's teachers.	DES, 2001; English, 2005; Forsey, 2006; Hargreaves, 2003; Holmes, 2006; Jackson-May 2006; Townsend, 2005
Reputation of principal	Several researchers have emphasised the pivotal role of the principal in leading (beyond merely managing) their schools. Holmes (2006) highlights the importance of also managing the reputation of the school in the community, and notes that this task normally falls to the school's principal.	Hargreaves, 2003; Fullan, 2001; Fullan, Hill & Crevola, 2006; Holmes, 2006; WASSEA, 2007.

Table 5.1: Antecedents for Thirty School Factors (continued)

Survey Wording of School Factor	Rationale for Inclusion in Parent Survey	Relevant Research
LOGISTICS		
Proximity to home	While limited reference was made to this factor in the literature in terms of influencing parents' choices, the oft-repeated term 'local' school implies that proximity to home could be among the compact of factors that parents consider when choosing a school. A related issue is Lubienksi's (2006) finding that middle class parents are more likely (than working class parents) to move house to be near a school of choice.	Campbell, 2005; Cannold, 2007; English, 2006; Jackson-May, 2006; Lubienksi 2006
Easy transport getting to/from school	As with proximity to home, it was anticipated that the convenience (or inconvenience) associated with getting to/from school each day could be a consideration for parents, despite the fact that no reference was made to this factor in the research.	Nil
School choices of child's friends	Walford (2006) found that working class children in the UK were more likely (than middle-class children) to be allowed to choose their own secondary school, and further, that a key consideration among those working class children was the schools their friends were planning to attend.	Walford, 2006; Forsey, 2006
CURRICULUM		
Extra-curricular offerings, especially sport	Anecdotal evidence suggests that extra-curricula sporting programs – especially for boys – are contributing to parents choosing non-government schools (Albert, 2005). Such mainstream opportunities are additional to specialist programs conducted for select students, and are often linked to excellent equipment and facilities, and building school-identity through after-school competitions (Penney 2004).	Albert, 2005; Keddle, 2007; Penney 2004
Extra-curricular offerings, particularly art/music	Several schools participating in this research offered arts/music extra-curricula opportunities such as instrumental instruction, school orchestras/bands and annual school plays. While little reference was made to such offerings in the literature, several participating schools highlighted facilities for such activities such as theatres, music rooms and specialist art rooms. These opportunities and facilities are likely to be attractive to parents and their children.	Albert, 2005
Specialist programs available	One approach to attracting and motivating secondary students in recent decades has been to offer specialist programs in arts, sport, technology, academic streams, languages, etc.. Evidence from the UK suggests a positive effect on school achievement in schools with 'specialisms' (DfES 2004, Penney 2004). Numerous WA government schools run specialist programs relating to academic, music, arts, languages and various sports – though sporting programs are not attributed the prestige of operating within the Education Department's Gifted and Talented Education (GATE) program. One Catholic school participating in this enquiry also conducts two specialist sports programs. At the other end of the spectrum, several schools also provide specialist programs for students with additional needs in relation to learning difficulties and/or English as a Second Language.	Araujo, 2007; Angus, 1998; DET, 2007; Groundwater-Smith, 2001; WASSEA 2007
Range and quality of the mainstream curriculum provided	While specialist programs and extra-curricula activities are potentially attractive factors, past research shows that parents are more concerned with the breadth, depth and quality of the mainstream curriculum (Beavis 2004, Forsey 2006).	Beavis, 2004; Bosetti, 2006; Campbell, 2005; Davies & Aurini, 2006; Forsey, 2006;
Opportunities to pursue individual interests and talents	Jackson-May (2006) found that while parents cited their concern with school achievement, their major interest was the extent to which attention would be given to their child's needs, interests and talents. This factor reflects the breadth of the mainstream curriculum and the range of extra-curricula opportunities (such as debating teams, solar-car challenges, and visiting experts) provided for students.	Davies & Aurini, 2006; Jackson-May, 2006; Ryan, 2005
Range of camps and trips	While this factor was not mentioned in the literature, it is a feature of secondary schooling that consumes teachers' time and effort, and was included here to gauge the extent to which such opportunities influenced the choices parents made.	Nil

Table 5.1: Antecedents for Thirty School Factors (continued)

Survey Wording of School Factor	Rationale for Inclusion in Parent Survey	Relevant Research
FAMILY VALUES		
Family tradition – previous generations attended the same or similar schools	It is not unusual for parents to prefer their children to attend the same school (or the same sort of school) as they attended themselves. Kelley and Evans (2004) found this to be especially true among Catholic families.	Kelley & Evans 2004, McCarthy, 2007; Ryan, 2006.
Notion of “old school tie” – connections that will be useful for our child in later life	While the notion of the ‘old school tie’ was not prominent in the research literature, it was central to Swan’s (2005) thesis about diminishing egalitarianism in Australia and continues to be evident in certain business circles (Nicholls Society 1989).	Campbell, 2005; Nicholls Society, 1989; Swan, 2005
SCHOOL APPROACH AND VALUES		
Single-sex <i>versus</i> co-educational classes	While this factor was not prominent in the literature, it was a key characteristic of two of the participating schools for this enquiry, and single-sex classes are being trialled in selected government schools, so it warranted inclusion among the list of thirty school factors in Questions 8 and 9. It was anticipated that single-sex schooling could be considered as a positive or a negative school factor.	Forsey, 2006
Religious affiliation	Kelley and Evans (2004) found that religious affiliation was a prominent factor in school selection among Catholic families, and was of little significance among families who chose government or non-Catholic, non-government schools. It was anticipated that religious affiliation could be considered as a positive or a negative school factor.	Kelley & Evans, 2004; Beavis, 2004; Forsey, 2006.
Inclusion of students from diverse cultural backgrounds and family circumstances	A key characteristic of government schools is that they must cater for all students, irrespective of linguistic, financial and cultural circumstances. Accordingly, such schools are typically more diverse than many non-government schools which are able to be selective. This factor was included to gauge the extent to which diversity versus homogeneity is considered a strength or a weakness in the eight participating schools.	Campbell, 2005; Cooley, 2006; Forsey, 2006; Reid, 2005a; Swan, 2005; Vickers, 2005.
High achievement is expected and valued	Several researches found that parents are concerned that their children’s schools promote diligence and a culture of high expectations pervades students’ daily learning experiences. This was linked to the commodification of skills and abilities, and the idea that a good school yields good results which lead to a good job and an assured future.	Araujo, 2007; Davies, & Aurini, 2006; Forsey, 2006; Keddle, 2007; Popkewitz, 2007; Ryan, 2005
Students are encouraged/allowed to be themselves at this school – not to always conform	Forsey (2006) recounts the experience of one student who moved from a non-government to a government school because he felt overly restricted with regard to his appearance and self-expression. Several researchers refer to the higher levels of conformity required of students in non-government schools, but also that such traditions and rituals are highly valued by some parents who send their children to such schools.	Beavis, 2004; Forsey, 2006; Keddle, 2007; Leech, 2006; McLeod & Yates, 2006; Ryan, 2005
Confidence that the school will listen to (and deal properly with) any concerns that I raise	Numerous researchers found that middle-class parents, especially those who choose fee-paying schools, view themselves as paying customers and have a clear expectation that their needs and concerns will be promptly addressed by teachers and school administrators. In contrast, government schooling is criticised as being unresponsive; that teachers are unable or unwilling to listen to or attend to their concerns (DES 2001).	Bosetti, 2005; Bradley, Draca & Green, 2004; Davies & Aurini, 2006; DES, 2001; Forsey, 2006; Holmes, 2006; MacIntosh, 2007; Patty, 2007; Ryan, 2005
Confidence that my child’s individual needs/talents will be recognised and supported	This factor is linked to that above, but instead of the focus being parents’ concerns, this targets students’ needs and talents.	Araujo, 2007; Bosetti, 2005; Bradley, Draca & Green, 2004; Jackson-May, 2006; MacIntosh, 2007; Marks, 2004; Reid, 2005a, 2005b; Ryan, 2005; Vickers, 2005; Walford, 2006

All thirty factors from Table 5.1 (above) were worded in Question 8 such that a negative, neutral or positive response was equally plausible, logical and grammatically correct. Parents were asked to respond to each factor using a Likert-scale which offered five options, placed left-to-right in the following sequence: *Drawback of this school; Irrelevant or don't know; I like this more than I dislike it; Quite attractive factor; and Extremely attractive factor.*

The fact that the Likert scale used in Question 8 comprised only one negative option while there were three progressively more positive options on the other side of the scale exemplifies the pragmatic paradigm that underpins this enquiry. The Parent Survey was conducted early in the school year within weeks of respondents' children starting their secondary school careers. Given this timing and the fact that school choice can be an anxious chore for parents (Vickers 2005; English 2005), it was important to not undermine their choice of school by drawing attention to any shortcomings they might feel about the school. Further, it was assumed that respondents had chosen the school in question because, overall, they liked more aspects of that school than they disliked. Therefore, the scale was designed to gauge the *extent* to which parents liked what they knew (or had heard) in relation to each factor, but also provided scope for them to say so if they had reservations, if they did not know or considered a factor irrelevant.

The decision was made to combine 'irrelevant' and 'don't know' in the scale because, in either case, the factor in question would not have been a major consideration in the choice-making process. The assumption was made that if a particular factor was considered important to parents, they would make a point of finding out about it. Having found out about or formed an impression of that factor, they would respond positively or negatively – or indicate that it was largely irrelevant. At the end of Question 8, respondents were invited to add any comments they wished to make.

Survey Part 4: Good Schools

This final part of the survey was designed to probe respondents' concept of a 'good' school, independently of the school they had actually chosen for their child.

The reason for exploring 'good' schools in parallel with what parents like/dislike about their own child's school is the assumption that the schools to which parents send their children do not always reflect, in every way, their image of a 'good' school. As noted by Friedman (1955) the way markets function is that customers weigh a range of wants and needs when selecting products and services from those available to them. The things they would *like* to buy reflect the things they consider most desirable or important, whereas the things they *actually* buy may differ due to various constraints including cost, availability and convenience. A fundamental characteristic of the free market is that customers with the least choice-making obstacles (financially, intellectually, ideologically, geographically, etc.) are best placed to match what they buy with the things they most want, like and/or need (Holmes, 2006b; Volmer, 2002). In the context of the local-global-personal school choice model in Figure 1.3, parents facing minimal obstacles are not required to filter-out preferred options due to their personal circumstances so are likely to achieve a close match between their image of a 'good' school and the school to which they send their child. Parents with comparatively more choice-making obstacles must negotiate a more stringent filter and may find it harder to achieve a close match.

Part 4 of the survey comprised only one question, **Question 9** in which the thirty school factors that appeared in Question 8 were repeated in a table and respondents were asked to select the three (only) factors that indicated a good school. This forced-choice approach (Punch 2003) was intended to distill the broad range of factors into a handful of absolute essentials along the lines of "I'm prepared to forego X and Y, but a good school must never allow Z to slip". Respondents were also invited to add comments at the end of Question 9.

DATA COLLECTION: PROCEDURE

Pilot Study

A pilot-study was conducted in January 2007 using eight people who were known to the researcher and were known to have children entering Year 8 in 2007 at schools other than those involved in this enquiry. Two pilot participants completed the survey in the presence of the researcher, while the remainder completed it by themselves and later returned it to the researcher. In each case, pilot participants were given a brief outline of the purpose of the enquiry, and after they completed the survey, they were asked to comment on item comfort and clarity, and time taken to complete the Parent Survey.

Pilot participants took 7-10 minutes to complete the survey. Two pilot participants sought confirmation that Question 9 required the selection of not more than three factors, but all participants ultimately and independently interpreted the instructions for this question correctly, so the only modification made to the Parent Survey as a result piloting was to add 'only' in brackets in Question 9's instructions to emphasise the forced choice entailed in this question.

Main Investigation

Each participating school agreed to distribute a survey package to every student in their Year 8 cohort in the same manner as they usually distribute newsletters to parents. In some cases, this entailed mail-outs to students' home address via Australia Post, while others handed material to students and instructed them to pass it on to their parents.

Prior to distribution of the Parent Survey, each school included an item in their regular school newsletters advising parents about the forthcoming survey and encouraging them to participate. As the deadline for survey completion drew near, schools also followed-up with an item in a subsequent newsletter, reminding parents about the survey and encouraging them to complete it.

In the fifth week of the 2007 school year (after the usual tumult of starting a new school year at a new school had subsided) survey packages were hand-delivered to a nominated person in each school in sufficient quantity to ensure one package for each Year 8 student.

Survey packages comprised a large envelope containing a copy of the Parent Survey (pre-coded with an anonymous school identifier), a cover letter (see Appendix 2) and a reply-paid envelope.

Beyond distribution of the survey package and encouraging parents to complete the Parent Survey, no further tasks were requested from the participating schools.

The cover letter in the survey package and an introductory paragraph at the front of the Parent Survey asked parents to complete the survey and return it to the researcher in the reply-paid envelope by Easter (Friday 6th April 2007). This provided a turn-around time of five weeks.

SAMPLE GROUP

The sample group comprised the parents of Year 8 children at eight secondary schools located within a five-kilometre radius of each other in metropolitan Perth. The target population within that sample comprised the parents of 1,139 students.

In 2007, Year 8 was the first year of secondary schooling in most Western Australian secondary schools. The exodus from government schools is most pronounced at the point of transition from primary to secondary schooling (see Figure 1.1), suggesting that the complex of school-choice factors that are leading to this exodus may be most potent at this point of transition (Cannold, 2007; Forsey, 2006; Rothman, 2003). Accordingly, this case study targeted parents who had recently chosen a secondary school for their child as he/she commenced his/her secondary schooling.

The decision was made to target parents who had already chosen their child's secondary school (rather than parents still engaged in the process of choosing) because it eliminated the risk of data being contaminated by the choices parents *would like to* make when the aim was to investigate the choices that parents *actually do* make.

It has already been stated that all participating schools were located within a five-kilometre radius of each other in a precinct of metropolitan Perth comprising several established suburbs. The relevant suburbs were targeted for this enquiry because they have mixed socio-economic profiles but do not include concentrations of extreme wealth nor poverty.

Due to the shared proximity of the eight participating schools, decisions that parents made to send their child to one school among this group of schools implies the decision to *not* send him/her to other schools within the group. In effect, this group of schools were each other's main competition in efforts to attract students, so school choices made by the parents involved in this enquiry were likely to have involved comparisons being drawn among two or more of these particular schools.

Twelve secondary schools are located within the target precinct and comprise a mix of four government, four Catholic and four independent schools. Four weeks before the end of the 2006 school year, the principals of all twelve schools were approached by telephone and then follow-up email with a research proposal and an invitation to participate in this case study. An incentive offered to each principal to support participation was an undertaking to provide the principal with findings relevant to his/her school. Also, principals were given the opportunity to review the Parent Survey before confirming their schools' participation.

The principals of three schools verbally declined participation: one due to changes of administrative personnel between the 2006 and 2007 school years; one because it is

a K-12 school and loses more students than it gains in the primary-to-secondary transition, and the other due to prior research commitments. The principal of a fourth school did not respond despite two follow-up calls.

By the start of 2007, the principals of eight schools (three government, two Catholic and three independent) had confirmed their willingness to support this enquiry and for their schools to participate.

The overall mix of the schools (in terms of school age, fee structure, school size and year levels) was well balanced, with most school-types represented in proportions that are typical of the Perth metropolitan area. Two of the schools were single-sex schools catering for girls. It would have been preferable for both genders to be represented among the single-sex schools. One of the schools that declined participation was a single-sex boys' school.

Table 5.2: Profiles of the Eight Participating Schools

School Identifier	Number Yr 8: 2007	Sector	Gender	Age of School	Fees Yr8: 2007	Year Levels
Gov't #1	100-150	government	co-ed	over 40 yrs	Free	8 to 12
Gov't #2	100-150	government	co-ed	over 40 yrs	Free	8 to 12
Gov't #3	150-200	government	co-ed	over 40 yrs	Free	8 to 12
CathCo-ed	150-200	Catholic	co-ed	over 100 yrs	\$2,500 to \$3,500	8 to 12 separate primary school
CathSingle	150-200	Catholic	single-sex (girls)	over 100 yrs	\$2,500 to \$3,500	8 to 12
IndCoed#1	100-150	independent	co-ed	less than 20 yrs	\$2,500 to \$3,500	K-12
IndCoed#2	<50	independent	co-ed	less than 20 yrs	\$2,500 to \$3,500	K-12
IndSingle	200-250	independent	single-sex (girls)	over 100 yrs	over \$12,000	K-12 plus boarding facilities
Overall	1,139					

Broad profiles of the eight schools are provided above in Table 5.2. To preserve each school's anonymity, exact details such as the number of students and the schools' years of establishment have not been specified.

The particular School Identifier code used in Table 5.2 for each participating school will be used from hereon in main text, tables and graphs throughout the portfolio.

Additional information about each school follows. Quotations provided below have been sourced from the schools' web-sites, but to protect the identity of the schools, individual citations have not been provided.

Government School #1 describes itself as a "multicultural learning community, highly regarded for its academic, sporting and artistic achievements". While parents are encouraged to make a voluntary contribution of up to \$230 per year, there are no compulsory fees for this school. Its list of Department-endorsed programs includes English as a second language, specialist arts, full-fee paying overseas students, Aboriginal school-based traineeships, literacy and numeracy support and vocational education and training in schools. The Deputy Principal of this school noted the high proportion of non-English speaking background (NESB) students at this school. This school maintains an integrated Yr 8-12 structure: it does not run a dedicated Middle School for Yr 8-9 students. The school has a uniform, comprising a selection of neat but casual mix-and-match items from which students must select. Over the past four years, this school's student numbers have dropped by over twenty percent, most noticeably in the lower secondary years. It is noteworthy that Gov't#2 claims to draw students from this school's suburb.

Government School #2 describes itself as a "multi-cultural secondary school made up of over 55 different cultures" with most students drawn from neighbouring suburbs, one of which is the suburb in which Gov't#1 is located. While parents are encouraged to make a voluntary contribution of up to \$230 per year, there are no compulsory fees for this school. This school's uniform is made up of a selection of neat but casual

mix-and-match items from which students must select. Its student numbers have risen slightly (by about nine percent) over the past four years. Prospective Year 7 students for this school participate in a year-long transition program and, when they start Year 8, they go into a Yr 8-9 Middle School which offers “smaller class sizes” and “an integrated team environment”. Recent refurbishments at this school focused on design and technology facilities for its “award-winning Vocational Education and Training team”. Its list of Department-endorsed programs includes English as a second language, learning with information and communication technologies (ICTs), literacy and numeracy support, Aboriginal school-based traineeships, single gender classes trial and vocational education and training in schools.

Government School #3 describes itself as “one of the premier schools in Western Australia”. In contrast to the other government schools, the absence of multiculturalism in this school’s self-portrayal is noteworthy. As with all other government schools, parents are encouraged to pay a voluntary contribution of up to \$230 per year but there are no compulsory fees. It also has a uniform made up of neat but casual mix-and-match items from which students must select. This school is bigger than Gov’t#1 and Gov’t#2 combined, and it has grown by eight percent over the past four years. Gov’t#3 it is now over-subscribed. Students living within the school’s gazetted local area or who gain a place into its specialist programs are guaranteed enrolment, but students who live outside that gazetted local area must wait for vacancies. The suburbs surrounding this school (comprising its gazetted local area) reflect relatively high socio-economic circumstances when compared with suburbs surrounding Gov’t#1 and Gov’t#2. This school has also undergone major re-development in recent years: nearly all of its existing facilities are less than five years old. Year 8 students entering this school attend a dedicated Middle School for two years, progressing to the Senior School at Year 10. Its list of Department-endorsed programs includes English as a second language, Aboriginal school-based traineeships, literacy and numeracy support, full fee-paying overseas students, specialist programs in languages and the arts, and vocational education and training in schools.

Catholic Co-educational School describes itself as “one of the most culturally diverse schools in Western Australia ... with students from over 68 different cultures”. This school formed in the 1980s through amalgamation of two adjoining single-sex Catholic schools which were over 100 years old. Compulsory fees are payable for this school. It also has a uniform comprising neat mix-and-match items for summer and blazer with tie for winter. As a low-fee school, the annual fee charged for Year 8 at this school is \$2,500 - \$3,500. An administratively separate primary school, which shares the same name and school board, operates on a separate campus in the same suburb. CathCo-ed emphasises multiculturalism alongside its Catholic ethos, and accepts students of different non-Christian and Christian faiths. Religious education is a compulsory area of the curriculum at this (and all other Catholic) schools. This school also provides specialist programs for English as a second language, two areas of sport, and caters for overseas students through affiliation with Australian Education International.

Catholic Single-sex School is one of the state’s oldest schools, describing itself as a “Catholic Secondary ... with a tradition of service to others and the pursuit of academic, cultural and sporting excellence”. While the school is old and its grounds are small, it has undergone significant renovation and property acquisition in recent years, so while its facilities are not lavish, it is well-equipped. Compulsory fees are payable for this low-fee school; the annual fee charged for Year 8 is \$2,500 - \$3,500. This school is not formally linked to any primary schools, but many of its students are drawn from Catholic and government primary schools located within the five kilometre radius that is the target precinct of this enquiry. CathSingle is oversubscribed and maintains a waiting list. The enrolment procedure includes parents and the student completing a satisfactory interview with the principal. The school’s compulsory and strictly-enforced uniform changes for winter and summer, and includes a blazer and tie. As is the case in all Catholic schools, religious education is necessarily studied as a ninth learning area within the curriculum at this school. This school offers a

range of extra-curricula activities, but the only specialist programs referred to in its website relate to literacy and numeracy support.

Independent Co-educational School #1 describes itself as a non-Catholic Christian school “with a mission to build a Christian community of learners, to provide a quality educational experience, and to nurture the whole person in the three dimensions of mind, body and spirit”. It is a multi-campus K-12 school which is less than ten years old and charges low fees in the vicinity of \$2,500-\$3,500 per year. Its facilities are newly built and modern, and are well maintained. At this school, secondary schooling begins as students move into the Middle school at Year 7, progressing to the Senior school at the start of Year 10 but the school also has a large intake of students at the start of Year 8. The school is over-subscribed and maintains a waiting list, advising that “in general, places are offered in the order of application, subject to a satisfactory interview”. Beyond a broad mainstream curriculum, with extra-curriculum offerings, the school does not conduct specialist programs for students with additional needs or talents, and does not offer scholarships. The school’s compulsory and strictly-enforced uniform changes for winter and summer, and includes a blazer and tie.

Independent Co-educational School #2 describes itself as a “co-educational day school, run under the auspices of the (named cultural group) of Western Australia, formed as a multi-cultural school with the aim of providing affordable educational opportunities for families seeking a Christian ethic for their children”. It is a small school (less than 400 students, K-12) with low fees in the vicinity of \$2,500 - \$3,500 per year. The school started in the 1990s with one class and has progressively added to its buildings, facilities and programs to now operate three sub-schools: Junior (K-5), Middle (6-9) and Senior (10-12). Its curriculum “encompasses all of the expected and usual areas of study with the addition of a comprehensive and varied program of study in the (named cultural group) language and culture”. Its students are required to wear a neat and casual uniform. This school is a ‘work in progress’ with new facilities which have the appearance of awaiting further additions, partly because its gardens and playing fields are not well-established.

Independent Single-sex School describes itself as “a proud institution that aims to inspire the attributes of caring, competence and confidence in the young women within its safekeeping”. This long-established, non-Catholic Christian school is among a handful of prestigious, high fee, single-sex schools in Perth with fees in excess of \$12,000 per year. It also offers academic and music scholarships for talented students who are identified through examination. The school occupies several well-appointed, heritage buildings to which modern design and technology, physical education and visual and performing arts facilities have been added. It comprises a junior school, a senior school and boarding facilities, and offers a “curriculum which combines traditional elements with innovation”. This school exemplifies the opulent facilities in some non-government schools to which Vickers (2005) refers. It is over-subscribed and maintains a waiting list of students wishing to enrol, but gaining a place at this school also involves satisfactory interview with the school’s principal. The school’s compulsory and strictly-enforced uniform changes for winter and summer, and includes a blazer, hat and tie.

DATA ANALYSIS

Response Rate

A total of 322 completed Parent Surveys were received across all school groups, representing an overall response rate of 28.3 percent. This exceeds the minimum recommended sample size of 288 responses from a population of 1,139 which is required to claim a confidence level of 95 percent with an error margin of 5 percent (Raosoft, 2005; Creative Research Systems, 2003), but as noted earlier, it is not known whether selection bias applies among respondents. No mechanism was used to gauge whether key sub-groups (such as low-income parents, single parents, non-English speaking parents and Aboriginal parents) were proportionally represented among respondents.

Table 5.3 below details the number of responses and response rates gained from each school, ranging from 39 percent down to 12.3 percent.

Table 5.3: Parent Survey Response Rates

School Identifier	Year 8s 2007	Responses (N)	Response Rate (%)	Response Rate Rank
Gov't #1	100-150	20	19.4	6
Gov't #2	100-150	16	12.3	8
Gov't #3	150-200	65	26.0	5
CathCo-ed	150-200	24	19.0	7
CathSingle	150-200	61	38.1	2
IndCoed#1	100-150	69	36.5	3
IndCoed#2	<50	10	28.6	4
IndSingle	200-250	57	39.0	1
Overall	1,139	322	28.3	

With respect to individual schools or school-types, the small population sizes and (for some schools) low response-rates detailed above in Table 5.3 preclude generalisable claims being made about data derived from this Parent Survey. In particular, there is likely to be an indeterminate degree of selection bias in the data with the views of the low-response school groups under-represented in statistics aggregated across the whole sample. This is of particular concern because two of the groups with the lowest response-rates were government schools, and all three low-response school groups noted the socio-cultural diversity of their student bodies. It follows that the voices of socio-culturally marginalised groups may be under-represented in this data set.

Notwithstanding the above notes regarding selection bias, the statistical analysis employed here was largely exploratory, confined to descriptive statistics which were used in the hope of revealing patterns that may point to the *possibility* of group differences and trends.

The three schools with the lowest response rates (Gov't#2, CathCo-ed and Gov't#1) all handed the survey packages to their Year 8 students to take home to their parents, while the remaining five schools mailed them direct to parents via Australia Post. It is likely that some students from the lowest response-rate schools failed to hand the survey packages to their parents.

It is also noteworthy that the three lowest response-rate schools also noted in their internet profiles the multicultural make-up of their student bodies. The multicultural make-up of these schools implies that English may be a second or subsequent language for a large proportion of parents with children at these schools, and that some of them may not read or write English at all. A comment to this effect was made by the Deputy Principal of Gov't#1, but research funding limitations precluded the provision of translation services to support completion of the survey.

Statistical Analysis Techniques

The first step in statistical analysis of the data was to generate frequency tallies for each school group for every item in the Parent Survey. Tallies were generated in both Microsoft Excel and in Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) Version 11 and provided the basis for subsequent statistical analysis.

The nature of measurement type varied across the total of 72 items contained in the Parent Survey, so different forms of statistical analysis were applied accordingly. Table 5.4 overleaf provides an overview of the measurement-type yielded by each question, and the statistical technique that was employed in each case.

For every item, it was intended that analysis and comparison be considered at each of three different levels:

- within individual school-groups;
- between school-groups; and
- overall, across all respondents.

Table 5.4: Overview of Parent Survey Questions and Analysis Techniques

Section	Question	Number of Items	Question Focus	Measurement Type	Statistical Techniques
Family Background	Q1	1	Family income	5-point scale – continuous intervals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Arithmetic Means
	Q2	2	Parental school background	Dichotomous (gov / non-gov)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Mode Per-capita frequency for each option
			Parental education attainment	3-point scale – ordinal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Median Per-capita frequency for each option
	Q3	1	Number of Siblings	5-point scale – ordinal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Median Per-capita frequency for each option
	Q4	1	First time at this school?	dichotomous (yes / no)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Mode Per-capita frequency for each option
Having Choices	Q5	1	Extent of choice	4-point scale – ordinal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Median Per-capita frequency for each option
	Q6	1	Age/stage of choice	4-point scale – ordinal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Median Per-capita frequency for each option
	Q7	5	Various limiting factors	3-point scale – ordinal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Median Per-capita frequency for each option
Your Year 8 Child's School	Q8	30	Likes/dislikes of own child's school	5-point scale – ordinal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Median Per-capita frequency for each option
Good Schools	Q9	30	Indicators of a good school	Modified rank order scale – select 3 factors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Per-capita frequency for each factor Priority ranking
Total Items		72			

Response-rates for individual schools do not permit generalisable claims about schools or school sectors. Most of the within-school and between-school analyses were based on graphical comparison of means, modes or medians (as specified in the right-hand column of Table 5.4) and/or per-capita frequencies.

Question 9 was a qualitatively different question in two important ways. Firstly, it departed from using a Likert-scale and instead directed respondents into a forced choice (Punch, 2003) response, asking them to select three (only) items from an array of thirty. Secondly, respondents formed two divergent interpretations of what they were required to do.

While Question 9 instructions asked respondents to "select three (only) factors that indicate a good school", over half of them (56 percent) selected twelve to fourteen factors (which was roughly three from every cluster of factors as they appeared in the survey). The remaining 44 percent limited their selections to only three factors, as instructed.

The possibility of response-divergence at Question 9 was evident when the Parent Survey was piloted, but it did not appear at that point to be a major risk. In the pilot study, two participants sought confirmation that they were required to select not more than three factors at Question 9. While this implied a degree of uncertainty with the question, those two participants (and all other pilot participants) ultimately interpreted the question as intended, so it proceeded largely unchanged, except for the addition of "only" in the instructions.

As it transpired, the qualitatively divergent forms of response at Question 9 had a serendipitous effect on the 'good' schools data because it yielded two qualitatively different layers of information. The *twelve to fourteen factors* group provided a broad-brush account of things that might be on a parent's 'wish list' when choosing a school for their child, while the *only three factors* group consolidated that 'wish list' into a narrower range of factors that parents consider fundamental to their concept of a good school. This is illustrated in Appendix 3 with a graph that compares the two response-types.

Two approaches to determining the collective across-schools ranking of good school indicators from Question 9 were applied, and both are reported in the Good Schools findings in Chapter Six to follow. The first (default) approach was to combine both response-types across all respondents to generate overall mean frequency data for each factor and, on the basis of overall means, generate a rank-order of all thirty factors irrespective of school groupings. The second approach was to calculate mean values for each factor (as above) within individual school-groupings, and then generate a mean of means for each factor as the basis for an alternative rank-order of the thirty school factors.

Given that the number of respondents across the eight individual schools ranged from 10 to 69, there was a risk that basing the analysis entirely on overall mean values would swamp the perspectives of parents who had chosen the smaller schools and/or those schools that returned a low response rate. It is noteworthy that the school with the lowest response rate was also the school that serves the lowest socio-economic status community in this sample. It was considered important to ensure that the small number of responses from such schools were not lost among the numerous voices from bigger, wealthier schools. Supplementing the analysis with means of means ensured that responses from each school received equal weighting, irrespective of school size or number of respondents. Ultimately, the decision was made to complete calculations and rankings using both approaches because this provided a cross-check on findings and enabled analysis of the extent to which rankings differed across schools and sectors.

CHAPTER SIX: GOOD SCHOOLS

This chapter contains findings from the Good Schools part of the Parent Survey.

The Good Schools section appeared at the end of the survey and comprised a single multi-item question, Question 9, which probed the factors to which parents attribute importance when they are trying to determine whether or not a school is 'good'. The common-sense notion of what constitutes a 'good' school is of interest here because it is likely to reflect what parents want and expect of schools and, in turn, the hopes, fears and aspirations they hold for their children in general. Research from across the Western world has shown that many parents consider the task of choosing a secondary school for their children as pivotal to their child's long-term career prospects (Bosetti, 2005; Davies & Aurini, 2006; English, 2006; Rothman, 2003), friendship networks (Forsey, 2006; Keddie, 2007) and the values and work ethic their child is likely to develop (Campbell 2005; Jackson-May, 2006; Walford, 2006).

Making the choice of the right school is, for most parents, one of the most difficult decisions they have to make ... making the right choice is closely connected with helping their children succeed in life. (English, 2006, p. 23)

Question 9 presented respondents with a list of thirty school factors relating to appearances, reputation, logistics, curriculum, approach and family values, all of which had been raised in the global literature previously reviewed in Section 3. The wording, rationale and relevant research for each factor in the list of thirty is provided in Table 5.1 in Chapter 5. Respondents were asked to read through the list, thinking in terms of what makes a GOOD school and to select up to three (only) factors that indicate a good school.

As outlined in Chapter 4, two approaches were taken (using the overall mean and a mean of means for each factor) to determine the rank-order of relative importance

that participating parents attributed to each school factor in Question 9. The rankings derived from each approach are provided for comparison below in Table 6.1.

Table 6.1: Factor Rankings: Overall mean *versus* Mean of School Means

Overall Mean		Mean of School-Means	
rankings	overall mean	rankings	Mean of means
1. school facilities	60.1	1. school facilities	58.5
2. individual needs supported	48.9	2. reputation - discipline	47.7
3. high achievement	47.4	3. student appearance	47.2
4. student appearance	46.7	4. high achievement	46.9
5. reputation - discipline	46.4	5. individual needs supported	46.8
6. mainstream curriculum	45.8	6. curriculum - interests	42.4
7. curriculum - interests	43.9	7. mainstream curriculum	40.9
8. reputation - inside info	41.4	8. ease of transport	39.0
9. TEE track record	36.8	9. reputation - inside info	36.7
10. ease of transport	36.5	10. TEE track record	36.6
11. proximity to home	35.5	11. proximity to home	35.0
12. school will listen	29.0	12. school will listen	29.3
13. specialist programs	27.4	13. specialist programs	29.0
14. staff appearance	25.9	14. staff appearance	27.5
15. school appearance	25.2	15. extra-curricula sport	27.5
16. extra-curricula sport	24.6	16. reputation of teachers	27.1
17. single-sex <i>versus</i> co-ed	24.0	17. school appearance	24.4
18. reputation of teachers	23.1	18. extra-curricula art	24.4
19. extra-curricula art	22.7	19. family traditions	19.4
20. reputation of principal	19.9	20. friendship groups	19.3
21. family traditions	18.1	21. diverse cultures	19.2
22. friendship groups	17.8	22. single-sex <i>versus</i> co-ed	19.0
23. diverse cultures	17.5	23. reputation of principal	18.6
24. old school tie	14.6	24. individuality encouraged	16.5
25. individuality encouraged	14.3	25. old school tie	15.3
26. religious affiliation	12.8	26. religious affiliation	10.7
27. camps and trips	7.8	27. camps and trips	9.1
28. reputation - media	5.9	28. reputation - media	7.5
29. VET track record	5.3	29. school brochures	6.6
30. school brochures	4.7	30. VET track record	5.9

One of the most striking features of comparison between the two sets of rankings in Table 6.1 is, across thirty factors, there is a high degree of agreement between them. Even when rankings are disaggregated into separate school sectors (see Appendix 4) a high degree of agreement (with notable exceptions to be discussed later relating to religious affiliation and single sex *versus* co-educational schooling) is evident across the school groups. This suggests minimal between-school differences in relation to what this sample of parents look for as indicators of a 'good' school and what parents routinely use as signposts to inform their choice of a secondary school for their children. Key points of agreement between the two sets of rankings in Table 6.2 (above) are as follows:

- The *school facilities* factor was ranked highest in both sets by a sizeable margin. While the mean value for *school facilities* in each case was close to 60 percent, the mean values attributed to the four or five next-ranked factors in each list clustered in the mid-to-high forties.
- The top-ten factors in each set of rankings (lightly-shaded) were the same, and while the order in which they appeared varied slightly between the sets, it was never by more than three places or more than 2.1 mean value percentage points.
- With minor variation to the order of factors, the school factors that made-up the seven lowest-ranked factors in each set (darker-shaded) were identical.
- The make-up of the middle-ranked factors (unshaded) comprises the same thirteen factors in each set, and the rank position attributed to each factor in each set differed by not more than three places. The one exception to this was the *single-sex versus co-ed* factor (bold and enlarged). The higher value attributed to the *single-sex versus co-ed* factor in the Overall data set is likely to be due to the relatively high response-rate derived from the two single-sex schools (over 38 percent from these two schools *versus* an average response rate of 28.3 percent across all schools), both of which attributed high value to single-sex schooling..

TOP-TEN RANKED FACTORS INDICATING A GOOD SCHOOL

The top-ten ranked factors considered by parents to indicate a good school are listed below in the order in which they appeared in the *overall* data set from Table 6.2. This data-set reflects the mean of 322 responses from a population of 1,139 parents.

School Facilities

‘Facilities at the school’ was clearly the highest-ranked factor with an attributed importance value of 60.1 percent overall. A substantial gap of more than ten percentage points exists before a cluster of seven next-ranked factors then jostle for prominence across the next ten percentage points of attributed importance.

This high ranking may reflect the fact that the quality of school facilities is one of the few tangible factors that parents can judge with relative confidence when looking for a ‘good’ school for their child. It is noteworthy, however, that the way that high quality school facilities appeal to parents seems to extend beyond the superficial aspect of how the school might merely look because the ‘school appearance’ factor was ranked only at fifteenth place. This implies that the importance attributed to school facilities reflects a belief among parents that high quality facilities enhance their children’s learning opportunities at school.

Table 6.2: Comparison of relative importance attributed to ‘school facilities’ and ‘school appearance’ factors across school sectors

Factors	Overall		Government		Catholic		Independent	
	Rank (of 30)	Mean (%) N = 322 8 sch.	Rank (of 30)	Mean (%) N = 101 3 sch.	Rank (of 30)	Mean (%) N = 85 2 sch.	Rank (of 30)	Mean (%) N = 136 3 sch.
school facilities	1 st	60.1	1 st	58.4	1 st	65.9	1 st	57.4
school appearance	15 th	25.2	17 th	27.7	18 th	24.7	13 th	23.5

Given that government schools are less likely than non-government schools to possess state-of-the-art science, sporting, technological or performing arts facilities

(Symes & Gulson, 2005; Vickers, 2005) and are often more shabby (Campbell, 2005; Vickers, 2006; WASSEA, 2007) these findings suggest that government schools at a clear disadvantage when trying to attract and retain students.

I know that gardens, swimming pools, music rehearsal rooms, dining areas, grassy quadrangles, polished floors, school-wide climate control systems, post-1957 plumbing, regulation sized ovals and the organised sporting teams that go with them aren't the heart and soul of a good education. I know, because my son's (government) secondary school doesn't have any of them. But what about enough specialist teachers to ensure adequate interest and diversity in the curriculum? Enough to craft the specialised curriculum required by students at the top and bottom end of the bell curve? Class sizes appropriate to the subject being taught? Can anyone really suggest these are peripheral to the central function of secondary schooling? Yet, here too, our school struggles. (Cannold, 2007, np)

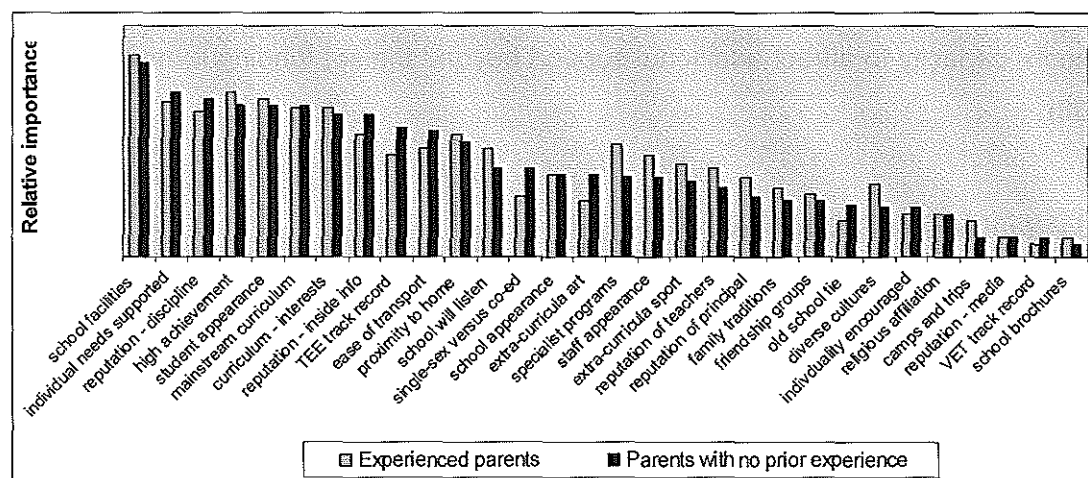
In relation to attracting students (or their parents), it might be expected that a school's physical features (such as its facilities and/or overall appearance) would be especially compelling for 'new' parents who had not yet formed an 'insiders' view of the school about which they were being asked and had little else to go on. An extension to this line of reasoning is that parents with prior experience of secondary schools might be expected to attribute importance to other, more covert and cultural factors in their determination of a good school. Analysis of the data indicates, however, that:

- The school facilities factor consistently out-ranks the school's appearance factor, the latter of which mid-ranks in both the overall and mean of means rankings (see Table 6.1, above).
- The school facilities factor ranked equally high among all parents, regardless of whether they had prior experience of sending a child to a secondary school (see Figure 6.1, overleaf).

The ratio of parents with no prior experience of the school *versus* those who had previously sent a child to the school was 2:1 (68.7 percent *versus* 31.6 percent

respectively). When good school factor rankings are compared across these two levels of parental experience with the schools (see Figure 6.1, below), the school facilities factor remains the top-ranked good school indicator for both groups. Note also that the school appearance factor in Figure 6.1 is again ranked roughly mid-way at 14th place for both groups.

Figure 6.1: Factor rankings – comparison of parents with and without prior experience of sending a child to the school



School facilities have been identified as key determinants of school choice in several other Australian studies. Forsey (2006) quoted Western Australian parents who expressed concern about the age and quality of facilities at their local government secondary school. Potts (2005) identified dated facilities, which had become too costly to maintain, as a key factor contributing to an exodus of students from Catholic secondary schools in the 1950s while Aulich (2003) portrays the injection of Commonwealth grants into those schools to build science blocks in the 1960s as a life-source that enabled them to continue to operate through to the 1970s when the Whitlam government boosted public funding to all low-wealth schools (Aulich, 2003; Henderson, 2004; Reid, 2000).

Claims have also been made (Vickers, 2005; WASSEA, 2007) that it is easier for Australian non-government schools to raise special-purpose funds to upgrade facilities (through government grants and private bequests) than is the case for government schools which must join lengthy waiting lists and compete with each other for upgrades. It has also been noted (Karmel, 2000; Vickers, 2005; Watson, 2003) that a school's existing assets are not currently incorporated into the formula used by state or Commonwealth governments to calculate fund allocations for non-government schools. It follows that existing deluxe facilities do not currently limit a school's capacity to attract further funding, nor does a lack of facilities elevate a school's capacity to attract additional support beyond the set funding formula (Vickers 2006).

Individual Needs Supported

The 'individual needs supported' factor is among a cluster of seven factors that were all attributed similar high levels of importance as indicators of a good school.

Beyond the fact that the 'individual needs supported' factor was (roughly) second-ranked overall, a major point of interest here is that it was attributed substantially more importance than was the closely-related 'school will listen' factor. The ranking attributed to the 'school will listen' factor was twelfth.

The 'school will listen' factor and 'individual needs supported' factor appeared consecutively at the end of the list of thirty options in Question 9. Full wording for these two factors was as follows:

- Confidence that the school will listen to (and deal properly with) any concerns that I raise.
- Confidence that my child's individual needs/talents will be recognised and supported.

While both of these factors deal with individualised attention, the first reflects an orientation towards the concerns of parents, while the second foregrounds the needs and talents of students. The comparatively high ranking attributed to the 'individual needs supported' factor (second *versus* twelfth place) indicates that parents prefer schools to explicitly focus on and cater for the individuality of their children instead of trying to predict and attend to parental concerns. This finding is at odds with prior research from several quarters:

- School marketing consultants explicitly advise schools to target parents as the main stakeholder (English, 2006; Harney, 2006; Holmes, 2006).

... schools operate in an environment where competition for parents is directly related to funding, as the number of parents that schools attract determines the funding they receive. (English, 2006, p. 23)

- Jackson-May (2006) found that a key factor determining whether the parents of elementary school-aged children in the United States move their children to a charter school or leave them at their local school was the extent to which teachers actively build and maintain positive relationships with parents.
- Davies and Aurini (2006) found that Canadian parents had a strong sense of authority about their children's needs and abilities and felt that, as good parents, it was their duty to advocate their child's needs – even if that placed them in an adversarial role with their children's teachers. They concluded that a school's willingness to listen and respond to parental concerns was of great importance to parents involved in their study.

When the relative importance attributed to the 'individual needs supported' and 'school will listen' factors were compared across school sectors, the possibility of sector-specific differences emerged. As detailed in Table 6.3 overleaf, the data suggests that:

- parents who chose Catholic schools attribute slightly less importance to the 'individual needs supported' factor than do parents who chose government or independent schools; and
- parents who chose government schools attribute slightly more importance to the 'school will listen' factor than do parents who chose non-government schools.

Table 6.3: Comparison of relative importance attributed to 'individual needs supported' and 'school will listen' factors across sectors

Factors	Overall		Government		Catholic		Independent	
	Rank (of 30)	Mean (%) N = 322 8 sch.	Rank (of 30)	Mean (%) N = 101 3 sch.	Rank (of 30)	Mean (%) N = 85 2 sch.	Rank (of 30)	Mean (%) N = 136 3 sch.
individual needs supported	2 nd	48.9	2 nd	58.4	14 th	29.4	2 nd	53.7
school will listen	12 th	29.0	12 th	34.7	20 th	21.2	11 th	29.4

Reasons for the across-sector differences in relation to these two factors are not clear. The lower level of importance attributed by Catholic parents to the 'individual needs supported' may imply a more collective orientation and a greater focus on shared needs, but this would require further investigation. In relation to the 'school will listen' factor, the government and independent school groups attributed this factor substantially more relative importance than the Catholic group. This is at odds with the received wisdom that parents who choose non-government schools (and pay substantial fees for their child's education) are much more aware of their power as choice-making consumers. It is also at odds with Campbell's (2005) observation that parents and teachers from government schools often share an adversarial relationship whereas the relationship between parents and non-government school teachers is often more reflective of an alliance.

Researchers who advocate allowing market forces to shape school provision position parents as choice-making consumers who act on behalf of their children (Coulson, 1998, 1999; Friedman 1958). Also, market consultants position parents (rather than

students) as the clients that schools should focus on (Holmes, 2006a). When parents make choices on behalf of their children, it is inevitable that their own concerns and aspirations will be coupled with the best interests of their children to influence the decisions they make. The finding here that parents selected the 'individual needs supported' factor appreciably more often than the 'school will listen' factor suggests, however, that parents understand this difference and like their children's schools to attend more explicitly to the former.

High Achievement

The 'high achievement' factor, next among a cluster of seven factors in the factor rankings, was third-ranked overall.

The full wording for this factor, that 'High achievement is expected and valued', foregrounds the extent to which a culture of high expectations permeates the school. The flip-side of expectations is the actual outcomes that are achieved. The notion of outcomes is better captured in the 'TEE track record' and 'VET track record' factors. Both of the outcomes-focused factors ranked lower (ninth and twenty-ninth overall respectively) than this expectations-focused factor (see Table 6.4, below).

Table 6.4: Comparison of relative importance attributed to 'high achievement expected', 'TEE track record' and VET track record' factors across school sectors

Factors	Overall		Government		Catholic		Independent	
	Rank (of 30)	Mean (%) N = 322 8 sch.	Rank (of 30)	Mean (%) N = 101 3 sch.	Rank (of 30)	Mean (%) N = 85 2 sch.	Rank (of 30)	Mean (%) N = 136 3 sch.
high achievement expected	3 rd	47.4	8 th	39.6	4 th	48.2	3 rd	52.2
TEE track record	9 th	36.8	13 th	32.7	10 th	41.2	10 th	36.8
VET track record	29 th	5.3	29 th	6.9	30 th	1.2	28 th	6.6

The high value parents place on schools actively promoting effort and diligence among their students was also reported by Forsey (2006), Keddie (2007) and Davies and Aurini (2006). The high-but-not-highest ranking of the 'high achievement' factor (along with the sixth ranking for the 'TEE track record' factor) also reflects findings reported by Beavis (2004) that while a school's academic reputation is prominent in parents' school-choice deliberations, it is not the most important factor. Beavis found instead that the single most important factor was the extent to which 'traditional values' are perceived to be upheld by the school.

In his study, Beavis treated 'traditional values' as a collective that included "discipline, religious or moral values, the traditions of the school itself, and the requirement that a uniform be worn" (Beavis, 2004, p. 3). The present research found that the 'student appearance' and 'reputation – discipline' factors were both important in their own right (ranked fourth and fifth overall respectively) but other values-specific factors (such as 'family traditions', 'diverse cultures', 'old school tie', individuality encouraged' and 'religious affiliation') all ranked among the bottom-ten factors.

Unfortunately, comparisons between Beavis's study and the present research are problematic. Firstly because Beavis did not include the quality of school facilities in his study – the highest-ranking factor in the present research. Secondly because it is unclear whether the 'discipline' and the 'traditions of the school itself' elements of Beavis's 'traditional values' collective reflect diligence and a culture of high achievement, or whether those elements are more about how students defer to established adult authority. This point will be taken up again in discussion about the student appearance factor.

The fact that parents in this study attribute more importance to a culture of high achievement and effort than they do to the level of recorded outcomes implies that schools do not have to depend on the raw ability of their students to be attractive to parents. It could then be argued that certain government schools which have come to be known as 'residual' or 'sink' schools (DES, 2001; Mukherjee, 1999; SECWA, 2007;

Vickers, 2005) need merely to establish a culture of effort and diligence (Donnelly, 2004; Nelson, 2003,). The problem with this argument is that institutionalised culture is very resistant to change (Fullan, 2001; Hargreaves, 2003).

Schools have a long history; they have evolved over time. These schools are rooted in the culture that created them. (Neugebauer, 2008, p. 8)

While Forsey (2006, p. 8) claims that “there is no choice but to choose”, the typical nil-response to school choice (due to a lack of knowledge or interest) would be to send one’s child in the local state-run, no-fee school (Campbell, 2005; Forsey, 2006; Jackson-May, 2006). Parents most likely to make a nil-response to school choice are those who face numerous challenges in their daily lives; those for whom making sure their children are doing their best at school may not be a high priority (Freebody, Ludwig & Gunn, 1995; Keddle, 2006; Popkewitz, 2007; Walford, 2006).

The culture of a shared space (such as a school) tends to take on the hue of the majority membership (Fullan, 2001), so if most students at a sink school have low expectations of themselves and what school can offer, turning-around that culture will be extremely difficult. Meanwhile, ‘helicopter’ parents (Mackay, 2007) who value the opportunities that a good education affords and have high hopes for their children are less likely to send their children to a sink school; to do so would be neglectful (Campbell, 2005; Davies & Aurini, 2006). In so doing, these parents consolidate the culture of diligence and achievement that already pervades the schools they choose for their children. McGaw (2006) and Swan (2005) have warned that this could lead to a negative spiral in the sink schools and a positive spiral in chosen schools – and an ever-widening gap between the two school types and the communities for which they cater. Mackay (2004, np) concurs:

What’s happened to the idea that world-class public education was the brightest symbol of Australia’s commitment to egalitarianism? My recent research suggests a growing acceptance of the idea of class divisions: certainly, those at the top are

inclined to believe they're probably entitled to be there, and tough luck for the rest.
(Mackay, 2004, np).

Across-sector comparison of data in relation to the 'high expectations' factor (see Table 6.4, above) indicates that parents who chose government schools attribute appreciably less importance to this factor than do parents who chose Catholic or independent schools (a ranking of 8th for the government sector versus 4th and 3rd respectively for the Catholic and independent sectors). These findings are drawn from a small sample so no statistical significance can be attributed to this difference, but it may warrant further investigation.

Student Appearance

The 'student appearance' factor was among the cluster of seven next-ranked factors that were attributed similar, relatively high levels of importance. It was the fourth-ranked factor overall with a mean per-capita value of 46.7 percent. The full wording for this factor in the survey was 'appearance of students'.

The parents from all three sectors attributed similar levels of importance to this factor (see Table 6.5, below). While the mean figure is slightly higher for the Catholic parent group and slightly lower for the Independent parent group, the differences are too small for this sample size to suggest a clear pattern.

Table 6.5: Comparison of relative importance attributed to 'student appearance' factor across school sectors

Factors	Overall		Government		Catholic		Independent	
	Rank (of 30)	Mean (%) N = 322 8 sch.	Rank (of 30)	Mean (%) N = 101 3 sch.	Rank (of 30)	Mean (%) N = 85 2 sch.	Rank (of 30)	Mean (%) N = 136 3 sch.
student appearance	4 th	46.7	3 rd	47.5	3 rd	50.6	6 th	43.4
individuality encouraged	25 th	14.3	22 nd	18.8	26 th	12.9	25 th	11.8

The relatively high level of importance attributed to 'student appearance' in the present research is consistent with prior research. From the context of school marketing in particular, it has been reported that the way a school's students dress and behave as they move through the community functions as a powerful asset (or liability) in relation to the impressions prospective parents form about the values of the school (Beavis, 2004; English, 2006; Harney, 2006; McLeod & Yates, 2007).

What can the school do to ensure that the community knows its values so the school is on potential parents' 'radar'? The uniform should reflect a neat and tidy appearance and students should be encouraged to wear their uniform with pride. Students who are proud of their school are more likely to behave appropriately when on the bus, at the shopping centre and on the way to and from school in uniform. This is when the school is publicly on show, and is one of the most important ways that parents can see the type of children who attend the school. (English, 2006, p. 23)

In this sense, student appearance functions as a proxy indicator for the extent to which 'traditional values' are upheld at the school. The same link was found by Beavis (2004) who reported that the single most important school choice factor for Australian parents was whether traditional values were promoted and enacted at the school. Beavis described traditional values as a collective of "discipline, religious or moral values, the traditions of the school itself, and the requirement that a uniform be worn" (Beavis, 2004, np).

McLeod and Yates (2006) found that students in Australian secondary schools are acutely aware of how their personal appearance advertises their school in the community. They cite the example of one school, previously known for its broad-mindedness and creativity, which decided in 2002 to re-introduce school uniforms as a strategy to arrest declining enrolments.

Suburban High's reputation as a school that tolerated lack of discipline, symbolised in its lack of school uniform, placed its version of the good student

under threat ... Its message was that, henceforth, it would maintain the distinctive options of its cultural directions, but within a more traditional, conventional and hegemonic sense of how a 'good student' should look and behave. The campaign was successful in reversing the declining population. (McLeod & Yates, 2006, p. 71).

A similar account of how rules about student appearance and school uniforms operate as mechanisms of compliance and conservatism was also reported by Forsey (2006). He found that several students and parents who were initially attracted to the traditions of non-government schools eventually grew tired of the "overzealous policing of minor uniform infringements" (Forsey, 2006, p. 21) and that this was one factor contributing to their decisions to move to a government school.

Forsey (2006) and McLeod and Yates (2006) imply that schools which enforce rules relating to student appearance (usually in the form of uniforms) are at risk of stifling students' individuality which positions the high-ranking 'student appearance' factor as oppositional to the low-ranking 'individuality encouraged' factor. Comparison of these two factors supports Apple's (2001) claim that conservative modernism has come to dominate Western society in the current decade. If the same question were asked of parents twenty years ago (parents whose coming of age coincided with anti-war protest, flower power, feminism, hippies, sexual liberation and heavy rock) it may have yielded quite different results.

McLeod and Yates (2007, p. 105) claim that the reintroduction of school uniforms in many Australian government schools "reflects bigger trends in the reassertion of traditional forms of conformity and control".

Western Australia's government school system is not immune to this wave of conservative modernism and renewed efforts to make teenage students conform to traditional school dress codes. From 2007, government school students in Western Australia were banned from wearing denim jeans, shorts or skirts to school. In the

foreword of a Dress Requirements Policy for Western Australian government schools, the Minister for Education and Training stated:

Dress requirements for students play an important role in promoting a positive image of public schools and creating a sense of identity among students. They are also tangible evidence of the standards expected of students. Traditional styles of uniform will play an important part in keeping up the strong reputation of public schools and ensuring parents continue to send their children to public schools. (McGowan, 2007, p. 1)

Findings here and elsewhere suggest that Minister McGowan may be right to claim that the reintroduction of traditional styles of uniform will appeal to parents, but it appears unlikely that this requirement will be enough to reverse the trend of students away from the government school sector.

Reputation – Discipline

The ‘reputation – discipline’ factor ranked in fifth place overall and was among the cluster of five factors that were attributed similar high levels of importance after the ‘school facilities’ factor. The full wording for this factor was “reputation of student behaviour”.

Table 6.6: Comparison of relative importance attributed to ‘reputation – discipline’ factor across school sectors

Factors	Overall		Government		Catholic		Independent	
	Rank (of 30)	Mean (%) N = 322 8 sch.	Rank (of 30)	Mean (%) N = 101 3 sch.	Rank (of 30)	Mean (%) N = 85 2 sch.	Rank (of 30)	Mean (%) N = 136 3 sch.
reputation – discipline	5 th	46.4	5 th	44.6	4 th	49.4	5 th	45.6

The relatively high ranking of ‘reputation – discipline’ across all school sectors coincides with numerous previous studies which have found that the socio-cultural tone of schools is important to parents (Araujo, 2007; Beavis, 2004; Bonnor & Caro,

2007; Bosetti, 2005; Campbell, 2005; DES, 2001; English, 2006; Forsey, 2006; Jackson-May, 2007; Keddie, 2007; Kelley & Evans, 2004; Leech, 2006; Lubinski, 2006; Macintosh, 2007; Ryan, 2005; Vickers, 2005; Walford, 2006; Wolf, 2007). Further, the observation by McGaw (2006, p. 17), based on analysis of international student performance data which shows that “the negative effects of poor company may be much greater than any positive effect of good company”, suggests that the high level of importance that parents attribute to this factor may be warranted.

It was reported in Chapter 5 that when reputations for student behaviour in government and non-government schools are compared, the government sector consistently fares poorly (Campbell, 2005; DES, 2001; Forsey, 2006; Leech, 2006; Lubinski, 2006; Ryan, 2005; Walford 2006). The data here, however, clearly show that the parents of all three school sectors attribute similar high levels of importance to the ‘reputation – discipline’ factor. It seems, therefore, that while all three parent groups equally value positive reputations for student behaviour, some parents (who chose a government school for their child) are more willing to risk (or less able to avoid) the possibility that reputations of poor behaviour in government schools are warranted.

It was also reported that discipline was among the compact of traditional values (along with morals, school traditions and uniforms) that Beavis (2004) found to be the key determinant of parental school choice. Beavis’s findings that link the high value attributed to certain institutionalised expressions of conservatism have been repeated here, that is, ‘student appearance’ and ‘reputation – discipline’.

The capacity of the school to handle discipline is important – to maintain a focus on education and not behaviour management of disruptive students. (Parent – IndCoed#1)

However, Table 6.7 (overleaf) shows that the degree of importance that Beavis reported in relation to the traditions of the school itself and to religious and moral

values (captured here as 'old school tie', 'religious affiliation' and 'family traditions' factors) has not been repeated in the present research.

Table 6.7: Comparison of relative importance, across sectors, attributed to a compact of factors that reflect Beavis's (2004) traditional values

Factors	Overall		Government		Catholic		Independent	
	Rank (of 30)	Mean (%) N = 322 8 sch.	Rank (of 30)	Mean (%) N = 101 3 sch.	Rank (of 30)	Mean (%) N = 85 2 sch.	Rank (of 30)	Mean (%) N = 136 3 sch.
student appearance	4 th	46.7	3 rd	47.5	3 rd	50.6	6 th	43.4
reputation – discipline	5 th	46.4	5 th	44.6	4 th	49.4	5 th	45.6
single-sex <i>versus</i> co-educational	17 th	24.0	27 th	7.9	2 nd	52.9	19 th	17.7
family traditions	21 st	18.1	23 rd	12.9	15 th	28.2	23 rd	15.4
diverse cultures	23 rd	17.5	21 st	19.8	25 th	12.9	20 th	18.4
old school tie	24 th	14.6	24 th	11.9	23 rd	15.3	22 nd	16.2
individuality encouraged	25 th	14.3	22 nd	18.8	26 th	12.9	25 th	11.8
religious affiliation	26 th	12.8	30 th	5.0	13 th	30.6	27 th	7.4

Across all factors in Table 6.7 above, the responses of the Catholic parent group were consistently more conservative than the other two groups (especially in relation to gender and religion) while the responses of the government parent group are consistently more progressive. This pattern is further illustrated by comments added to the survey by parents who had chosen Catholic or government schools for their children:

Students should be encouraged to stick to school rules, eg: school uniform and should be encouraged to maintain their values and morals. Implement good behaviour at all times, i.e.: not to use vulgar language on school premises and

back chat teachers. They must treat teachers and peers with utmost respect. Discos should not be encouraged too much. (Parent – CathCo-ed)

Our child's school is easily accessible to public transport and is the sister/brother school to his/her sibling's school. It also offered an education in moral, values and civic duty and is not totally focused on academic achievement. (Parent – CathSingle)

After much deliberation we felt public school is better for producing well-rounded community members. I find the "old school tie" and "winning" of little interest to our family values. (Parent – Gov't#3)

I have two very different children that I feel will both flourish in an environment where their INDIVIDUAL needs are met. (Parent – Gov't#3)

Our child chose the school that fits their career/interest in that particular school's curriculum and extra-curriculum offered. (Parent – Gov't#1)

Data in Table 6.7 indicates that the views of the independent parent-group are closer to those of the government parent-group than to the Catholic parent-group. This implies that it is inappropriate to treat the views and motives of parents who choose non-government schools as a one group. Rather, parents who choose Catholic schools appear to be the 'outliers' and it appears that a key factor in their school choice-making continues to be "based on the attraction of a particular ethos or religion rather than on a perception of superior teaching or learning" (DES, 2001, p. 32).

The data further imply that efforts to redress the drift of students to non-government schools should specifically focus on parents who are moving their children to schools within the independent sector. Data from the ABS (1995, 2006) provided in Figure 1.1 supports this analysis because it shows that all of the growth in that has occurred in the non-government sector over the past twenty years has occurred among independent schools.

Mainstream Curriculum and Curriculum – interests

Two curriculum-related factors ('mainstream curriculum' and 'curriculum – interests') were ranked in sixth and seventh places respectively. The full wording for these two factors was as follows:

- Range and quality of the mainstream curriculum; and
- Opportunities to pursue individual interests and talents.

Comparison of all curriculum-related factors (see Table 6.8 below) indicates that the independent and Catholic parent groups are more attracted to a strong and effective mainstream curriculum whereas the government parent group also values specialism and the pursuit of interests alongside the mainstream.

Table 6.8: Comparison of relative importance attributed to five curriculum-related factors across school sectors

Factors	Overall		Government		Catholic		Independent	
	Rank (of 30)	Mean (%) N = 322 8 sch.	Rank (of 30)	Mean (%) N = 101 3 sch.	Rank (of 30)	Mean (%) N = 85 2 sch.	Rank (of 30)	Mean (%) N = 136 3 sch.
mainstream curriculum	6 th	45.8	10 th	37.6	6 th	47.1	4 th	50.7
curriculum – interests	7 th	43.9	4 th	47.5	9 th	42.4	7 th	41.9
specialist programs	13 th	27.4	11 th	35.6	16 th	27.1	16 th	21.3
extra-curricula sport	16 th	24.6	19 th	21.8	11 th	34.1	14 th	20.6
extra-curricula art	19 th	22.7	15 th	29.7	19 th	23.5	21 st	16.9
Camps and trips	27 th	7.8	25 th	9.9	28 th	2.4	26 th	9.6

The pattern of findings whereby the non-government parent groups attribute higher value to the mainstream curriculum while the government parent group attributes

more value to curriculum interests and specialisation is consistent with research reported in Chapter 4. Non-government schools have typically consolidated and deepened curriculum provision around traditional, high-status academic courses while government schools have tended to broaden their provision to cater for their less homogenous cohorts and to establish specialist programs that will attract students with particular interests or talents (Campbell, 2005; Forsey 2006; Groundwater-Smith, 2001; Maddison, 2005; Marks, 2004; Symes & Gulson, 2005).

Parents in particular are typically narrower in their expectations and more demanding of targeted and customized information that is aligned with their expectations. (Holmes, 2006b, p. 5)

While it is not possible to generalise from the data pattern in Table 6.8, the fact that it coincides with the strategic curriculum directions taken by the government school sector in recent years – with a broadening of curriculum provision to embrace vocational and academic courses and to establish numerous specialist programs in a range of artistic, sporting, academic and linguistic pursuits (DET, 2008; Groundwater-Smith, 2001; Rothman, 2003) suggests that the strategy is simultaneously:

- gratifying its current client base; but
- alienating parents who have sent their children to non-government schools. As Marks (2004, p. 43) claims, the diversification strategy is widely “interpreted by parents as Government schools ‘giving up’ on university entrance”.

Reputation – inside information

The full-wording for this factor was “School reputation – according to ‘inside’ information from other parents/friends”. It gained eighth place in overall rankings but was outside the cluster of five or six factors that all received overall mean values in the high-forties; the overall mean value for the ‘reputation – inside information’ factor was 41.4 percent.

While it is clear that eighth place out of 30 factors is a relatively high ranking, prior research suggests that an even higher ranking for this factor could have been expected. According to Holmes (2006a, p. 11), a consultant who specialises in school marketing, “parents make decisions on which school to send their children largely based on its reputation – stories in the press, the neighbour’s views, the verdict of another parent, ... what is typically called ‘word of mouth’”.

Table 6.9: Comparison of relative importance attributed to ‘reputation – inside information’ and ‘reputation – media’ factors across school sectors

Factors	Overall		Government		Catholic		Independent	
	Rank (of 30)	Mean (%) N = 322 8 sch.	Rank (of 30)	Mean (%) N = 101 3 sch.	Rank (of 30)	Mean (%) N = 85 2 sch.	Rank (of 30)	Mean (%) N = 136 3 sch.
reputation – inside information	8 th	41.4	6 th	41.6	7 th	44.7	9 th	39.0
reputation – media	28 th	5.9	26 th	7.9	27 th	4.7	29 th	5.2

Data in Table 6.9 above indicate that ‘word of mouth’ reputation is quite an important factor in the school choice-making process, but that stories in the press are attributed a lot less attention.

The persuasive nature of ‘word of mouth’ commendation was noted by English (2006) and Forsey (2006) but comments offered by several respondents as they completed the survey suggest that ‘word of mouth’ operates mainly as a warning about which schools to avoid. The same may also be true for media reports. When parents were asked at the end of Question 7 in the survey to note any “other factors that limited our choice”, three parents provided the following comments:

Poor reputation of state schools. Poor performance in TEE of state schools.
Perceived behavioural problems of students in state schools. (Parent – IndSingle)

Bad reputation and feedback from others. (Parent – IndCoed#1)

It was either too expensive or very poor reputation. (Parent – Gov't#3)

The first comment (above) indicates that government schools in general fare badly in the reputation stakes. This is supported by a large body of research (Beavis, 2004; Bonnor & Caro, 2007; Campbell, 2005; Forsey, 2006; Marks, 2004; WASSEA, 2007). The final parent comment (above) also illustrates how particular government schools are especially stigmatised in the community; "institutions that are invariably located in the poorer parts of town" (Forsey, 2006). Of the three government schools included in the present research, the parent from the government parent group who made the final comment (above) had chosen the government school located in the most affluent suburb from among those participating in this case study.

Tertiary Entrance Examination (TEE) track record

The 'schools track record in TEE' factor gained an overall ranking of ninth place. This high-but-not-highest ranking is again consistent with Beavis's (2004) findings that while parents consider a school's academic performance to be a factor in their school choice-making, the extent to which traditional values are upheld at the school is more important. This position is echoed in the following comment by a respondent from the Catholic parent group:

It also offered an education in moral, values and civic duty and is not totally focused on academic achievement. . (Parent – CathCo-ed)

The high-to-middling level of importance attributed to a school's TEE track record, however, gives pause for thought about the publication of unadjusted TEE league tables in newspapers every year. Bradley, Draco & Green (2004) found significant differences between raw league tables and a complementary set of adjusted league tables that accounted for socio-economic status and student intake quality. They concluded that "raw league tables understate the performance of schools in disadvantaged socio-economic areas and overstate the value added to students in high socio-economic areas ... (and could lead to) ... cream skinning and other

negative effects associated with competition between the two systems (government and non-government)” (Bradley, Draco & Green, 2004, p. 284).

A significant point of interest in the high-to-middling level of importance attributed to a school’s TEE track record is the particularly low level of importance attributed to its VET track record (see Table 6.10 below).

Table 6.10: Comparison of relative importance attributed to ‘TEE track record’ and ‘VET track record’ factors across school sectors

Factors	Overall		Government		Catholic		Independent	
	Rank (of 30)	Mean (%) N = 322 8 sch.	Rank (of 30)	Mean (%) N = 101 3 sch.	Rank (of 30)	Mean (%) N = 85 2 sch.	Rank (of 30)	Mean (%) N = 136 3 sch.
TEE track record	9 th	36.8	13 th	41.6	10 th	44.7	10 th	39.0
VET track record	29 th	5.3	29 th	6.9	30 th	1.2	28 th	6.6

Overall, the ‘VET track record’ factor ranked just ahead of the lowest-ranked ‘school brochures’ factor and behind ‘camps and trips’ and ‘reputation – media’ factors. This low ranking was universal across all three sectors.

Of all findings from the present research, the especially low ranking of the ‘VET track record factor’ may be the most noteworthy for the government school sector. It also suggests that participating parents are universally unimpressed by steps taken in recent years by state and Commonwealth governments in recent years to enable:

- greater continuity of provision between academic and vocational programs studied in years 10, 11 and 12; and
- more circumstances in which course provision can be shared between schools and colleges of Technical and Further Education (TAFE).

When the current state Labor Government came to power in Western Australia in 2001, TAFE colleges and government schools in Western Australia were administered as two

separate departments. The new state government merged the two departments into a single Department of Education and Training so more sharing of expertise, resources and students could occur across the two instructional settings (Carpenter, 2001). The government also pressed-ahead with plans to reform courses of study for years 11 and 12 to break-down a historical demarcation that existed between tertiary-bound and vocational pathways (Curriculum Council, 2006; Rothman, 2003). Both of these changes challenge historical features of secondary schooling in Western Australia:

- The gulf between academic and vocational courses of study has deliberately been reduced. Some have interpreted this to have also reduced the rigor and status of academic courses (Buckingham, 2004; Donnelly, 2006).
- The requirement that students complete their graduation at a school (where they are immersed in a climate of pastoral care, adult supervision, uniforms and behaviour management) before progressing to TAFE or university (which assume independence, freedom and personal responsibility) can be circumvented whereby students can be simultaneously enrolled in school and TAFE/university (ACER, 2002)

Given the wave of conservative modernism previously discussed, it is not so surprising that these changes have not been enthusiastically embraced by the majority of parents who continue to look to schools to shape the cosmopolitan (Popkewitz 2007) as much as to educate.

The lack of interest in the school's VET track record in the present research may also be due in part to the fact that the survey was conducted on the parents of children who had just entered year 8. Had it targeted the parents of children who had just entered year 10 or 11, the school's track record with VET may have been attributed greater importance. This reservation should be tempered, however, by the fact that most students remain at the same school throughout their secondary years (Forsey, 2006; Symes & Gulson, 2006) so in most cases, the school that parents choose for year 8 will be the school that children attend in years 11 and 12.

Ease of Transport (and Proximity to Home)

The three logistics factors: 'ease of transport', 'proximity to home' and 'friendship groups' are qualitatively different to other factors in Question 9. They are situational, and do not reflect the quality of the school itself. It could therefore be argued (as did one respondent) that such logistics are irrelevant to whether or not a school is 'good'. For this reason consideration was given to removing these three factors from Question 9. It was therefore unexpected that 'ease of transport' and 'proximity to home' gained overall rankings of tenth and eleventh place respectively, which put them near the top third of all factors.

When rankings for the three logistics factors are compared across sectors, there is some indication of school-specific patterns (see Table 6.11 below).

Table 6.11: Comparison of relative importance attributed to the three logistics factors across school sectors

Factors	Overall		Government		Catholic		Independent	
	Rank (of 30)	Mean (%) N = 322 8 sch.	Rank (of 30)	Mean (%) N = 101 3 sch.	Rank (of 30)	Mean (%) N = 85 2 sch.	Rank (of 30)	Mean (%) N = 136 3 sch.
ease of transport	10 th	36.5	7 th	41.6	8 th	43.5	12 th	27.9
proximity to school	11 th	35.5	9 th	37.6	17 th	25.9	8 th	39.7
friendship groups	22 nd	17.8	18 th	27.7	24 th	14.1	24 th	12.5

The government parent group attributed slightly higher rankings to all three logistics factors than the Catholic and independent parent groups. It also transpired that in relation to the transport and proximity factors, the way the Catholic and independent parent groups responded were opposite to each other: while the Catholic group gave greater prominence to 'ease of transport', the independent group favoured 'proximity to school'. The reason the two non-government sectors differ on these factors is unclear and may warrant further investigation.

The moderately high level of importance attributed overall to transport and proximity was further illustrated through comments made by numerous parents about looking only at schools “in our local area” and the following point made by a single-parent who chose a government school:

Logistics are especially important for single parents and those from lower socio-economic background due to limited resources including time. (Parent – Gov’t#2)

While the overall ranking of the ‘friendship group’ factor placed it among the bottom-third of all factors, it is noteworthy that it out-ranked several factors that might have been expected to rank higher including ‘individuality encouraged’, ‘religious affiliation’ and ‘reputation – media’.

It may also be noteworthy that the government group attributed more importance to children’s friendship groups than parents from the two non-government groups. This finding reflects research reported by Walford (2006) that working class children are given more say in school choice-making than are their middle-class counterparts.

TWO FACTORS THAT FUNCTIONED IN QUALITATIVELY DIFFERENT WAYS

While a high level of across-sector and across-school agreement was found in relation to twenty-eight of the thirty school factors in the survey, two factors functioned in qualitatively different ways across groups: ‘single-sex *versus* coeducational school provision’ and ‘religious affiliation’. Each will be considered briefly here in more detail.

Single-sex versus Co-educational Provision

While the overall ranking for the ‘single-sex *versus* co-ed’ factor positioned it at seventeenth place, its ranking varied markedly across different school groups. As shown below in Table 6.12, the ranking for this factor ranged from second place for the Catholic group to twenty-seventh place for the government group.

Table 6.12: Comparison of relative importance attributed to the ‘single-sex versus co-ed’ factor

Factors	Overall		Government		Catholic		Independent	
	Rank (of 30)	Mean (%) N = 322 8 sch.	Rank (of 30)	Mean (%) N = 101 3 sch.	Rank (of 30)	Mean (%) N = 85 2 sch.	Rank (of 30)	Mean (%) N = 136 3 sch.
single-sex <i>versus</i> co-educational	17 th	24.0	27 th	7.9	2 nd	52.9	19 th	17.7

At face value, however, the data in Table 6.12 is misleading because the high ranking attributed by the Catholic parent group to the single-sex *versus* co-ed factor was derived almost entirely from the CathSingle parent group which returned the second-highest response-rate. That group’s consistently high ranking of this factor swamped the lower ranking given to this factor by the CathCo-ed parent group which returned the second-lowest response-rate. A similar pattern was found in the data for the independent parent group: the high response-rate from the IndSingle group combined with the high ranking that school group attributed to the single-sex *versus* co-ed factor boosted the ranking attributed to this factor for the independent parent group as a whole.

It was noted in Chapter 5 that the divergent response-types received at Question 9 provided another layer of information relating to the importance that parents attribute to various factors. This additional layer proved particularly useful when probing the ‘single-sex *versus* co-ed’ and ‘religious affiliation’ findings because it showed that for some parents, these qualitatively different factors are of the utmost importance for some parents and operate as primary filters in their school choices. The following comment from a parent from CathSingle illustrates this point:

In all of the suburbs near where we live, there are no other single-sex schools around. Hence no other choice. (Parent – CathSingle)

It was also found, however, that a small proportion of parents from the Gov’t#3 and IndCo-ed#1 who selected only three factors at Question 9 included the ‘single-sex

versus co-ed' factor among their three 'votes'. This shows that some parents who choose co-ed schools attribute a very high level of importance to this factor and have a strong aversion to single-sex schools:

We wanted coeducational schools as we have a boy and a girl and also believe education should be reflective of society therefore single-sex is unbalanced.
(Parent – IndCo-ed#1)

Didn't want single-sex – wanted co-ed. Was very important to us. (Parent – CathCo-ed)

Once school for all our kids (boys and girls). (Parent – IndCo-ed#1)

Religious Affiliation

While the 'religious affiliation' factor gained a ranking of only 26th place overall the Catholic parent group attributed much more importance to 'religious affiliation' than the other two parent groups (see Table 6.13 below).

Table 6.13: Comparison of 'religious affiliation' factor across school sectors

Factors	Overall		Government		Catholic		Independent	
	Rank (of 30)	Mean (%) N = 322 8 sch.	Rank (of 30)	Mean (%) N = 101 3 sch.	Rank (of 30)	Mean (%) N = 85 2 sch.	Rank (of 30)	Mean (%) N = 136 3 sch.
religious affiliation	26 th	12.8	30 th	5.0	13 th	30.6	27 th	7.4

As noted in Chapter 4, the prominence attributed to religiosity by Catholic families is well established in the literature (Beavis, 2004; Kelley & Evans, 2004; Morgan 2001). It was evident from comments made by several parents from the Catholic group that the first filter they applied when choosing a school for their children was whether the school was Catholic:

The religious denomination of the school was an important factor. (Parent – CathSingle)

As Catholics, I have chosen this school because the values are genuinely Catholic/Christian; not merely superficial or nominally Gospel based but factually privileging wealth and status. (Parent – CathSingle)

It was also evident that some parents from the government and independent groups apply the same filter in reverse to avoid Catholic schools. When asked at Question 7 to note any other factors that limit their school choice, three parents from the government group wrote “religion”, and a parent from the independent group wrote “other schools in our area are all Catholic” which implies that he/she actively avoided Catholic schools and did not even consider the possibility of sending his/her child to a government school.

BOTTOM-SEVEN FACTORS INDICATING A GOOD SCHOOL

This section will briefly consider factors that parents rated among the bottom-seven in the overall rankings (apart from ‘religious affiliation’ which has been discussed). The low ranking attained by the following factors indicates that they are considered to be of limited importance when seeking evidence of whether or not a school is ‘good’.

Old School Tie

While one respondent did indicate that this factor was among the three most important indicators of a good school, the overall low ranking that it received indicates that the value attributed these days to ‘old school tie’ connections has diminished.

One reason contributing to this finding may be that high-status schools are less exclusive than in previous generations (Townsend, 2005). While certain schools had a tradition of catering for particular established families across generations (Freund, 2001), prestigious schools nowadays apply student selection policies that depend in part on student ability, disposition and parents’ capacities to pay (Campbell, 2005; Ryan, 2005; Symes & Gulson, 2005). Another reason may be that in an increasingly

mobile world and globalised job market, the prestige of the school one attended as a child is of diminished interest (Nelson, 2004). Of greater importance is the kudos and quality of the university one attended (Baker & Brown 2007).

Individuality Encouraged

The full wording for this factor was “teachers encourage/allow students to be themselves – not required to always conform”. The low ranking for this factor (ranked overall at twenty-fifth place) was illustrated earlier in Table 6.7. In discussion that accompanied Table 6.7, it was noted that this finding coincides with prior research which has reported that conservatism, conformity and a return to traditional values and curriculum has come to dominate school provision across Australia (Beavis, 2004; Forsey, 2006; Keddie, 2006; Ryan, 2006).

This finding contravenes Friedman's (1954) thesis that when free market principles are applied to the provision of schooling, it will lead to greater flexibility and diversity of provision. Rather, as Holmes (2006b, p. 5) has argued, parents today are “typically narrower in their expectations and more demanding of targeted and customized information”, so schools that wish to maintain their market-share must provide what that market expects. Accordingly, the most desirable schools are those that focus on high-status academic programs, require that their students wear school uniforms and return to traditional values which encourage conformity and spurn overt individuality and diversity.

An unexpected finding from this case study data was that there was a slight but consistent tendency for the Catholic parent group to have been more conservative than the other two groups in their responses to factors relating to individuality and diversity, and for the government parent group to have been more progressive (see Table 6.7).

Camps and Trips

The 'range of camps and trips' factor was offered among the list of thirty factors largely as a distracter, so it is slightly alarming that it gained higher ranking (at twenty-sixth place) than the 'track record in VET' factor and unexpected that it ranks about the same level as the 'reputation – media' factor.

Reputation – media

The low ranking of twenty-seventh place that was gained by the 'media reports about this school (or this type of school)' factor suggests that little notice is taken of media reports about schools and school sectors. As noted earlier, however, it is possible that residual negative impressions are formed about certain schools or school-types when they receive sustained criticism in the media – such as has occurred in Western Australia in recent years in relation to the implementation of OBE, teacher shortages and bullying incidents which reached the Children's Court in 2007 (Hiatt, 2006, 2007a, 2007b; Kessell, 2006; Maiden, 2007; Mundine, 2006; Patty, 2007).

Vocational Education and Training (VET) track record

The low ranking (twenty-ninth place overall) gained by the 'VET track record' factor has already been discussed in the context of the contrasting high ranking attributed to the 'TEE track record' factor. This is a key outcome from this research and is especially significant to the way that:

- school and TAFE provision has been linked through the merged Department of Education and Training; and
- outcomes based courses of study in years 11 and 12 were intended to permit greater flexibility and fluidity between TEE and VET courses. It seems that these reforms are of little interest to the parents involved in the present research.

School Brochures

The 'school brochures' factor was included among the list of factors offered at Questions 8 and 9 because, despite the fact that schools put time and money into the development on these materials, little reference was made to them in the research literature. This factor ranked last in thirtieth place. The fact that it received an overall mean value just fractionally below the value attributed to the 'track record in VET' factor – and that it actually ranked above the VET factor in the mean of means ranking (see Table 6.1 above) – underscores the extent to which a school's track record in VET appears to have been largely irrelevant to the school choice-making processes of the parents who participated in this case study.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS: GOOD SCHOOLS

The overall picture to emerge from the Good Schools part of the survey is that there was broad agreement among parents from all school groups on the question of what makes a 'good' school.

According to parents involved in the present enquiry, and as illustrated in Table 6.1, a good school:

- has state of the art facilities;
- caters properly for the needs, talents and interests of every individual student;
- operates within a culture of high achievement, self-respect and respect for others (manifest among its students as diligence, perseverance, good behaviour and pride in personal appearance);
- has a record of strong performance in the mainstream curriculum; and
- provides ample opportunity for students to develop and pursue individual talents and interests.

The enquiry also found a high level of agreement among parents about school factors that are deemed to be of minor importance. As shown in Table 6.1, one of the

lowest-ranking factors was the school's track record in Vocational Education and Training (VET) suggesting that recent efforts to diversify the curriculum through outcomes-based courses of study in years 11 and 12 in Western Australia (Curriculum Council, 2006) have not captured the interest of many parents involved in this enquiry. Another low-ranking factor related to the idea of teachers encouraging individuality and not constantly requiring their students to conform. This finding echoes researchers and social commentators who have observed a persistent wave of conservatism sweeping Western society and influencing the choices parents make about their children's schooling (Apple, 2001; Davies & Aurini, 2006; Forsey, 2006; Hargreaves, 2003; Mackay, 2004; Popkewitz, 2007; Saul, 2006; Symes & Gulson, 2004).

Findings from the Good Schools part of the survey show that while the school choices that parents ultimately for their children make vary considerably (and are described in more detail in Chapter 7 to follow), the things they set out looking and hoping for in a school do not vary much at all.

CHAPTER SEVEN: CHOOSING SCHOOLS

Where Chapter 6 explores the school factors that parents look for as generalised indicators of a 'good' secondary school, this chapter will turn attention to the actual secondary schools that survey respondents chose for their children, and probe the circumstances that led to those school choices.

The three parts of the Parent Survey reported here are *Family Background* (Questions 1 to 4 inclusive), *Having Choices* (Questions 5 to 7 inclusive) and *Your Year 8 Child's School* (Question 8).

FAMILY BACKGROUND

As reported in Chapter 4, numerous researchers have found a strong and consistent correlation between school choice and socio-economic background. It has been repeatedly shown in Australia, Canada, the USA and Britain that well-educated, high-income parents are more likely (than low-income, poorly-educated parents) to send their children to an independent non-government fee-paying school (Beavis, 2004; Bonnor & Caro, 2007; Bosetti, 2006; Campbell, 2005; DES, 2001; Kelley & Evans, 2004; Levin & Belfield, 2003; Lubenski, 2006; Marks, 2004; Mukherjee, 1999; Nelson, 2003; Reid, 2005; Vickers, 2005; Walford, 2006). Further, that the bottom-edge of Australia's high-to-middle socio-economic populous that is likely to choose a fee-paying non-government school is moving downwards as numerous low-fee non-government schools have been established in the past twenty years in high-growth population centres on the fringes of cities across Australia (Bonnor & Caro, 2007; Campbell, 2005; MacIntosh, 2007; Symes & Gulson, 2005). Prior research has also reported that little separates the socio-economic profiles of Australian families that send their children to government and to Catholic non-government schools – except that the latter group is significantly more likely to identify as Catholic (Kelley & Evans 2004, Morgan 2001).

Family Income

Question 1 of the survey asked respondents to indicate their combined pre-tax family income by selecting one of five Income Bands:

- Income Band 1 – under \$30,000
- Income Band 2 – \$30,000 to \$70,000
- Income Band 3 – \$70,000 to \$110,000
- Income Band 4 – \$110,000 to \$150,000
- Income Band 5 – over \$150,000

The \$40,000 interval that separated each band was constant, so it was possible to combine the frequencies with which each band was selected by each school group to arrive at a mean income level (based upon Income Bands) for each school. The results from these calculations appear below in Figure 7.1.

Figure 7.1: Mean family income levels (based on Income Bands) across school-groups

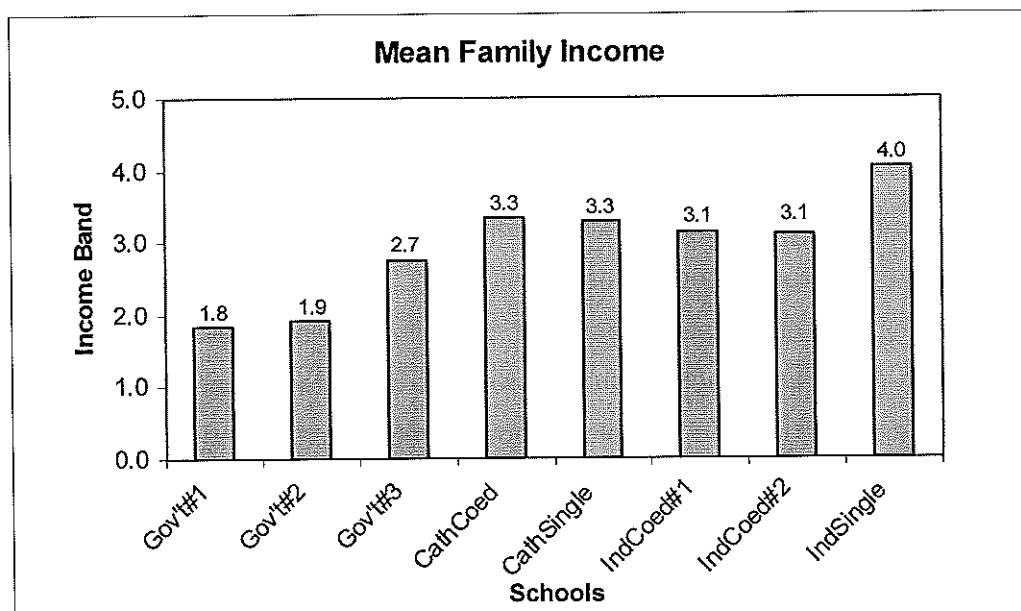


Figure 7.1 shows that the mean level of family income for all three government school groups is appreciably lower than the mean level of family income of all five non-government school groups. It also shows variation within each category of schools.

The mean family income for each of Gov't#1 and Gov't#2 falls within Income Band 1 (under \$30,000) while the mean family income of Gov't#3 (which is located in a more affluent suburb) is within Income Band 2 (\$30,000 to \$70,000). Each of CathCoed, CathSingle, IndCoed#1 and IndCoed#2 have mean family incomes that fall within Income Band 3 (\$70,000 to \$110,000) while the mean family income of IndSingle reaches Income Band 4 (\$110,000 to \$150,000).

The Gov't#1, Gov't#2, CathCoed, IndCoed#1 and IndCoed#2 schools are all located in adjoining suburbs that share similar demographic features. Gov't#3 and IndSingle schools are both located in an adjoining (but more affluent) suburb. The CathSingle school is closer to the city centre, but has good transport links to the suburbs in which the other seven schools are located.

The data in Figure 7.1 indicate that in the adjoining mixed-means suburbs from which all eight participating schools draw the majority of their students, families with higher incomes are more likely to choose a non-government fee-paying school than are their lower-income neighbours.

The higher mean family income evident here for the independent non-government school groups is consistent with prior research (Beavis, 2004; Kelley & Evans, 2004; Mukherjee, 1999). The observed variability of mean income levels across the three independent non-government school groups was also expected because IndCoed#1 and IndCoed#2 are both low-fee schools, whereas IndSingle is a long-established high-fee school.

The higher mean income of the two Catholic school groups (compared with all three government school groups) was not expected, however, because previous research

has shown that the only discernable factor that separates parents who choose Catholic schools over government schools is that they are more likely to identify as Catholic (Kelley & Evans 2004, Morgan 2001). The findings here suggest that greater financial means may also contribute to choosing a Catholic school – an anecdotal claim that has previously been made by several commentators (Price, 2007; Ryan, 2005).

Family income levels were the focus of several additional comments that respondents provided as they completed the survey:

It is a hard choice to make. Finances and proximity do play a major part of choosing. You always wonder if you made the right choice. There have been a lot of negative comments from friends with children at the local government high school, mostly saying there is nothing wrong with the local government school so why did I want to send my child to a private school, especially as I am financially not well off. I think I have done the right thing by my children. (Parent – IndCoed#1)

Felt that private school prices at average \$10,000 a year would be better spent purchasing rental property for my child, which we have done. (Parent – Gov't#3)

Both kids were at a private school – fees were just too expensive. (Parent – Gov't#3)

Other limitations: Money (Parent – Gov't#2)

Other limitations: It was either too expensive or very poor reputation. (Parent – Gov't#3)

The first two comments above exemplify the assertion made by the previous Commonwealth Minister for Education, Dr Brendan Nelson, that:

ABS statistics show that one in every five children who come from families with an annual income of less than \$20,900 attends a Catholic or independent school. ... (and) ... Nearly fifty percent of students who come from families with an annual income of over \$104,000 attend a state government school. (Nelson, 2003, np)

The latter three comments from respondents (above), when combined with mean family income data contained in Figure 7.1, suggest quite a different picture from the one Dr Nelson seeks to paint. This different picture matches key findings from previous research (Campbell, 2005; Forsey, 2006; Murkehjee, 1999) which consistently shows that:

- many more children from low income families attend government schools rather than non-government schools;
- government schools cater for a much smaller proportion of children from high income families than do non-government schools; and
- high-income families who do send their children to government schools are more likely to live in affluent suburbs where the local government school enjoys a good reputation.

Parental Education

Previous research has shown that in addition to family income, the educational background of parents is a key socio-economic factor impacting on school choice. For this reason, Question 2 of the survey addressed two aspects of respondents' educational background:

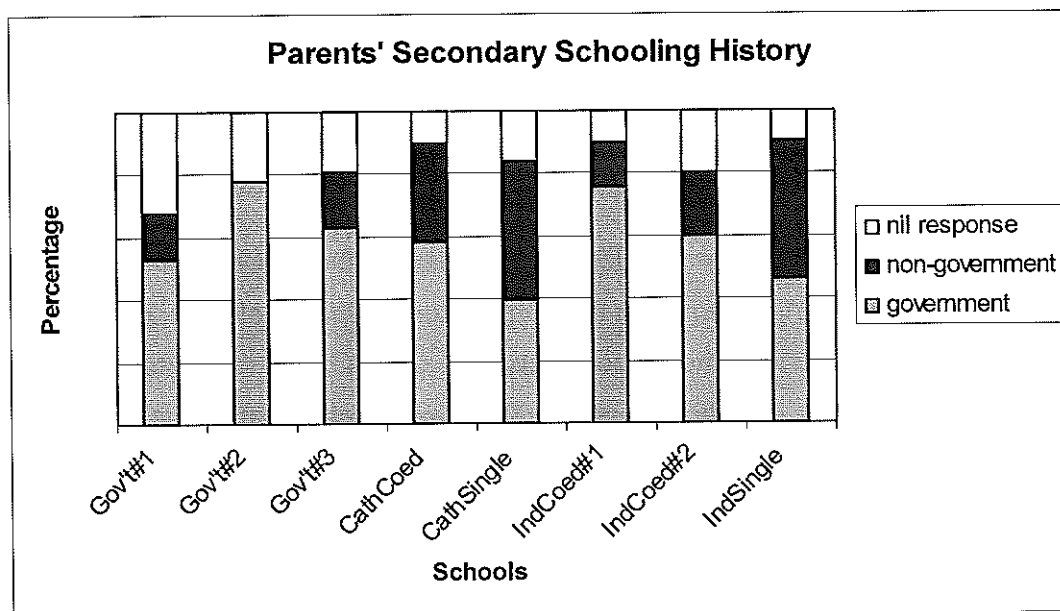
1. The type of secondary school they attended (government *versus* non-government).
2. The highest level of education (secondary school, technical college or university) that parents attained.

Provision was made for two parents to respond separately to the question (as Parent 1 and Parent 2), though no attempt was made to differentiate between mother and father in the data. Where responses to this question were provided for only one parent, it was assumed that those respondents represented single-parent families. This assumption was supported by several such respondents crossing-out the Parent

2 provision with a comment indicating “single-parent”. Family make-up was not of central interest in the present research so the only comment to make about this issue is that the incidence of what appeared to be single-parent families was noticeably low among IndSingle respondents (only 1 respondent out of 57) while the incidence of what appeared to be single-parent families was otherwise similar across the other seven schools with a mean incidence of 15.3 percent.

In relation to the type of secondary school that parents attended, no attempt was made in Question 2 to further differentiate the non-government option into Catholic and independent sectors because most of the parents filling-out this survey would have completed their secondary schooling in the 1980s when ‘private school’ was code for high-status, high-cost school. As illustrated earlier in Table 2.1, the rate at which new (often low-fee) non-government schools were established did not surge until the 1990s.

Figure 7.2: Parents’ secondary schooling history across school-groups



Approximately 59.6 percent of all respondents indicated that they completed their secondary schooling at a government school while 23.8 percent of respondents

attended a non-government secondary school. The proportion of respondents who said they attended a government secondary school was lower than anticipated because ABS (2006) data shows that approximately 76 percent of students attended government schools in 1986.

The proportion of parents who returned a nil response at Question 2 was 10.4 percent overall. Despite this relatively large nil response, Figure 7.2 clearly shows that a larger proportion of respondents from the CathSingle, IndSingle and CathCoed school groups attended non-government secondary schools than did parents from the other five schools.

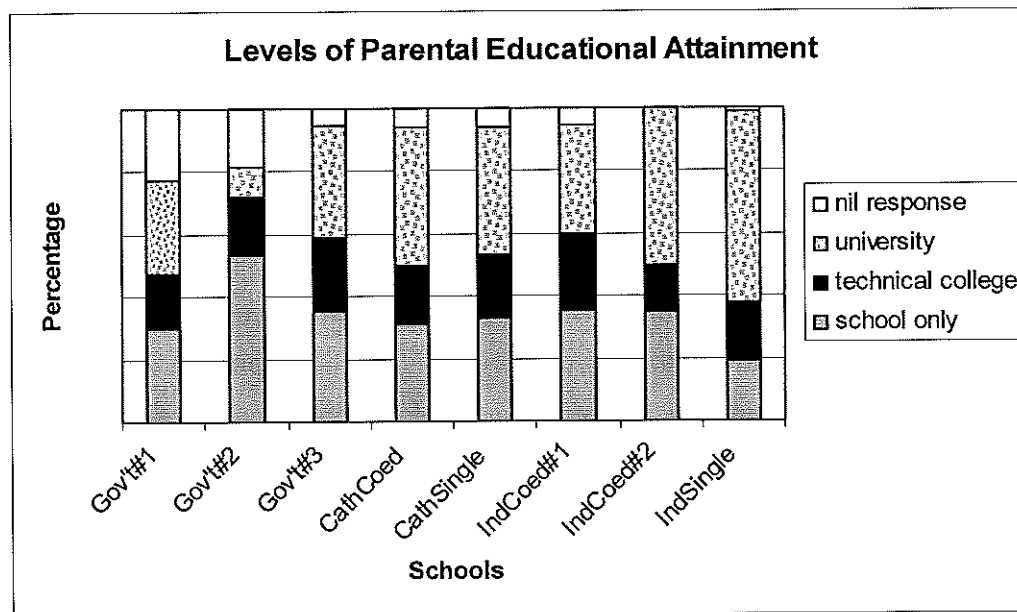
The relatively high-proportion of non-government schooling history evident among the two Catholic school parent groups reiterates earlier findings that religiosity is a key school-choice factor among parents who identify as Catholic; a sizeable proportion of their parents chose a Catholic secondary school for them to attend, and now they have made the same choice for their own children. A similar generational effect is implied in the parental school history data for the IndSingle group, the long-established high-status, high-fee independent school, whereby more than half of the parents who chose that school for their children had themselves been sent to a non-government secondary school.

In contrast, Gov't#1, Gov't#3 and the low-fee IndCoed#1 and IndCoed#2 all return a ratio of approximately 5:1 government to non-government parental secondary schooling history and none of the respondents from Gov't#2 said they attended a non-government school. This finding reiterates an earlier observation that common ground exists between parents who choose low-fee independent schools and those who choose government schools, but that a qualitative difference sets these parent groups apart from those who choose Catholic and high-fee independent schools.

In relation to the second aspect of Question 2 which focused on educational levels attained by parents, a hierarchy of attainment was applied such that university was

attributed high-status, technical college was intermediate and high school only was considered low. Results from this aspect of Question 2 appear below in Figure 7.3.

Figure 7.3: Levels of parental educational attainment across school-groups



Overall, the pattern of relative advantage for the independent and Catholic school groups that has been observed in Figures 7.1 in relation to family income levels is repeated in Figure 7.3 in relation to levels of parental education.

The school group with the highest proportion of university-educated parents and lowest proportion of school-only-educated parents is IndSingle. The reverse situation (high proportion of school-only; low proportion of university) is most striking for Gov't#2, but also extends to the other two government schools with (at best) roughly equivalent proportions of university-educated and school-only educated parents. The least advantageous ratio of university-*versus*-school-only attainment observed among the non-government schools was for IndCoed#1 which matched the 'roughly equivalent' ratio of Gov't#1 and Gov't#3. Parent groups for the remaining non-government schools all returned a higher ratio of university *versus* school-only attainment.

It is also noteworthy that across all schools, the percentage of parents who selected technical college to this aspect of Question 2 was relatively constant (ranging from 15 percent for the IndCoed#2 group and up to 24.6 percent for the IndCoed#1 group) and did not match any of the patterns of advantage/disadvantage described above.

Family Size

Question 3 asked parents to indicate the number of siblings their Year 8 child had. This question was included to gauge whether family size was a determining factor in school choice. The question was also included because some reference has been made in the research literature to the phenomenon of 'helicopter parents' who tend to have small families and constantly 'hover' around their children to make sure their needs are quickly and properly met (Davies & Aurini, 2006; McKay, 2007).

The mean number of children (including the Year 8 child) in the families of survey respondents across each school group ranged from 2.4 to 3.1, but no sector-specific patterns were evident in this data so no further analysis of this issue was conducted.

Prior Experience with this School

Question 4 asked respondents whether this was the first time they had sent a child to the particular school they had chosen for their Year 8 child. This question was included because the original intent of this study was to follow-up later in the year with a second survey which would explore the extent to which parents' initial impressions and expectations of the school matched their experience of the school over time. The decision was subsequently made to focus only on data from this initial survey so data from Question 4 became superfluous.

HAVING CHOICES

The prevailing commonsense that today's Australian parents have the right to choose a school for their children from a range of government and non-government school options is so well entrenched (at least in cities and large regional towns) that, Forsey (2006, p. 8) claims, "there is no choice but to choose". A key point to make in this regard is that debates about school choice in Australia have not really dwelt on the merits of otherwise of whether parents should have a choice, but rather, on what should be done to ensure everyone has access to the same range of choices. This contrasts with ongoing school-choice debates in Canada and the United States where the object of contention is whether provision should be made for parents to have a choice – versus maintaining the status quo that parents either send their child to the local state school or pay large fees to send them to private schools which do not ordinarily attract public funding (Davies & Aurini, 2006; Jackson-May, 2006; Levin & Belfield, 2003; Lubienski, 2006).

A large portion of the high sense of agency that many Australian parents enjoy (or endure) in relation to school choice today can be attributed to Commonwealth government funding policies that have actively supported the establishment of numerous low-fee non-government schools across Australia (Bonnor & Caro, 2007; Burke & Spaul, 2001; McCarthy, 2007; Symes & Gulson, 2005; Vickers, 2005) and state government policies that have minimised restrictions that previously dictated which government school a child could attend according to his/her place of residence (Angus, 1998; Forsey, 2006; Freund, 2001; Groundwater-Smith, 2003).

Logic suggests, however, that some Australian parents have a broader range of school options from which to choose than do others. It is clear, for example, that parents who live in the country where there is only one school within (say) 50 kilometres of home have far fewer options than those who live in the city where ten or more schools operate within 10 kilometres of home (as was the case for the area of Perth in which the present research was conducted). It is also evident from the comments about family finances that were cited above that some parents feel as though their options

are limited by high tuition fees charged by certain schools. It is likely that other factors work in other ways to limit the options of still more families.

The three questions posed within the Having Choices part of the survey probed the extent to which parents felt they had a choice about the school to which they sent their child, and then asked about any factors that limited the range of school choices that were available to them.

Degree of Choice

Question 5 of the survey asked parents "to what extent do you feel you had a choice about the school to which you have sent your child for Year 8?" and then offered four response alternatives:

- No choice
- More than one option
- Several options
- Lots of options

Figure 7.4: Degree of choice perceived by parents across school-groups

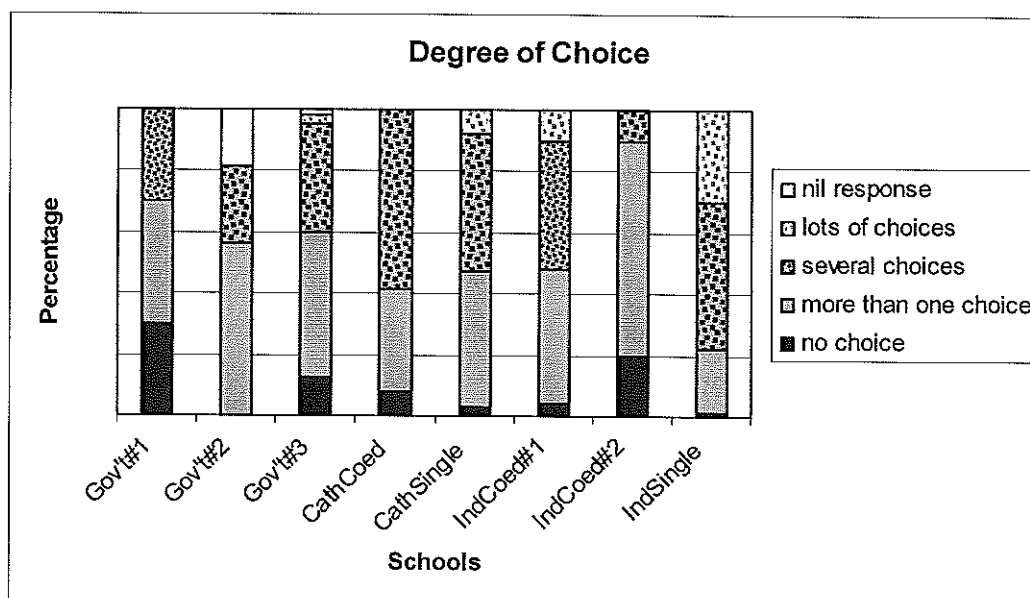


Figure 7.4 (above) summarises the proportions by which parents from each school group selected each response option provided at Question 5. It shows that the group which indicated the largest degree of choice (the highest sense of agency) is the IndSingle parent group whereby 29.8 percent of this group felt they had 'lots of choices' and a further 47.4 percent felt they had 'several choices'. In contrast, the sense of agency evident among the three government school parent groups was markedly lower: approximately 60 percent of these respondents felt they had 'more than one choice' or 'no choice', 30 percent had 'several choices' and only 3.1 percent of the Gov't#3 school indicated that they had 'lots of choices'. It is noteworthy, however, that none of the parents from Gov't#2 felt that they had 'no choice' – possibly because other government schools in the area are undersubscribed so they could have enrolled their children in those schools if they had wanted. It is also noteworthy that the pattern relating to the degree of choice that is evident for the three government school groups in Figure 7.4 loosely matches the pattern of their mean family incomes in Figure 7.1: the more affluent Gov't#3 group also reports having the largest range of school choice options.

Response patterns from the two Catholic school parent groups and the IndCoed#1 parent group illustrated in Figure 7.4 again positions them between the government school groups and the IndSingle group. Over 52 percent of the parents from each of CathSingle, CathCoed and IndCoed#1 felt that they either had 'several choices' or 'lots of choices' and a lower proportion of parents from each of these schools (from 33 to 44 percent) said they had 'more than one choice'. It is interesting to note that a small number of parents from each of these groups (from 3 to 8 percent) indicated that they had 'no choice' – even though legislation clearly states that every child is entitled to enrol free of charge in a government school (State Law Publisher, 1998).

The small 'no choice' claim that emerged from these three groups indicates that some parents who choose to send their children to non-government schools utterly disregard the possibility of sending their children to a government school as a complete non-option. This may reflect a mind-set that is implied in McCarthy's (2007)

account of a mother who decided to remove her child from a Catholic school within the family's parish due to an unresolved incident at the school: "even though her extended family were distressed by her intention to move her children from the Catholic school, she proceeded with the change to a government school" (McCarthy, 2007, p. 251). The anecdote shows how character-defining family 'imperatives' (McCarthy 2007) such as religiosity, cultural identification and single gender versus co-educational classes can operate as powerful primary filters which parents use to first work out which schools they are willing to consider. One such example from the present study is the following comment that was made in response to the prompt, "other factor/s that limited our choice":

Other schools in our area all Catholic. (Parent – IndCoed#1)

This parent from the IndCoed#1 school group appears oblivious to the possibility of sending his/her child to a government school (their very existence is not even acknowledged) and has consciously filtered-out any Catholic schools in the area.

This phenomenon may explain the pattern of Question 5 responses returned by the IndCoed#2 group whereby 20 percent felt they had 'no choice', 70 percent said they had 'more than one choice' and 10 percent felt they had 'several choices' at best. While the number of respondents making up the IndCoed#2 parent group is small (only 10 respondents representing a school response rate of 28.6 percent) the low level of agency implied in this data is not easily explained – especially among a parent group that has a mean family income of between \$70,000 and \$110,000 and parental educational levels that match or exceed those of six other parent groups in this case study. It appears that some other unidentified imperative is operating as a primary filter for this group – maybe the government school to which these families are guaranteed access has a poor reputation so is considered to be a 'non-option', or maybe the ethno-cultural basis upon which this school was established coincides with a defining family imperative that cannot readily be found in other schools.

Nature of limitations

To further explore the circumstances within which parents' school choice-making occurs, Question 7 asked respondents to indicate "what factors (if any) limited the range of school choices available to you?" They were asked to select from a three-point scale ('this was not a limitation for us', 'this limited our options a bit' or 'this was a huge limitation for us') in relation to five separate prompts:

- Other schools we looked at were too expensive for us.
- Waiting lists at other schools we liked were too long.
- Our child missed out on a specialist program/school.
- Other schools we liked are too far away or too hard to get to each day.
- Our child flatly refused to go to any other school.

Figure 7.5: Extent to which the cost of school fees limited the range of school choices for parents across school groups

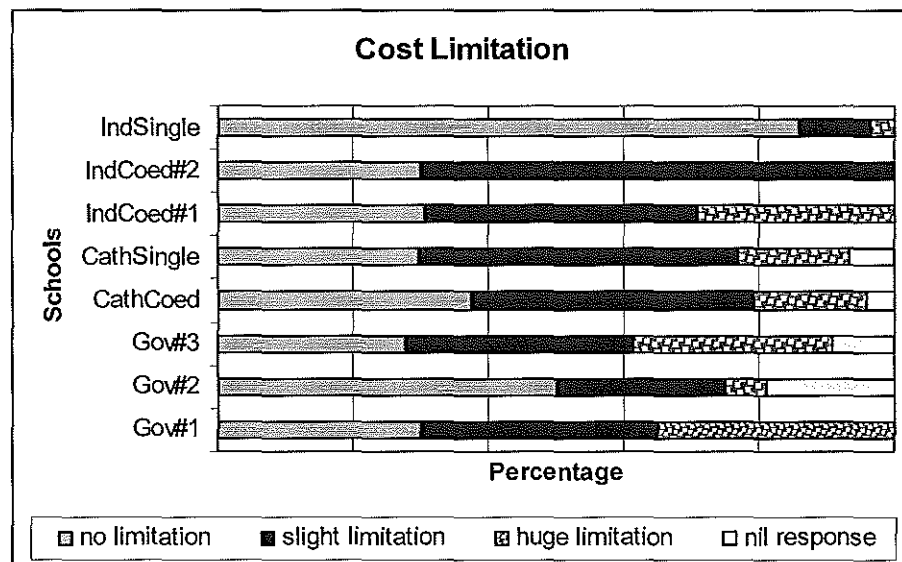


Figure 7.5 above illustrates the extent to which the cost of school fees limited the range of school choices that were available to parents across each school group.

Of the five limitations suggested at Question 7 it was found that, overall, the cost factor was the most limiting but school-specific differences emerged. In particular, 86 percent of the parents who chose the IndSingle school said that cost was not a limitation for them at all (despite annual fees of over \$12,000 per year at year 8) whereas the proportion of respondents from the seven remaining schools who said that cost had not limited their options was much lower, ranging from 30 to 50 percent with an average of 33.6 percent. This indicates that, at least for respondents involved in the present research, families with high incomes feel far less constrained by the high fees charged by elite schools than do families on lower income levels. Further, that access to schools appears to be unevenly distributed according to the financial means of students' parents.

Almost 30 percent of parents from the IndCoed#1 school indicated that the high cost of other schools they had looked at had been a huge limitation – suggesting that these parents chose a low-fee non-government school because it was what they could afford, but they actually preferred another higher-cost non-government school. None of the IndCoed#2 parent group said that costs had been a huge limitation however, which implies that financial constraints were not a major factor in their decision to enrol their child in IndCoed#2 school – 70 percent said it was a slight limitation only.

The pattern of responses to this question across the two Catholic schools was almost identical. In each case, approximately 16 percent said that costs had been a huge limitation (implying they may have chosen a different school if they could afford it), around 45 percent indicated that cost had been a slight limitation and about 33 percent said it had not limited their options at all.

Given the less privileged financial circumstances across the three government school groups outlined earlier in Figure 7.1, it is to be expected that a relatively large proportion of parents from these three groups would say that costs had been a huge limitation. The data shows, however, that while 29 and 35 percent of the Gov't#1 and

Gov't#3 respondents respectively said that cost had been a huge limitation, only 6 percent of Gov't#2 said this was the case.

Perhaps many parents who choose Gov't#2 think the idea of sending their child to a fee-paying school is so far beyond their reach that it does not bear thinking about. Or perhaps they simply do not want their child to go to a non-government school. Despite the relatively low mean family income level of respondents from Gov't#2, 50 percent of that parent group said that cost had not limited their choice at all. This may indicate a self-drafting effect whereby families with limited socio-economic means actually prefer their children to go to school with the children of families that have similar means – rather than mixing every day with children from families who are much more well-off than themselves.

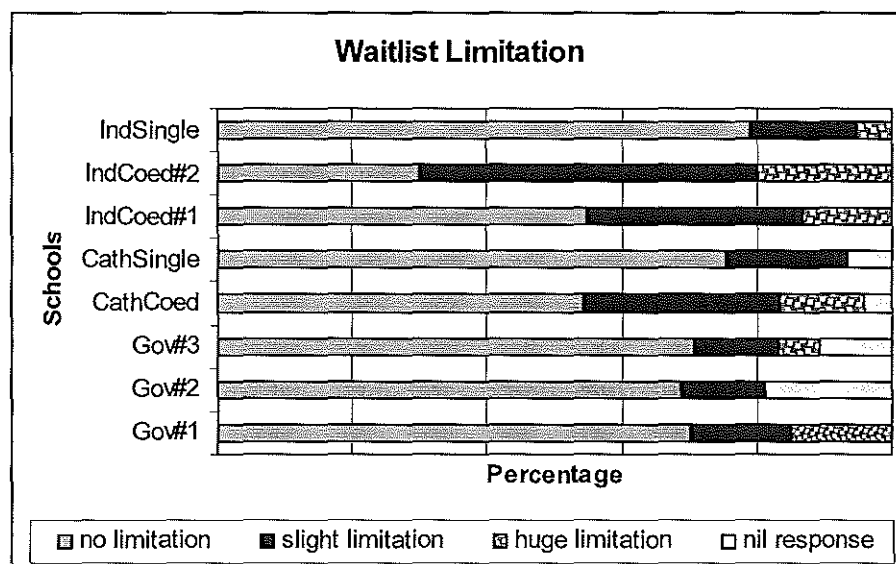
It was predicted that another factor that may limit the range of school choices available to parents is that the more popular schools tend to be over-subscribed. In such cases, schools often maintain waiting lists that parents can choose to join in the hope that a place will become available for their child. Different schools have different policies about how students move up their waiting lists:

- In government schools that are over-subscribed, all students who live within the gazetted local zone are guaranteed a place at the school. So too are students who gain a place in a specialist program offered by the school. After that, students who already have a sibling attending the school receive preference, then any remaining places are allocated according to distance 'as the crow flies' between home and the school. Time spent on the waiting list is irrelevant. There are no school-zone type enrolment restrictions applicable to government schools that are not oversubscribed.
- Non-government schools are not required to be as transparent as government schools about the process by which prospective students move up their waiting lists. The process used by all non-government schools involved in this study includes an interview with the student and his/her parents. Individuals may move up or down the waiting list on the basis of that interview. Students who

have been baptised as Catholic are also at an advantage in seeking a place at a Catholic school, and a recommendation from the local priest can further enhance a prospective student's chances of gaining a place at a Catholic school.

Figure 7.6 below illustrates the extent to which the length of waiting lists at other schools that parents liked limited the range of school choices that were available to parents across each school group.

Figure 7.6: Extent to which the length of waiting lists at other schools limited school choices for parents across school groups

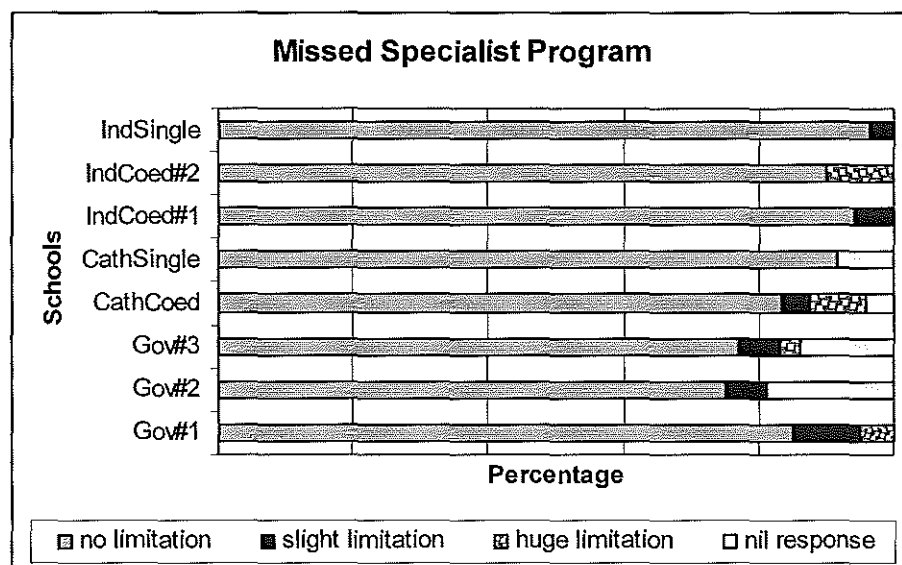


Compared with the extent to which costs limited the range of options (see Figure 7.5), Figure 7.6 shows that waitlists were less of a constraint. It also shows that the parent groups which felt most constrained by the length of waiting lists were the IndCoed#1, CathCoed and (especially) the IndCoed#2 school groups. This implies that a sizeable proportion of parents who chose these three schools had put their children's names onto waiting lists at other schools but were not successful in gaining places at those schools. In contrast, upwards of 70 percent of parents from the three government schools, the IndSingle and the CathSingle school all said that the length of waiting

lists at other schools had not limited the range of school choices available to them at all.

It was noted earlier that one way to by-pass school zone restrictions to gain a place at an over-subscribed (and by implication, relatively desirable) government school is to gain entry to a specialist program conducted by that school. Specialist programs are also conducted by some non-government schools, as is the case for CathCoed which offers fee-reduction scholarships to students who gain a place in two sport-related specialist programs.

Figure 7.7: Extent to which missing out on a specialist program/school limited school choices for parents across school groups



Responses to the specialist programs element of Question 7 appear above in Figure 7.7. The data indicate that missing out on a specialist program is not a major constraint among any of the school groups, with an average of 86.6 percent of respondents across all schools saying that missing out on a specialist program did not limit the range of school choices available to them. There is some suggestion in the data that specialist programs may attract slightly more interest among the government school groups and the CathCoed school – all of which currently offer

specialist programs – but this effect is not strong. One interpretation of this finding in relation to specialist programs is that the strategic effort the government school sector has committed in recent years to developing and promoting specialist programs (ranging through the arts, various sports, languages and academic extension) may not be capturing the interest of a large proportion of parents.

Prior research indicates that another factor which can limit the range of school choices available to parents is the distance between home and school and/or difficulties associated with travelling to/from school each day (Beavis 2004, English 2006). Of the five factors explored at Question 7 (i.e.: cost, waitlists, specialist programs, distance and child's preferences) it was found that the distance factor was second-only to cost in terms of limiting choice.

Figure 7.8: Extent to which the distance between home and school limited school choices for parents across school groups

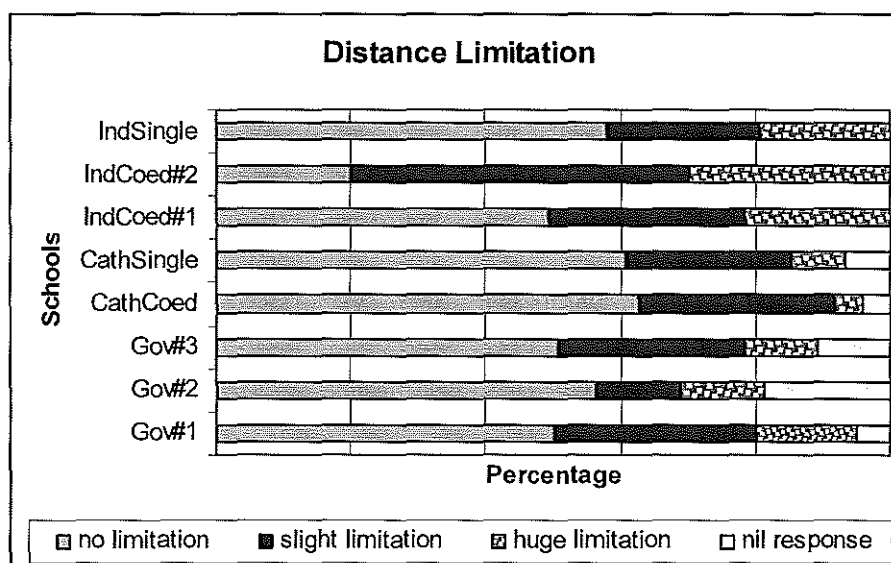


Figure 7.8 above illustrates the strength of this effect across the eight school groups and hints at the possibility of a sector-specific pattern. A mean of 23.7 percent (ranging from 20 to 30 percent) of parents across the three independent schools said

that daily travel and/or distance was a huge limitation, while corresponding means for the government and Catholic school groups were 12.7 and 6.2 percent respectively.

Figure 7.8 also shows that only about half of all parents said that daily travel and/or distance was not a limitation. This may indicate that public transport provisions for school students in metropolitan Perth are inadequate, or it may simply show that parents like their children's schools to be relatively close to home. Support for the latter conclusion comes from McCarthy (2007) who found that some parents like their child's school to be close to home so it will be easier for them to be involved in school activities such as canteen duty and regular informal contact with teachers.

It is unclear whether parents modify their school choices due to the daily travel and/or distance factor, but the findings here suggest that the typically local nature of government schools may be to their advantage in this regard. Comments that were added by several respondents reiterate this observation:

Felt the local schools were lacking in some aspects: didn't bother to look out of our area. (Parent – IndCoed)

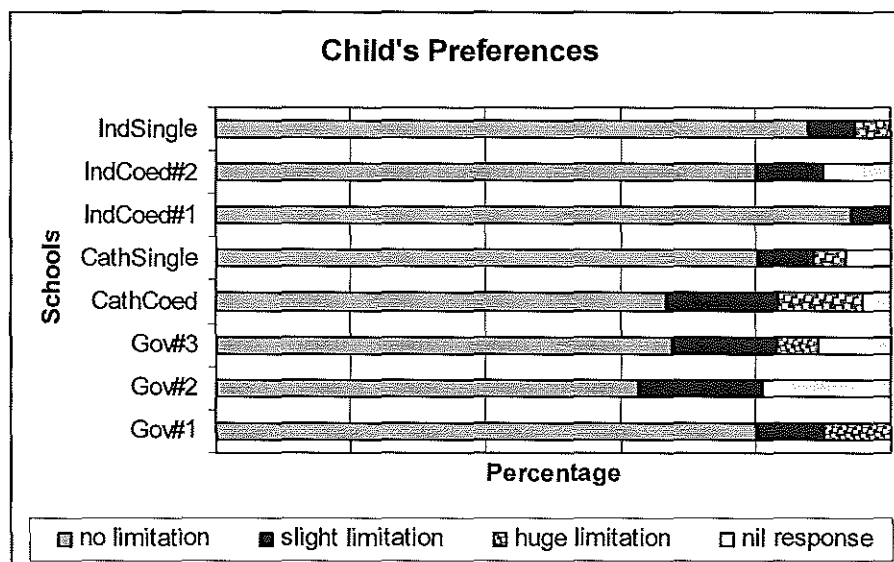
This was the only school in our area that was suitable and met most of our expectations. (Parent – Gov't#3)

The last limitation included at Question 7 related to the child's preferences and, in cases where the child's preferences differed from those of the parents, the extent to which this became a limitation for parents. It asked parents to indicate the extent to which "our child flatly refused to go to any other school" limited the range of school choices that were available. This aspect of Question 7 seeks to build on prior research from the United Kingdom which found that the children of working class children are likely to have more say (than their middle-class peers) about the school they will attend (Walford, 2006).

Figure 7.9 below contains data from the child's preferences aspect of Question 7. If falling into broad working-class and middle-class categories can be taken to coincide with income levels and parental educational background, Figures 7.1 and 7.3 (above) imply that a loose hierarchy of socio-economic status coincides with the order in which schools appear below in Figure 7.9 with IndSingle near the top of the scale and Gov't#1 near the bottom.

The data in Figure 7.9 reveals the possibility of a pattern consistent with Walford's (2006) research, but the effect is not strong and no claims of statistical significance can be made. Relatively few respondents from school groups near the top of the graph in Figure 7.9 indicated their child's preferences limited their range of choices, while a slightly larger proportion of parents from school groups near the bottom of the graph identified this factor as a limitation.

Figure 7.9: Extent to which the child's preferences limited school choices for parents across school groups



At Question 7 respondents were also invited to add any "other factor/s that limited our choice". Table 7.1 overleaf details the range of other factors that were raised in

additional comments provided at Question 7. The order in which they appear coincides with how frequently each issue was raised by respondents.

Table 7.1: Other factors that limited parents' school choices at Question 7

Limitation	Frequency	Example comment
Unfamiliarity with the process of enrolling child into secondary schools in Western Australia	6	The two private schools we liked were full. We didn't have our name down anywhere as we lived in the country and didn't fully realise the process of getting children into private schooling.
Gender – wanted single-sex	6	In surrounding suburbs there are no single-sex schools around. Hence no other choice.
Gender – wanted co-ed	5	We would not send our child to a single-sex school.
Siblings – wanted all children at same school (link to co-ed)	5	Having siblings at the same school.
Anti government schooling	5	We did choose this school because we lived in a mining town and the government school there was <u>very</u> poor.
Religion – required Catholic	5	The religious denomination of the school was an important factor
Religion – none wanted	5	Wanted a non-denominational private school – that was not available.
Boarding	5	Local Boarding – were living in Pilbara at the time.
School Zone	4	Feeder primary schools also limit choices. Once you commit to a primary school, it is a very difficult decision not to follow-through to the connected high school.
Religion – not Catholic so hard to get into a Catholic school	3	We're not Catholic so we couldn't jump the queue at the school we wanted.
Logistics	3	Logistics especially important for single parents and those from lower socio-economic background due to limited resources including time.
Anti private schooling	2	We did not want to consider private school education.
School Size	2	Other high schools too big.

Several of the issues that appear in Table 7.1 reflect family imperatives which are manifestations of “what they consider essential to their own character” (McCarthy, 2007, p. 251). This includes the factors relating to gender, keeping siblings together at school, religious affiliation and being anti-private schooling. It is interesting to note that for these factors, strong alignment with either side of those “fences” was expressed by several respondents. For example, while six respondents declared a

clear preference for single-gender schooling, a similar number indicated an equally strong preference for co-educational schooling. Several comments also revealed that preferences relating to school gender make-up are sometimes influenced by the gender make-up of the family: several families with children of mixed gender said they had chosen a co-educational school because they wanted all of their children to attend the same school.

Several other issues that appear in Table 7.1 are of a more logistical nature. Several parents said they were ignorant of the need to engage early-on in the school choice process, and/or of steps they needed to take to maximise their chances of getting their child into the school of choice. School zones continue to limit other parents, especially when combined with a lack of information about options. A couple of parents commented on the sheer size of some schools, while several others had chosen to send their children to a boarding school rather than the government secondary school available in their country town. On this point, it is noteworthy that the IndSingle school (which had boarding facilities) conducted parent information evenings in several high-income mining towns in the Pilbara, and this had been pivotal in the decisions of several respondents who had sent children to that school.

Stage at which choice was made

Question 6 of the survey asked parents "at what age/stage was your Year 8 child when you decided on this high school?" The rationale for this question was three-fold:

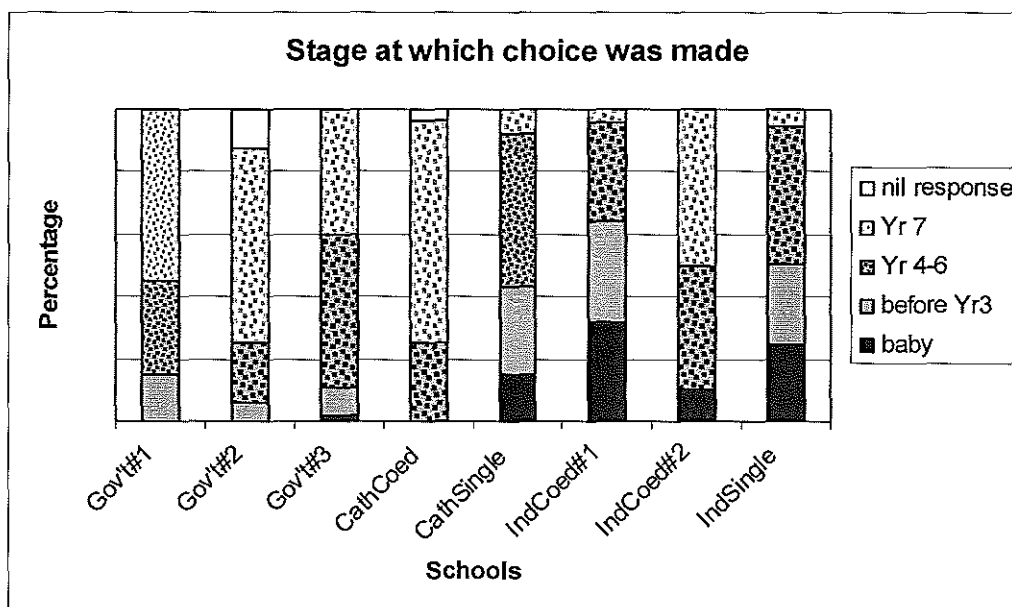
- Several researchers have referred to the highly strategic approach to child-rearing that many (especially middle-class) parents have adopted in recent decades; a phenomenon Lareau (2002) describes as 'concerted cultivation'. It was anticipated that one indicator of highly strategic choice-making would be early engagement in the choice-making process, whereas parents who leave these decisions until later in their child's schooling may be less calculating, less decisive

and/or more carefree. It has already been revealed in comments at Question 7 (above) that several respondents felt constrained by their lack of knowledge about getting their child into a preferred school and they think they should have engaged in the process much earlier.

- Many secondary schools offer school information sessions to the parents of prospective students. In the case of government secondary schools, many such sessions target the parents of children who live in the school's local area and are in the final one or two years of their primary schooling. This question was designed to reveal the extent to which such timing of information sessions coincided with the point at which parents decide upon a school for their child. The context for this facet of Question 6 rests with an idea raised by Holmes (2006) that school reputations are powerful 'evidentiary shortcuts' which mean that "we've often made up our minds before we even come across evidence that doesn't support the conclusions we expect to make, so we typically don't even get a chance to ignore or dismiss it" (Holmes, 2006, p. 11). It follows that parents who choose early may thereafter be impervious to the virtues of other schools – or to any shortcomings of the school they have chosen. Further, schools that leave their marketing drive until prospective students are one or two years away from entering secondary school may find that they have left their run too late.
- The notion of selecting a school according to individual needs, interests and talents implies that parents delay their school choice-making until their child is mid-way through his/her primary school years when such talents, needs and interests should have had time to emerge.

The percentage of respondents from each school group who selected each of the four stages/ages offered in Question 7 appear overleaf in Figure 7.10. Overall, it shows that parents who chose a non-government school generally arrived at their school-choice decision earlier than did parents who chose a government school.

Figure 7.10: Stages at which parents across school groups decided on the secondary school their Year 8 child attended



Between 43 and 64 percent of parents from the IndCoed#1, IndSingle and CathSingle groups had settled upon a school for their child before he/she reached Year 3 (in which most children turn 7 years of age) and less than 8 percent delayed their decision until their child was in Year 7. In the context of Holmes' (2006) observation that once decisions have been made, people become selective about how they process subsequent information – supporting evidence is attributed more credibility than opposing evidence – it will take a major upheaval to sway early choice-makers from their school choice.

The early choice-making among the IndCoed#1, IndSingle and CathSingle groups may also reflect long waiting lists that apply to certain preferred non-government schools in metropolitan Perth and may signal that these three schools fall into that category. It further suggests that about half of the parents who chose these three schools were either indifferent to tailoring their school choice according to their child's needs and talents, or were confident that the school they had chosen would cater for the needs and talents of all students it enrolled.

Among parents who chose a government school, over 80 percent of respondents made their decision during the last 4 years of their child's primary schooling, and between 40 and 62 percent delayed this decision until their child was in Year 7. Some of this delay may be because parents do not hear whether their child has gained a place in a specialist program at a government school until he/she is mid-way through Year 7, but may also reflect the fact that parents do not have to take any action to secure a place for their child in their local government school. All they have to do is turn up at the school with proof of residence, and fill-out an enrolment form. The relative delay may also hint at a degree of hedging for some parents who may have preferred a different school but were not able to send their child there – due to reasons explored in the analysis of responses to Question 7.

Parents who sent their children to CathCoed and IndCoed#2 were comparatively late in their choice-making. This may be due to equivocation among these parents: over 90 percent of them delayed their decision until their child reached Year 4, and 71 and 50 percent of CathCoed and IndCoed#2 parents respectively delayed this decision until their child was in Year 7. The lateness of these decisions – and the fact that neither of these two schools have waiting lists – suggests that of these parents may have preferred a different school, but settled on CathCoed or IndCoed#2 when they found that a place at their preferred school was not available. Such a scenario is implied in the following comment:

It may be of interest to you that many students who went to (CathCoed) primary school did not go to (CathCoed) high school, but instead went to (CathSingle). (Parent – CathSingle)

YOUR YEAR 8 CHILD'S SCHOOL

Question 8 was the biggest question (in terms of space occupied) in the survey and comprised the same thirty school factors that appeared in Question 9.

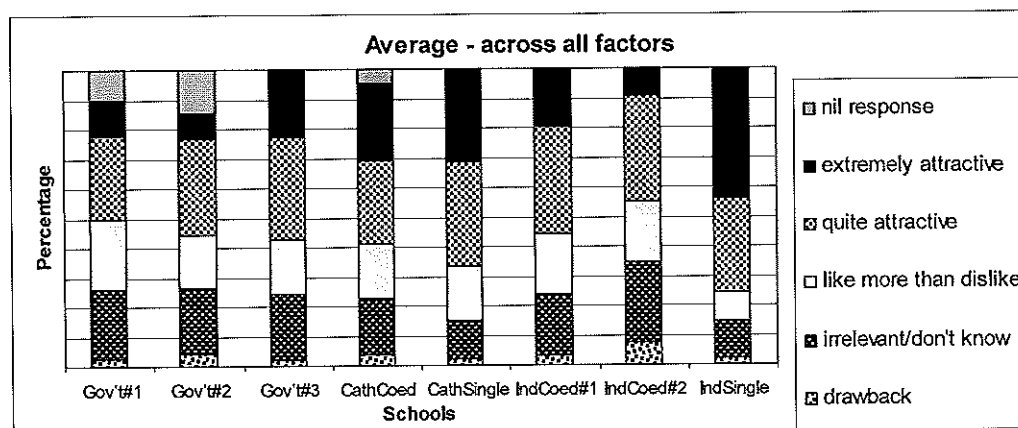
While Question 9 was framed to explore a generalised construct of what makes a 'good' school, Question 8 was designed to gauge parents' impressions about the particular school to which they had sent their Year 8 child – things they liked about that school, things they *really* liked about that school, and things they did not like but were prepared to live with. Question 8 asked respondents to consider each of the thirty school factors in the context of the school to which they had sent their Year 8 child, and to indicate how their child's school rated on a five-point scale: 'drawback of this school', 'irrelevant or don't know', 'I like this more than I dislike it', 'quite attractive factor' and 'extremely attractive factor'. The reason this scale was skewed towards the positive was the assumption that parents who decide to proceed with enrolling a child at a given school are likely to perceive more virtues than faults in the school – especially at the beginning.

Two points of the response scale were offered for respondents who felt ignorant or ambivalent about the school factors. One was the 'irrelevant or don't know' option which assumed that if respondents did not know about a factor, that factor was not likely to heavily influence their school choice. Further, if they had not made a point of finding out about that factor, it was largely irrelevant to their choice-making. The other (slightly more positive) ambivalence option was 'I like it more than I dislike it'. This option was offered for respondents who felt they knew about a particular factor, but did not have strong feelings either way about it. It was assumed that by selecting one of these two response-options, respondents were indicating that the factor in question had little bearing on their school choice. Figure 7.10 below contains a summary of Question 8 data across all thirty factors for each school. It shows lower levels of ambivalence/ignorance among the IndSingle group (with 23 percent choosing 'I like this more than I dislike it' or 'irrelevant or don't know') and otherwise

similar levels of ambivalence/ignorance across the remaining six schools (ranging from 32 to 49 percent).

Another assumption that will influence the analysis of Question 8 data that follows was raised in introductory comments to Section Four, that the school to which parents would *like* to send their child is likely to be a school that is imbued with whatever factors they consider to make a 'good' school, whereas the school to which they *actually* send their child may differ due to a range of school-choice limitations. It follows that parents with the least choice-making obstacles are best placed to achieve a close match between what they consider to be a good school and key features of the school to which they actually send their child. Accordingly, the analysis here will focus on the top-ten factors that were revealed through analysis of Question 9 to be key factors that make a 'good' school.

Figure 7.11: Mean percentages for all graduations of the Question 8 scale across all thirty school factors for each school group

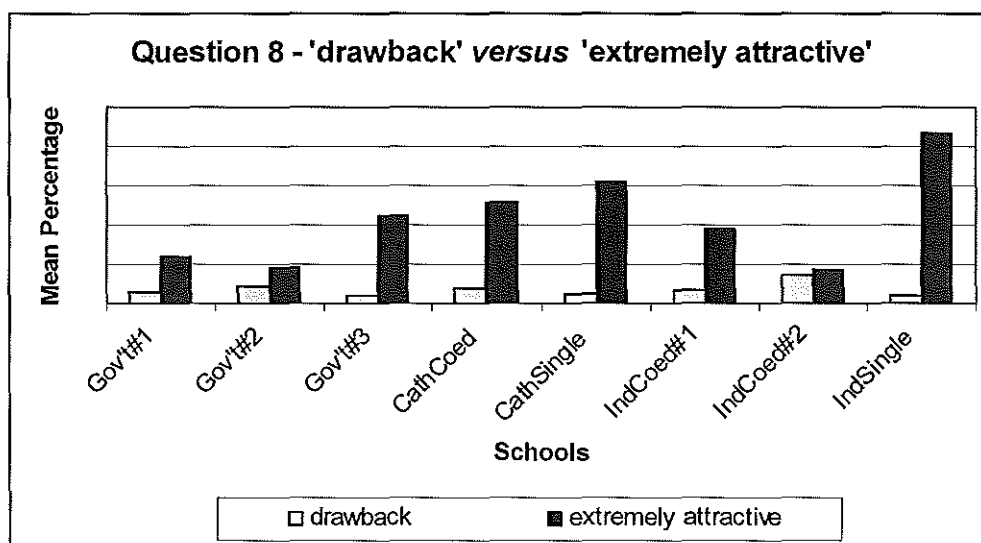


Before moving into analysis of Question 8 data on a factor-by-factor basis, the overall impressions that parents held about the schools to which they sent their children are noteworthy. Figure 7.11 above illustrates mean data across all factors at Question 8 and yields an overview of impressions and expectations that parents from each school group held about their child's school as he/she commenced secondary schooling at the start of 2007. It shows that the main difference across the eight

schools was the rate at which parents chose the 'extremely attractive' option. Across-schools variation in the proportion of parents who chose the 'quite attractive' option was minimal, and it has already been noted that minor variations occurred in the proportion of parents who chose the 'like more than I dislike' and 'irrelevant or don't know' options.

Figure 7.12 below excludes the three mid-scale responses to Question 8 ('irrelevant or don't know', 'I like this more than I dislike it' and 'quite attractive factor'), and shows only the percentage of respondents who selected the extremes of the scale: 'drawback of this school' and the 'extremely attractive factor'.

Figure 7.12: Mean percentages with which upper and lower extremes of the Question 8 scale were selected across all thirty school factors



Overall, Figure 7.12 shows that parents consistently perceive more attractions than drawbacks of the school they choose for their child. It also shows that the disparity between attractions and drawbacks varies across the eight schools in this study.

The IndSingle school fares best in this extreme attractions *versus* drawbacks comparison, followed by the CathSingle school and (closer to the pack but still slightly ahead) the CathCoed school.

When extreme attractions *versus* drawbacks are compared across the three government schools and the two low-fee independent schools, ratings gained by the three government schools are similar if not better than those received by their low-fee independent counterparts. Govt#3 school (located in quite an affluent suburb and a school that recently underwent significant physical and organisational reform) is perceived to have more extreme attractions and fewer drawbacks than either of the low-fee independent schools. Further, the school that fares least well in this comparison is IndCoed#2 where the difference between perceived extreme attractions and drawbacks is negligible. While IndCoed#1 rates more extreme attractions than either of Govt#1 or Govt#2, it also rates slightly more drawbacks than Govt#1.

These comparisons prompt questions about why an increasing proportion of parents choose to pay roughly \$4,000 per year in school fees to send their children to low-fee independent schools when, even in their own eyes, the pros and cons of low-fee independent schools are not markedly better than those of neighbouring free government schools. The answer may reside with the intangible notion of “the sum of the parts being greater than the whole” and be something that has not been captured in this survey. Alternatively, it may rest with the concept of “unsanity” that Holmes uses to explain how we “tend to take evidentiary shortcuts, giving added weight to the evidence that supports our pre-existing assumptions” (2006, p. 11) thereby elevating the importance of reputation – something that is currently more of a stain than an adornment for government schools in Australia (Campbell, 2005; Forsey, 2006; Vickers, 2006).

How each school rates in relation to 'good school' factors

Analysis of Question 8 will now change gear to focus on how each school was rated in relation to the top-ten high ranking 'good school' factors identified in Question 9. The basis for the analysis that follows will be the series of graphs provided below in Figures 7.13 to 7.22.

Figure 7.13 Question 8 ratings for the 'School Facilities' factor

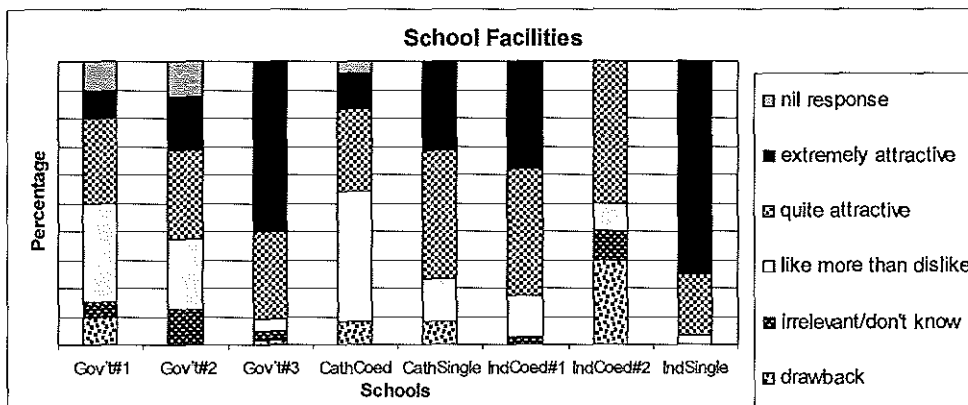


Figure 7.14 Question 8 ratings for the 'Individual Needs' factor

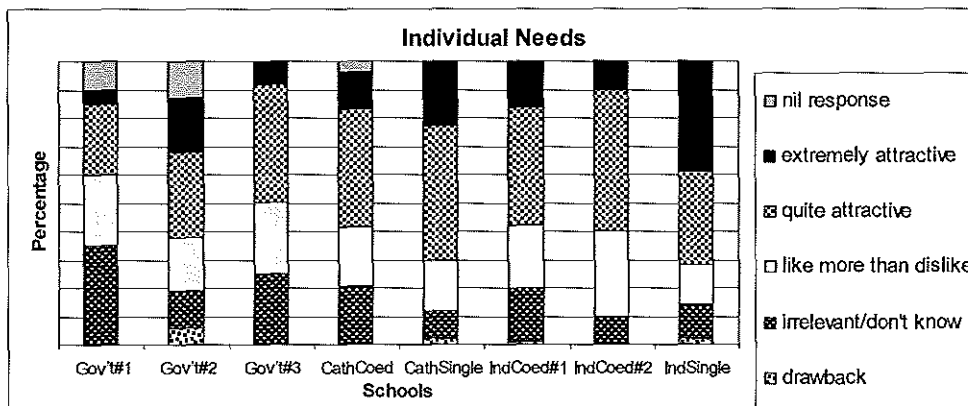


Figure 7.15 Question 8 ratings for the 'High Achievement' factor

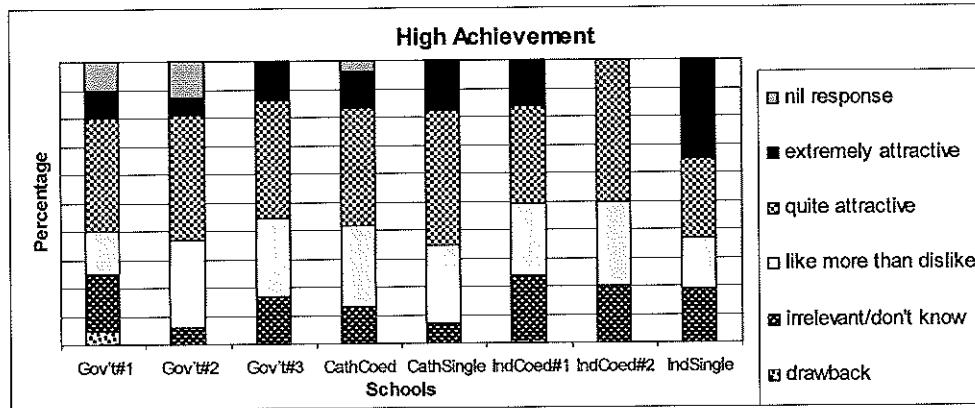


Figure 7.16 Question 8 ratings for 'Student Appearance' factor

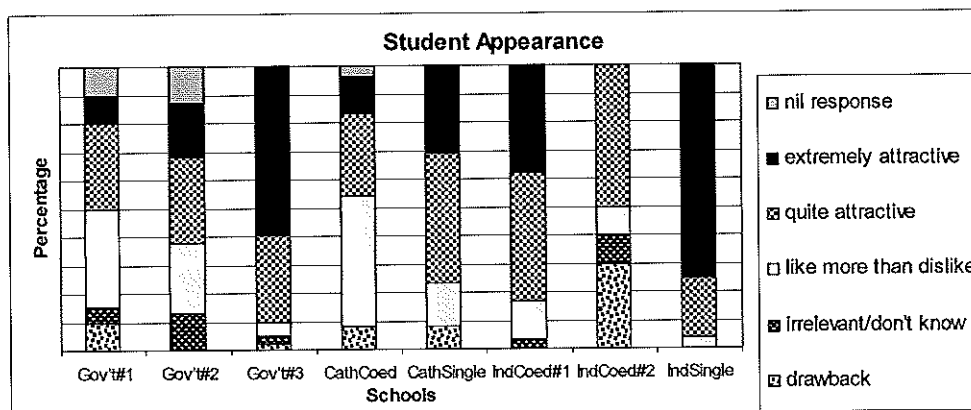


Figure 7.17 Question 8 ratings for the 'Reputation - Discipline' factor

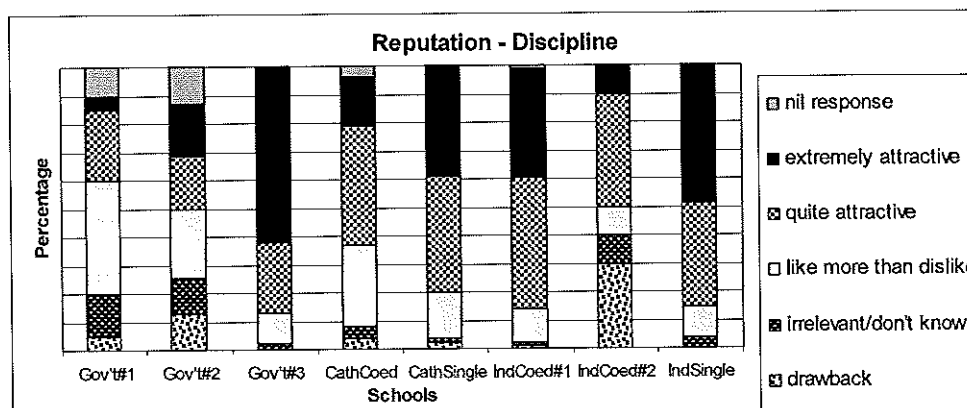


Figure 7.18 Question 8 ratings for the 'Mainstream Curriculum' factor

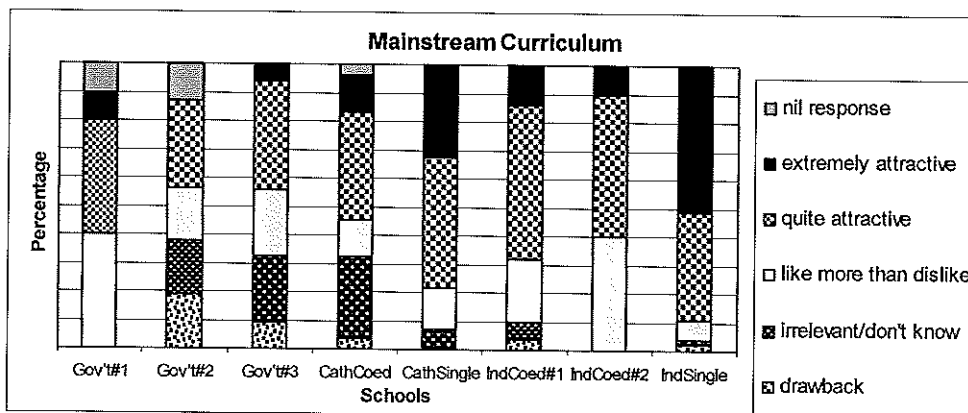


Figure 7.19 Question 8 ratings for the 'Curriculum - Interests' factor

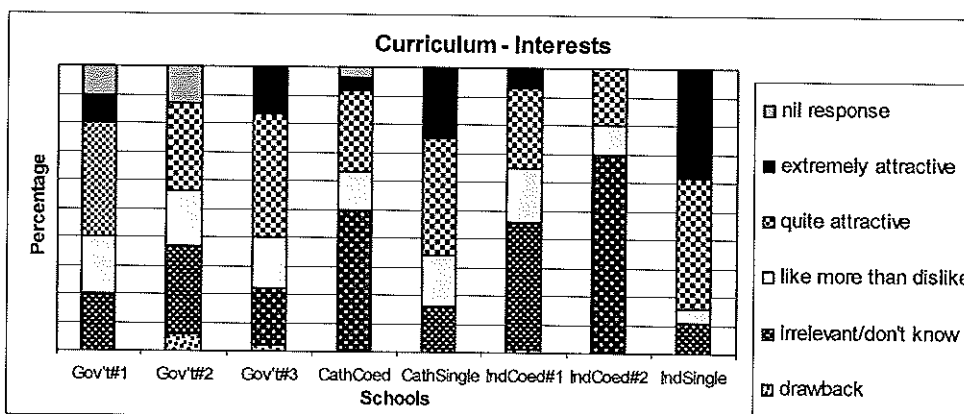


Figure 7.20 Question 8 ratings for the 'Inside Information' factor

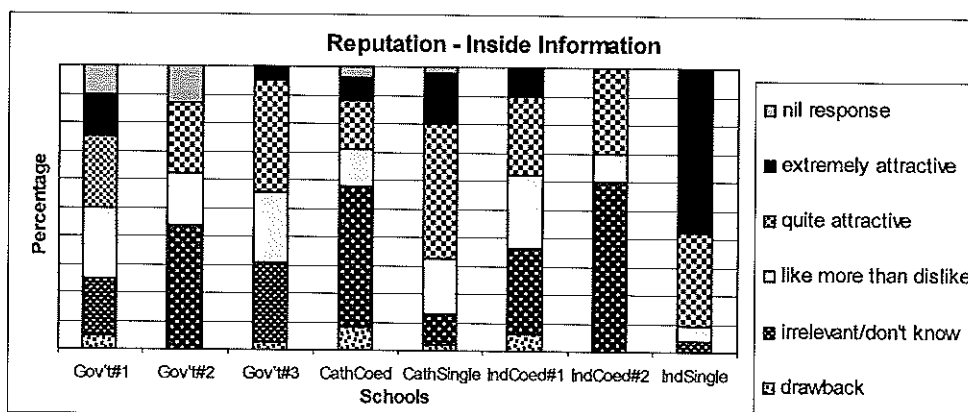


Figure 7.21 Question 8 ratings for the 'TEE Track Record' factor

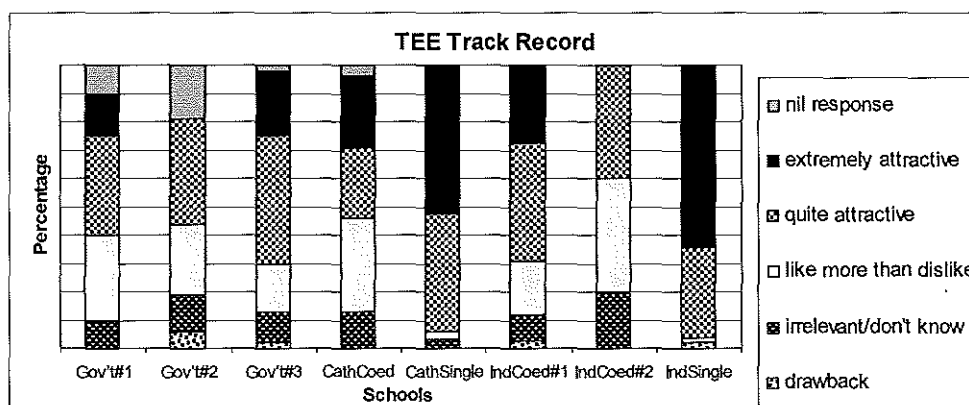
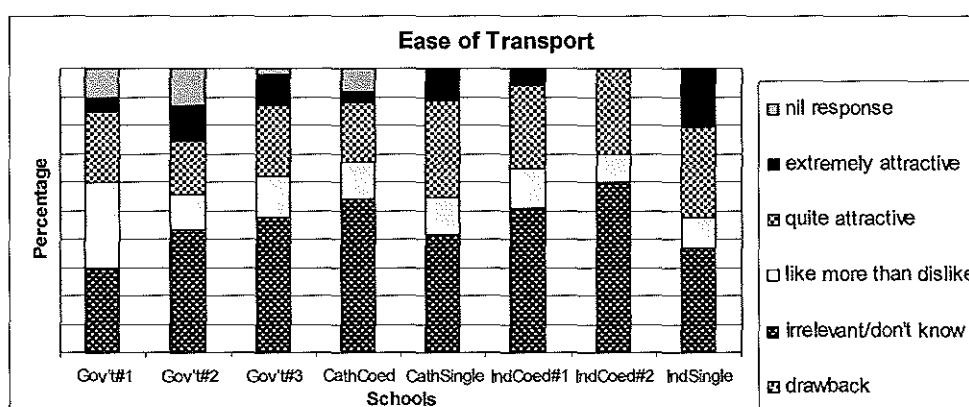


Figure 7.22 Question 8 ratings for the 'Ease of Transport' factor



Factor-by-factor disaggregation of Question 8 data provided in Figures 7.13 to 7.22 above yields a mixed picture of how each school rates against the top-ten ranking 'good school' factors identified in Question 9.

Parents were not asked to directly rank the schools in relation to each other so it is not possible to conclude a definitive ranking across the eight participating schools from data in Figures 7.13 to 7.22, but an implied cross-school rating emerges. For example, the IndSingle school consistently out-performs every other school on almost every factor while the Gov't#3 gains high ratings for several factors (school facilities, student appearance and reputation - discipline) and relatively low ratings for others (mainstream curriculum). The consistently low rating of the IndCoed#2 school is also

noteworthy. Given the strong drift of students away from government schools, it might be expected that the three government schools would consistently lag behind in comparisons with their Catholic and independent counterparts. What Figures 7.13 to 7.22 show, however, is that the lowest-rating school overall across the ten 'good school' factors is IndCoed#2. This was also evident earlier in Figures 7.11 and 7.12 in which Question 8 ratings were aggregated across all thirty school factors. The repeated low-rating of IndCoed#2 implies that either:

- key attractions for IndCoed#2 were not captured in this survey; or
- government schools to which the IndCoed#2 group of parents would otherwise have sent their children were not part of this research and that those alternative government schools would have rated even lower.

IndCoed#2 is on the periphery of the geographical area from which the eight schools in this research were drawn. While IndCoed#2 would potentially draw many of its students from the same areas as other schools in this research, the fact that it fares badly in comparisons drawn with the three government schools (and the two Catholic and two other independent schools) in this research suggests that most of its students come from suburbs beyond the research area; from school zones that are linked to other (less attractive) government schools than the three included in this study.

If the IndCoed#2 data is excluded, Figures 7.13 to 7.22 continue to yield a mixed picture but with some suggestion of a pattern. Several factors seem to operate on a school-by-school basis, in particular 'school facilities', 'student appearance' and 'reputation – discipline'; all factors for which Gov't#3 rated comparatively well. For other factors (notably 'individual needs' and 'mainstream curriculum'), there seems to be a pervasive government *versus* non-government demarcation which augers badly in each case for the government sector. It is also evident that, despite the relatively high rating achieved by Gov't#3 on several factors, the other two government schools consistently rated less well than the Catholic schools or the remaining independent schools. It appears that Gov't#3 may be an anomaly among government schools –

one of the “islands of excellence” to which the secondary government schools principals’ association refers (WASSEA, 2007, p. 5). Despite this individual strength, Gov’t#3 has not been able to escape the mantle of being a ‘government school’ and impressions about that school in particular being coloured by negative impressions of the government school system as a whole. This phenomenon was described by Okuma-Nystroem (2005, p. 61):

since the school is a system good (in the sense of being a ‘commodity’), the value of the school is defined by the education system, and the individual school cannot completely freely define its values.

The poor rating of the government sector in relation to the ‘mainstream curriculum’ factor (see Figure 7.16) may stem from ongoing controversy played out in the Western Australian media from 2004 in relation to the extension of OBE into courses of study for years 11 and 12 (ABC, 2006; Channel 7, 2006; Hiatt 2006, 2007b). During this period, a campaign conducted by PLATO cast ‘OBE’ as a pejorative term and created uncertainty and concern among parents and the broader community about the quality of schooling provided across the state (ABC, 2006; Hiatt, 2006). Despite the fact that the introduction of OBE and associated changes to the courses of study were overseen by a Curriculum Council which draws input jointly from government, Catholic and independent school sectors, most criticisms of OBE reported in the media implied that it was primarily an initiative of the government sector. This assumed link was not confined to the media. For example, the following quote from a refereed paper that Berlach (2004) presented at the Australian Association for Research in Education Conference implies that he believes the move to OBE was driven entirely by the Department of Education and Training in Western Australia (DETWA):

Is it a coincidence that the mass exodus (of teachers from WA government schools) reported above occurred around the time of the DETWA’s move to an OBE model of education? (Berlach 2004:7)

Berlach (2004) fails to explain that the move to OBE in Western Australia was a cross-sectoral initiative which applied equally across all school sectors – it was not specific to government schools in its formulation nor application.

Outcomes based education underpins the *WA K-12 Curriculum Framework*, which began implementation in all schools in this State in 1999. The move to an outcomes based approach to education in year 11 and 12 is consistent with this Framework and has the endorsement of all school system/sectors and all universities in this state. (Curriculum Council, nd, para. 2)

The widespread community assumption that OBE is 'owned' by the government school sector, combined with the fact that its implementation in the context of year 11 and 12 courses of study has been shrouded with controversy, has specifically tainted community confidence in government schooling and left non-government schools largely unscathed (Robson, 2005). This may contribute to the relatively low rating attributed to the 'mainstream curriculum' factor in government schools compared with the non-government schools in this case study.

The apparently sector-specific low rating of government schools in relation to the 'individual needs supported' factor is also noteworthy (see Figure 7.12). Given that the 'independent needs supported' factor was the second-ranked good school factor at Question 9 but is perceived to be a (relative) systemic weakness of the government sector, it emerges as a potentially important strategic focus for government secondary schools.

The relatively high rating of Gov't#3 in relation to the 'reputation – discipline' factor also warrants comment. The research literature suggested that this factor was likely to return a pattern in which government schools rated lower than independent and Catholic schools (Beavis, 2004; Campbell, 2005; Jackson-May, 2006; Symes & Gulson, 2005). What is evident in Figure 7.15, however, is that school-specific (rather than sector-specific) responses have been returned in relation to this factor: Gov't#3 school is the star performer; the rating of Gov't#2 is on a par with that of CathCoed;

and the lowest-rating school for 'reputation – discipline' was Gov't#1. This reflects Forsey's (2006, p. 15) observation that while it is widely assumed that discipline in non-government schools is generally better than it is in government schools "it is particular government schools that cause people the greatest concern".

Of the remaining twenty school factors, the only other clear patterns to emerge from analysis of Question 8 data related to 'extra-curricula: sport', 'single-sex *versus* co-educational', 'reputation of teachers' and 'family traditions'.

Figure 7.23 Question 8 ratings for the 'Extra-curricula: Sport' factor

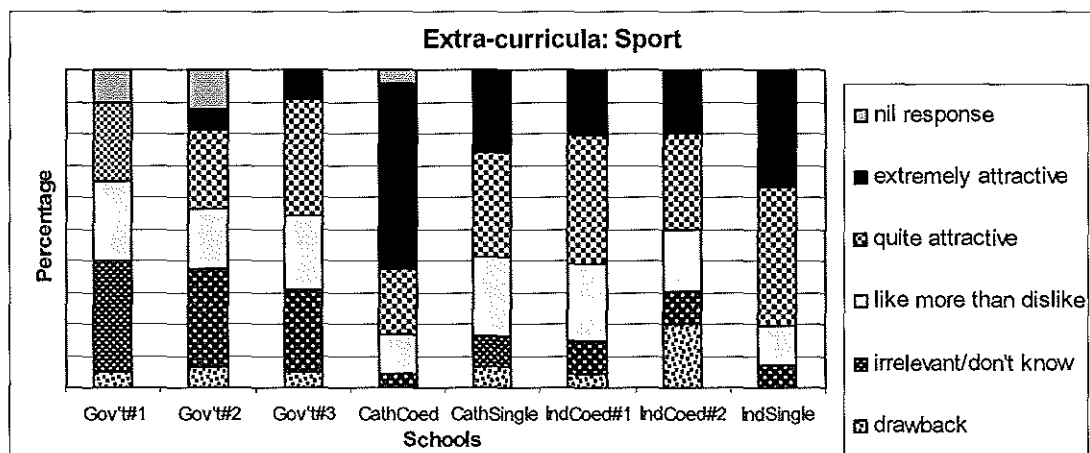


Figure 7.21 shows that the government sector loses significant ground to its Catholic and independent counterparts (including the otherwise low-rating IndCoed#2) on the basis of extra-curricular sporting opportunities. This finding could be of strategic significance to the government sector. It could be argued that being involved in sporting (and other) school-based competitions and activities helps students to form a sense of affiliation to their school, build team-work skills and dispositions, and engender healthy lifestyle choices including regular exercise, perseverance and meeting challenges – all of which reflect the compact of 'traditional values' reported by Beavis (2004) as being of critical importance to parents.

Figure 7.24 Question 8 ratings for the 'Single-sex versus Co-ed' factor

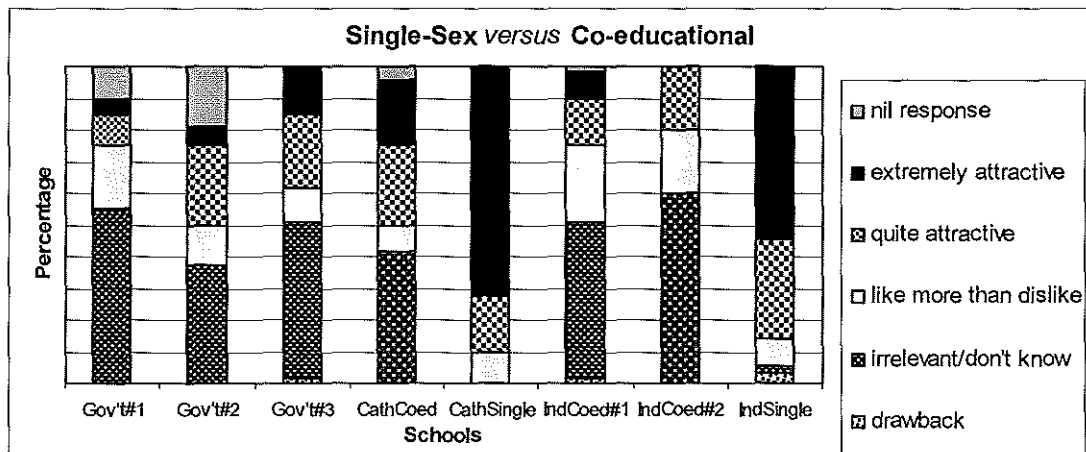


Figure 7.22 further illustrates the relative importance across schools regarding the previously discussed single-sex *versus* co-educational factor. It shows that the single-sex feature of CathSingle and IndSingle was extremely attractive or quite attractive to at least 85 percent of the parents who chose these schools. It also shows, however, that the co-educational feature of the remaining six schools was extremely attractive to at least a portion of all-but the IndCoed#2 school. The fact that many of the students attending CathSingle and IndSingle are drawn from metropolitan locations outside the catchment of the other schools in this study means that it is not possible to say whether the proportion of parents who express a preference for single-gender schooling is representative of the broader parent population. There are many more co-educational schools in metropolitan Perth than there are co-educational schools, and none of the non-government schools that have been established in recent decades are single-gender schools (ABS, 2006), so it appears unlikely that the preference for single-gender schooling observed here is widespread.

Figure 7.25 Question 8 ratings for the 'Reputation of Teachers' factor

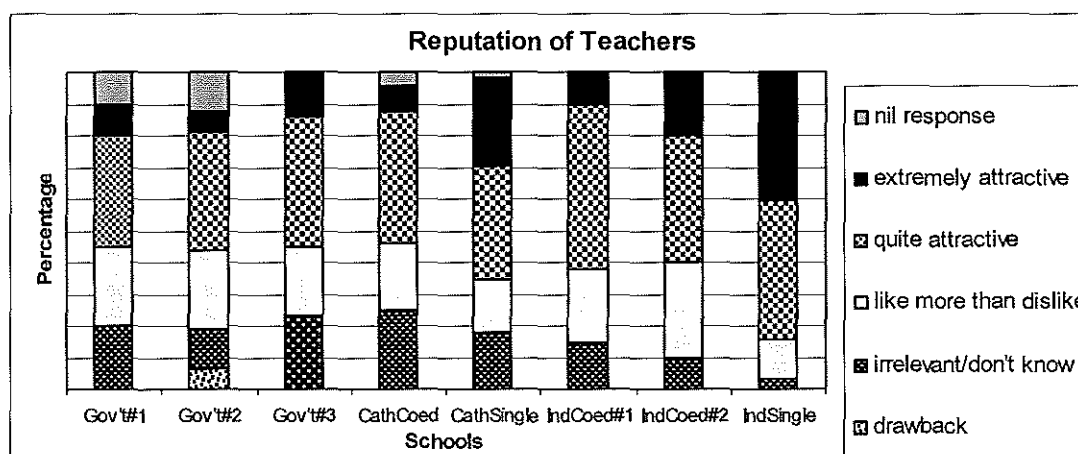
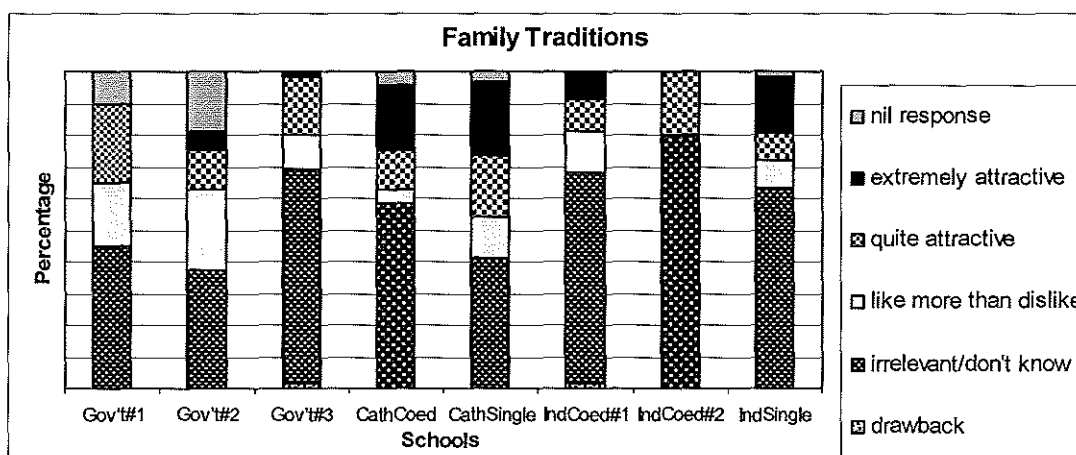


Figure 7.23 shows that the 'reputation of teachers' factor returned a mild sector-specific effect which, again, reflects badly on the government sector. While between 45 and 55 percent of the three government school groups indicated that the 'reputation of teachers' was an attractive or extremely attractive feature of their child's school, 8 percent of Gov't#2 felt this factor was a drawback. In contrast, the corresponding range of attractive or extremely attractive responses to this factor across the five non-government schools (including the otherwise low-rating IndCoed#2 school) was 45 to 83 percent and none of the parents from these groups indicated that the reputation of teachers was a drawback. While numerous researchers have commented on the way non-government schools can be more selective about the students they enrol and/or expel (Aulich, 2002; Bonnor & Caro, 2007; Campbell, 2005; Forsey, 2006; Swan, 2005; Symes & Gulson, 2004), far fewer have commented on the way non-government schools are also more able to be selective about the teachers they employ and/or dismiss – which contrasts with the centralised staffing arrangements that apply across government schools in Western Australia and hurdles associated with dismissing government school teachers who are under-performing (Angus, 1998). Findings here (illustrated below in Figure 7.23) suggest that these staffing arrangements may adversely affect the reputation of government school teachers and may be contributing to the exodus of students from government schools.

Figure 7.26 Question 8 ratings for the 'Family Traditions' factor



The final sector-specific effect to be discussed here relates to the 'family traditions' factor. While the effect in relation to this factor is mild, its potential significance lies in the fact that over 70 percent of today's parents attended government secondary schools (ABS, 2006). If family traditions were a major factor in school choice, this historical weighting in favour of government secondary schools would benefit the government sector, but findings illustrated above in Figure 7.24 indicate that this is not the case. A personal/family history of government schooling functions as only a minor source of generational loyalty whereas a personal/family history of attending a Catholic or a single-sex school (again excluding IndCoed#2) is more compelling. In school marketing terms (Holmes, 2006b), it appears that cross-generational product loyalty is stronger for the non-government sector than it is for the government sector.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS: CHOOSING SCHOOLS

In contrast with the broad agreement found in data reported in Chapter 6 relating to the Good Schools part of the survey, data from the remaining Family Background, Having Choices and Your Year 8 Child's School parts of the survey reported here in Chapter 7 have revealed marked differences in the impressions and circumstances behind the school choices that parents ultimately make. While some of this variation

occurred on a school-by-school basis, irrespective of the sector to which the schools belong, several factors functioned as points of separation between government and non-government schools, with government schools trailing their non-government counterparts in most cases.

It was also found that while all parent groups reported a reasonable sense of agency in relation to school choice, the groups with the greatest sense of agency were those with the highest levels of income and education.

Elaboration of key survey findings, illustrations of how they are manifest in the data and ways in which they link to prior research will be detailed Chapter 8 to follow.

SECTION 5

SYNTHESIS

The impetus for this portfolio was a steady and increasing drift of students away from government schools in Australia, especially for their secondary schooling. Concern has been expressed that if this trend was to continue, it may undermine the contribution that inclusive public schooling has made to the level of social cohesion, egalitarianism and stability that characterises Australian society today (Boston, 1999; Cannold, 2007; DES, 2001; Karmel, 2001; Saul, 2006).

The approach taken through this portfolio has been to explore from various angles the range of factors that influence the school choices that today's parents make, and how those factors might be contributing to the drift of students away from government schools. Sections 2, 3 and 4 of the portfolio each focused respectively on a range of local, global and personal factors which were examined through a combination of secondary and primary research.

This final section of the portfolio will move beyond the point of identifying the key factors to address the deeper purposes that have driven this exploration, that is:

- Which of these factors are within the scope of governments to change?
- How could government policy be altered to arrest the drift of students from the government school sector?

CHAPTER 8: INFLUENCING CHOICES

This final chapter which will summarise points gathered in preceding sections of the portfolio and draw them together to inform a handful of recommendations. The chapter begins by listing the main points gathered through Sections 2, 3 and 4 of this portfolio, and includes commentary about how each point appears to influence school choice as manifest in primary and/or secondary research. The list of main points leads to a small number of pragmatic recommendations that draw on an empirical understanding of the local, global and personal context within which school choice is occurring in Australia today. The chapter ends with a deliberately provocative idea which does not pass the test of pragmatism or political palatability, but which addresses head-on several issues that appear to be undermining government schooling in Australia today.

The main points gathered through Sections 2, 3 and 4 have been organised into three broad categories: findings, factors and issues:

- The findings are drawn directly from the case study. The commentary provided for each finding links it to the secondary research discussed in Sections 2 and 3. In many cases, these findings feed into the factors and issues that follow.
- The factors form part of the backdrop of parents' choice-making and are drawn primarily from the secondary research. While these factors are not necessarily problematic, they need to be considered when framing changes to policy because they impact on the way parents engage in school choice.
- The issues are problems. They are, however, amenable to government action and will be the focus of recommendations provided at the end of this chapter.

FINDINGS

Five key findings emerged through the case study detailed in Section 4. While the case from which these findings were drawn is a typical precinct with a typical number and range of school types, the quantum of selection bias within these findings is unknown.

1. A high level of agreement exists among participating parents about what they want from schools: what they consider 'good' schools to offer and be like

This is the key finding from the Good Schools part of the survey, and has already been noted at the end of Chapter 6. According to parents involved in the present case study, a 'good' school has state of the art facilities, caters properly for the needs, talents and interests of every individual student, operates within a culture of high achievement, self-respect and respect for others (manifest among its students as diligence, perseverance, good behaviour and pride in personal appearance), a record of strong performance in the mainstream curriculum and ample opportunity for students to develop and pursue individual talents and interests.

In the enquiry, the top-ranking 'good' school factor by some way was the quality of school facilities. The relationship between school facilities and school budgets was discussed in Chapter 2. It was noted that some non-government schools operate with relatively modest budgets (Nelson, 2003), but many have been able to combine high levels of privately-sourced funding with increasing amounts of public funding over the past decade and now boast opulent facilities (Vickers, 2005) and that nearly all government schools have modest facilities by comparison. Across the eight schools participating in the enquiry, the findings indicate that IndCoed#2 may be among the modestly-resourced non-government schools with poor facilities to which Nelson refers, whereas Gov't#3 is atypical of government schools in this

regard, having recently undergone a massive upgrade. It is noteworthy that prior to Gov't#3's upgrade, vacancies were routinely available at the school but, since the upgrade, the school has been over-subscribed. The remaining two government schools involved in the enquiry are more typical of government secondary schools in Australia – more than forty years old with dated buildings and facilities (Campbell, 2005; Cannold, 2007; Vickers 2005). Accordingly, they rate poorly in relation to the school facilities factor which parents consider to be the premier indicator a 'good' school, some distance behind the remaining non-government schools (see Table 7.12).

The cluster of second-to-ninth ranked 'good' school factors found through the enquiry coincided with a compact of 'traditional values' which Beavis (2004) found to be of primary importance to parents. The cluster included a solid mainstream curriculum, high achievement (manifest as strong performance in school exit examinations) and high standards of discipline and student appearance – the latter of which serves as a proxy indicator of diligence, compliance, discipline and personal pride (Beavis, 2004; English, 2006; McLeod & Yates, 2006).

While VET programs and diversity of provision is considered to be among the natural strengths of Australian government schools (ACER, 2002; Keeves, 2006; Rothman, 2003), enquiry findings suggest that this is unlikely to help them arrest the drift of students to the non-government sector in the present circumstances. It could even exacerbate the situation as expansion of VET provision may be viewed as a further retreat from the mainstream curriculum and tertiary entrance exams, both of which commanded much more interest among participating parents than VET provision (see Table 6.1).

2. Levels of agency among the parents participating in this enquiry varied: parents with higher income and education self-reported higher levels of agency

An important feature of the enquiry was that all eight participating schools were located within a five kilometre radius of each other, so were effectively competing with each other for the same students. Accordingly, despite sharing similar views about what constitutes a 'good' school, the fact that participating parents ultimately chose eight *different* schools presents three possibilities relating to the school choices made by those parents.

One possibility is that all schools in the enquiry are sufficiently similar – that they deliver equally on all of the factors that parents consider important – that choosing one school over another is essentially choosing the same service. A second possibility is that while parents recognise differences that exist between schools, they do not view those differences as deficiencies in some schools and strengths in others but rather, as qualitative differences that result in a diverse range of school offerings from which they can choose. The third possibility is that some schools are more desirable than others and that some parents have more scope than others to get their children into the more desirable schools.

Findings indicate that the third scenario is most prevalent. Figure 7.11 shows that the extent to which the eight participating schools were considered by parents to possess strengths *versus* deficiencies varied considerably and that schools from the government sector generally fared less well than their non-government sector counterparts. The enquiry also found that a close match exists between schools perceived to have a lot of strengths (from Figure 7.11) and parent bodies with more privileged socio-economic profiles (see Figures 7.1 and 7.3). Further, this match coincided with self-reported levels of agency whereby a higher level of agency was evident among the non-government parent groups (see Figure 7.4). Figure 7.5 shows that parental income was

the greatest limitation for those with a reduced sense of agency but the following comment from a parent who chose a government school reminds us that it is not just about financial constraints:

Logistics are especially important for single parents and those from lower socio-economic backgrounds due to limited resources including time.

(Parent – Gov't#2)

The enquiry directly probed the sense of agency that parents felt in relation to school choice and, unlike Beavis (2004) who found that all Australian parents had a high sense of agency, it was found here that agency roughly coincides with the type of school parents choose – those who choose a non-government school feel they have a wider range of options than those who choose a government school (see Figure 7.4). Another dimension to this finding was that among the three government school parent groups, the one with the highest mean family income also reported the largest range of school options, and the factor that most limited the range of choices available to the parents of government school students was cost (see Figure 7.5). This implies that when high-income parents send their children to a government school, they are likely to have actively *chosen* that school, whereas a sizeable proportion of low-income parents who send their children to a government school have possibly done so because it was the only available option. Such a scenario has previously been painted by Campbell (2005), Forsey (2006) and Swan (2005), all of whom point out that the government schools that wealthy well-educated parents choose are typically located in affluent suburbs and are largely filled by the children of other wealthy well-educated parents.

Conversely, the children of low-income parents with limited education are likely to attend school with the children of other low-income/education parents. Such divisions further impoverish the social capital available to children from families of limited means (Caldwell, 2005; McGaw, 2005) and

intensify divisions between high-wealth and low-wealth suburbs across Australia (Swan, 2005).

The rationale offered by the recent Liberal Commonwealth government for making public funds available to non-government schools has been that it protects and expands the school choices available to parents (Kemp, 2000; Nelson, 2003). Labor governments have also upheld the principle of making public funds available to non-government schools, but not as a mechanism to enhance market forces. Rather, as the partner of opportunity and equity. This was most evident in the Whitlam years with “distributive justice” (Whitlam, 1972, p. 7) funding to low-income schools, a policy that “resuscitated Australia’s dual education system” (Burke & Spaul, 2000, para. 52) and ensured the survival of many private secondary schools.

The present enquiry and previous research shows, however, that the extent to which choices are available to parents is unevenly distributed. Parents with limited means have limited choices while those with significant means have far more choice (Cannold, 2007; DES, 2001; Kelley & Evans, 2004; Mukherjee, 1999). It follows that some children get a lot more of what their parents want for them, while other children are left to make the most of what their parents can get.

Another more tentative finding relating to agency that emerged through the self-reporting approach taken in the enquiry was that many participating parents appeared to exercise school choice within boundaries they have (consciously or otherwise) set for themselves. An effect of this phenomenon is that low-income families not give any indication of feeling aggrieved by not being able to send their children to high-fee schools. Those schools simply do not appear on their ‘shopping list’. At the other end of the scale, one parent from the high-income bracket indicated that he/she had ‘no choice’. It would seem that this parent had set different personal boundaries for his/her

range of school-choices because in his/her eyes, sending children to the local government school (where all children are guaranteed access) was a complete non-option.

3. *The decision to send one's child to a non-government school occurs sooner than the decision to send one's child to a government school*

As illustrated in Figure 7.9, parents who choose a non-government school for their children tend to make this decision earlier than parents who choose a government school. Further, nearly one-fifth of the non-government parent group reached this decision when their children were still babies. It follows that many participating parents who choose a non-government school reached this decision before their child's particular needs or talents were likely to have surfaced. If the provision of specialist programs in government schools is designed to appeal to the parents of talented students and prevent them from moving their children to non-government schools, findings from this case study suggest that it has not been working – at least for the parents involved in this enquiry. Nearly 70 percent of participating parents who chose a non-government school made their decision before their child reached year 7 when nominations for various specialist programs in government schools are invited.

The differential timing of the school-choice decisions made by parents who ultimately choose government versus non-government schools may also be significant in the context of the concept of “unsanity” (Holmes, 2006a, p. 11) discussed in Chapter 4. Holmes argues that once a school choice has been made, parents become selective – in ‘unsane’ ways – about how they process subsequent information: supporting evidence is attributed more credibility than is opposing evidence. It follows that only a major upheaval will sway early choosers from their initial school choice. It also means that the strategy widely adopted in recent decades by non-government schools to

operate as K-12 schools (ABS, 2001) enables them to gain and retain the loyalty of parents from an early point in their children's lives.

The relative school-choice delay among government school parent groups may also result from government schools often being viewed as the fall-back option (Caldwell, 2005; DES, 2001; Forsey, 2006). A number of parents from the enquiry who sent their children to a government school may have preferred to send their child to a non-government school, and it may not have been until the 11th hour – when it became clear to them that such an option was not viable – that they resorted to their fall-back option. Two comments from parents who ultimately choose Gov't#3 are suggestive of this situation:

Wanted a non-denominational private school – that was not available.
(Parent – Gov't#3)

The two private schools we liked were full. We n't have our name down anywhere as we lived in the country and n't fully realise the process of getting children into private schooling. (Parent – Gov't#3)

Of the five likely restrictions to parental choice that were explored in the enquiry, the one most likely to force parents to activate their fall-back option related to costs, and the parent groups most affected by cost limitations were those who sent their children to government schools (see Figure 7.5).

4. Some school credentials/shortcomings function on a school-by-school basis while other credentials/shortcomings serve as points of division between the government and non-government sectors, with the government sector invariably perceived to be deficient by comparison

As expected, the enquiry found that the high-fee IndSingle school gained the most favourable overall rating across the thirty school factors. Also, reflecting the quote provided in Chapter 1 from the mother expressing her anxiety about

schools for her daughter, several comments offered by parents in the survey indicated a clear demarcation between the government and non-government sectors:

We not want to consider private school education. (Parent – Govt#3)

Both my children attended (local government) primary school but when we moved to (new suburb) I made the decision to go private. Best decision I've ever made – worth every cent! (Parent – CathCoed)

Poor reputation of state schools. Poor performance in TEE of state schools. Perceived behavioural problems of students in state schools. (Parent – IndSingle)

Ratings gained by the remaining seven schools about whether the school factors were considered to be attractions or drawbacks reveal more school-by-school variability (rather than clear divisions by sector) than might be predicted from prior research (Bonnor & Caro, 2006; Forsey, 2006; Vickers, 2005). The two Catholic schools rated in second and third places, then across the remaining schools, the three government schools gained similar if not better ratings than those gained by their low-fee independent counterparts (see Figure 7.11).

The ordinary overall quantitative ratings attained by the low-fee independent schools were embellished by comments volunteered by some parents from the low-fee independent schools:

The school does not respond to parents' concerns at times. (Parent – IndCoed#1)

The school hasn't quite lived up to my expectations but not sufficiently so for me to change. (Parent – IndCoed#1)

Some suspicion the school values its own reputation over the needs of individual students (personal experience). (Parent – IndCoed#2)

This finding reiterates the earlier observation that among the large group of parents who are currently choosing non-government schools, the sub-group most likely to switch back to the government sector comprises parents who are now choosing low-fee independent schools.

The finding also raises questions about why these particular parents are choosing to pay upwards of \$4,000 per year in school fees to send their child to a low-fee independent school when, even in their own eyes, the pros *versus* cons of the school they have chosen are not overwhelmingly positive. The answer may rest with the notion raised by several researchers (Bonnor & Caro, 2007; Campbell, 2005; Forsey, 2006; Saul, 2006; Symes & Gulson, 2005) and discussed in Chapter 5 that parents are retreating from government schools as “the private school becomes a means of protecting children against some of the many uncertainties of life in post-welfare Australia, including inadequate government schools” (Campbell, 2005, p. 8).

A handful of school factors on which all three government schools consistently rated below all schools from the non-government sector, that is: attention to individual student needs, quality of the mainstream curriculum, extra-curricula sporting opportunities and reputation of teacher quality (see Figures 7.12, 7.16, 7.23, and 7.25 respectively). Given the high level of importance attributed in particular to the ‘individual needs supported’ and ‘mainstream curriculum’ factors as indicators of a ‘good’ school – in second and fifth places respectively – these factors emerge as priority issues for the government sector.

5. Recent efforts by Australia's government schools to diversity and specialise do not appear to have captured the interest of most parents

It was shown in Chapter 2 that at its establishment, government schooling in Australia was characterised by a high degree of centralised control designed to ensure uniformity, efficiencies of scale and fairness (Angus, 1998; Burke & Spaul, 2001; Wight, 2003). While these characteristics contributed to relative parity in the quality of school provision within each state, some felt that it also frustrated innovation, encouraged conformity and tolerated mediocrity (Angus, 1998; Parish, 1989). Devolution of more authority and accountability to school principals and permission for schools to localize programs so they could be more reflective of the context, needs and perspectives of their communities were key elements of major reform agendas for government schooling across Australia, manifest in Western Australia as the *Better Schools* report released in 1986 (Angus, 1998; Barcan, 1991; Gilbert, 1991).

While pervasive meta-rules stymied progress of that initial reform effort (Angus, 1986), changes have gradually taken root and the rigid uniformity of the past has begun to slip, particularly among secondary schools (DES, 2001; Forsey, 2006; WASSEA, 2007). A key manifestation of this growing diversity has been the establishment of specialist schools and specialist programs for a range of pursuits across various sports, languages, music, performing arts, agriculture, aviation and academic programs (Angus, 1998; DET, 2008; Groundwater-Smith, 2001; Hiatt, 2005; Rothman, 2003).

As outlined in Chapter 3, the government sector's rationale for specialist programs has been twofold: to enable selected students to develop identified gifts and talents at school; and to enhance the ability of schools that offer such programs to attract more students (Angus, 1998; Marks, 2004). Findings from the present enquiry, however, show that specialist programs were not highly compelling among the majority of participating parents – they were more interested in the quality of the mainstream curriculum and

ensuring that their children can pursue a wide range of interests and talents at school (see Table 6.9).

A mild effect observed in the data was that parents who chose a government school attributed more value to specialist programs than parents who chose a non-government school. This suggests that while parents who send their children to government schools value specialist programs, those programs do not appear to be capturing the attention of parents who chose non-government schools. This may in part relate to the timing of parents' school choice decision-making. Data from this study indicated that over 75 percent of the parents who chose a non-government school decided on their child's secondary school before their child reached year 7 – which is when selection procedures for specialist programs within the government sector occur. In contrast, more than 50 percent of the parents who sent their children to a government school delayed this decision until after their children reach year 7 (see Figure 7.9).

It is also noteworthy that while specialist programs in government schools may yield a small competitive advantage to the particular schools that offer such programs, it is largely at the cost of the other government schools – the ones the specialist program students would otherwise have attended (Bonnor & Caro, 2007; Campbell, 2005; Groundwater-Smith, 2001). There is a sense of 'each to his own' in the specialization strategies that schools within the government sector have been allowed, and even encouraged, to pursue (WASSEA, 2007).

The lack of interest in diversity of curriculum provision among participating parents was most conspicuous in relation to VET provision. As shown in Table 6.1, the school's track record in VET was the second-lowest ranking school factor in terms of what participating parents considered to reflect a 'good' school and this low ranking applied across all school groups. While

VET programs and diversity of provision is a natural strength for government schools (ACER, 2002; Keeves, 2006; Rothman, 2003), findings from this case study suggest that this is unlikely to help them arrest the drift of students to the non-government sector.

FACTORS

Three factors that appear to form an important part of the backdrop of parents' choice-making have been drawn from the secondary research. While these factors are not necessarily problematic, they need to be considered when framing changes to policy because they impact on the way parents engage in school choice.

1. The traditional uniformity of school quality across the government sector has diminished

Chapter 3 focused on structural, regulatory and cultural changes that have occurred within Western Australia's government school system over the past thirty years. From the perspective of school choice, possibly the most momentous change in that thirty-year period concerns the way school zones have been used to regulate government school enrolments (Angus, 1998; Forsey, 2006). As outlined in Chapter 3, geographical catchment zones are set for every government school and, up to 1980s, were used stringently to dictate which government schools children were allowed to attend. At that time, parents who lived in a zone for which the local government secondary school had a poor reputation had two options: send their children to the local government school or 'go private' and pay the necessary fees. A minority of such parents dug deep and paid the fees (bearing in mind that fewer low-fee non-government schools existed at the time), but parents who were unwilling or unable to do so sent their children to their designated government school (Angus, 1998). For as long as a critical mass of aspirational, attentive,

middle-class and/or well-educated parents chose to take their chances with the local government school, their child's presence in that school acted as a stabilizing force and bolstered the tone and likelihood of success for all its students (Bonnor & Caro, 2007; Campbell, 2005).

Three decades on, this scenario has changed in two important ways. Firstly, school zones come into play these days only for over-subscribed government schools; they are used to ensure that local students are guaranteed a place at the school ahead of students who reside outside that school's zone (DET, 2007). Secondly, a large number of low-fee non-government schools have been established during the intervening years (ABS 2006). Not only do most of these new non-government schools have vacancies for the right students but they are also more affordable than most non-government schools were during the 1980s (Symes & Gulson, 2005). It follows that a critical mass of aspirational, attentive, middle-class and/or well-educated parents that previously stuck with the local government school is increasingly taking the opportunity to get their children into a more desirable (non-local) government school, or to go private (Bonnor & Caro, 2007; Campbell, 2005; Milburn, 2005). This is exactly the scenario painted by the mother who was quoted in the introduction to this portfolio in Chapter 1.

The government schools that aspirational, attentive and middle-class parents desert become increasingly marginal and 'residual' (Bonnor & Caro, 2006; DES, 2001; Forsey, 2006) while strikingly different government schools located in high-income suburbs become islands of excellence (Bonnor & Caro, 2006; Campbell, 2005; Forsey, 2006; WASSEA, 2007). Among the three government schools involved in the present enquiry, the data indicate that Govt#3 was one such desirable government school. It was credited with high ratings on several factors that were taken to be prominent indicators of a good school – notably, school facilities, student appearance and discipline. Close analysis of Govt#3 school's rating across other factors, however,

shows that it has not entirely escaped the mantle of being a 'government school' because, along with the two other government schools in this study, it shares their low rating regarding attention to individual needs, quality of the mainstream curriculum, quality of teachers and opportunities to participate in extra-curricular sport.

2. *Parents approach the task of school choice as a high-stakes decision*

In the research outlined in Chapter 4, numerous references were made to the way school choice has become a vexing high-stakes decision among parents across the western world. Choosing the 'right' school for one's child is understood by many parents to be one of the most important decisions they will make in the cultivation of their children because schools are considered to be pivotal in establishing and consolidating life-long social and intellectual habits and predispositions (Bosetti, 2006; Campbell, 2005; Davies & Aurini, 2006; English, 2006; Forsey, 2006; Kelley & Evans, 2004; Walford, 2006).

For some choosing the 'best' school continues to be an emotional, time consuming, sometimes arbitrary, high risk and difficult process. It is compounded by increased media and political attention encouraging parent choice makers to believe they determine the future life chances of their child through this one decision. (Corish, 2006, abstract)

The point was also made in Chapter 4 that where, twenty years ago, parents who closely monitored and directed their children's schooling may have been accused of being pushy or interfering (Davies & Aurini, 2006; Walford, 2006), an absence of such attention in some quarters these days is likely to be deemed neglectful (Bosetti, 2006; Campbell, 2005; Davies & Aurini, 2006; English, 2007; Mackay, 2007).

As parents have taken (or are expected to take) an increasingly active role in decisions about their children's school destinations, the burden of

responsibility for the quality of schooling that children receive has also shifted towards parents (Bosetti, 2006). This exacerbates the level of anxiety that parents attribute to the school-choice process (Campbell, 2005; English, 2006; Forsey, 2006; McCarthy, 2007) and leads to a high level of uncertainty and self-doubt among parents, as illustrated in the following comment from the enquiry:

It is a hard choice to make. You always wonder if you made the right choice. There have been a lot of negative comments from friends with children at (the local government high school), mostly saying there is nothing wrong with the government system so why I want to send my child to a private school, especially as I am financially not well off. I think I have done the right thing by my children. I love the tougher rules and respect for teachers. (Parent – IndCo-ed#1)

Other comments from parents in the enquiry reflect a deep understanding that schooling is about changing people (Popkewitz, 2006), that character-defining imperatives are central to school-choices (McCarthy, 2007) and that different schools produce different changes (Fullan, 2001), for example:

After much deliberation we felt public school is better for producing well-rounded community members. I find the “old school tie” and “winning” of little interest to our family values. (Parent – Gov’t#3)

It is clear from the high proportion of parents in the case study who selected the ‘don’t know’ option to many factors in the survey (see Figures 7:10) that the school choices they make are often on the basis of flimsy information and hear-say – and are largely a leap of faith. In this milieu of limited information, high stakes and emotional upheaval where friends and affiliations are also at stake, it is not surprising that many parents steer a safe course towards school structures and rituals they recognise and feel they can trust (Bosetti, 2006; Corish, 2006; McCarthy, 2007). In the present climate, this milieu is

leading them away from government schools (Bonnor & Caro, 2007; Burke & Spuall, 2001; Campbell, 2005).

3. *Parenting across the western world is characterised by conservative modernism*

The wave of conservative modernism (Apple, 2001; Inayatullah, 2006; Symes & Gulson, 2005) and individualism (Blunden, 2005; Brennan, 2006) that has swept the western world over the past couple of decades was discussed in Chapter 4. So too was the way this renewed past (Inayatullah, 2006) is being manifest in parents' school choices as the pursuit of a compact of traditional values (Beavis, 2004; Forsey, 2006) which include a return to school uniforms, consolidation of mainstream subjects at school, and more stringent discipline. These traditional values eschew the scientific progressivism and daring self-expression of the previous generation (Buche, 2002).

The discussion in Chapter 4 showed that conservatism and the maintenance of traditions characterises many schools within the non-government sector (Angus et al, 2002; Bonnor & Caro, 2007; Symes & Gulson, 2005) whereas the government sector is more widely associated with progressivism as it adjusts to meet the needs of an increasingly diverse cohort (Angus, 1998; Bonnor & Caro, 2007; Burke & Spuall, 2001; Forsey 2006). Some changes made by the government sector have been criticised as a series of untested fads, and that the demise of government schools is largely of their own making as they have watered-down the rigour of many subjects and allowed values and standards to drop (Berlach, 2004; Donnelly, 2004; Howard, 2005; PLATO, 2005). Several recent Western Australian government sector initiatives that reflect a return to past schooling traditions were outlined in Chapter 4. They include Ministerial directives about school uniforms (McGowan, 2007), the return of syllabuses (McGowan, 2008) and reinstatement of a fully selective secondary school for academically talented students (DET, 2006). These initiatives are all suggestive of efforts on the

part of the government sector to rebuild its credentials in relation to such traditions. However the evidence from prior research (Bonnor & Caro, 2007; Forsey, 2006; Symes & Gulson, 2006) and case study data suggests that the government sector has not convinced parents in this regard. Figures 7.14, 7.15 and 7.16 show that parents perceive the quality of the mainstream curriculum to be a universal weakness of the government sector, and that they believe standards of discipline and student appearance to (typically) be better in non-government schools.

The enquiry also found that the conservative mind-set is more entrenched among parents who choose Catholic schools than among parents who choose government or independent schools (see Table 6.8 where responses to several school factors that reflect past traditions are compared across the three school groups). This suggests it may not be appropriate to treat parents who choose non-government (Catholic and independent) schools as a homogeneous group; parents who choose Catholic schools appear to be more fixed in their conservatism.

Meanwhile, the major point of separation between parents in the case study who choose government and independent schools, as shown in Table 7.1, appears to be their financial means. A combination of findings in Table 6.8 and Table 7.1 implies that efforts to redress the drift of students to the non-government sector should specifically focus on parents who are moving their children to low-fee independent schools.

ISSUES

Five school choice issues which became evident through synthesis of the primary and secondary research detailed in this portfolio have been identified and are detailed below. While all five of these issues are problematic, they are also amenable to government action and will be the focus of recommendations provided at the end of this chapter.

1. Competition between government and non-government schools occurs on an uneven playing field

The competitive advantage that non-government schools command over government schools is widely reported in Australian research (Aulich, 2004; Bonnor & Caro 2007, Caldwell, 2005, Cannold, 2007; DES, 2001; McGaw, 2006; Reid, 2005; Vickers, 2005) and was detailed in Chapter 2. The central issue relates to the provision of public funds to non-government schools, and more particularly, the way that increased Commonwealth and state funding for non-government schools over recent decades has not been matched by a commensurate increase to the regulatory and accountability requirements levied against those schools (Bonnor & Caro, 2007, Caldwell, 2005, McGaw, 2006). Unlike their government sector counterparts, non-government schools are not required in legislation to accept enrolment from 'all comers', not required to demonstrate the same levels of public transparency in relation to student suspensions, staff-turnover, student outcomes and budget allocations and are not required in legislation to limit to fees and charges they levy against parents (Caldwell, 2005, *School Education Act, 2001*, Reid, 2005).

A combination of secondary research and case study data show that decisions parents make when choosing schools for their children are being influenced by the relative freedoms enjoyed by the non-government sector in at least three important ways.

Firstly, non-government schools can be more selective about the students they enrol and can more easily expel those who misbehave. The same luxury of selection and exclusion is not available to government schools (Bonnor & Caro, 2007; Campbell, 2005; Symes & Gulson, 2005). While the capacity and appetite to be selective in relation to student quality varies among non-government schools (whereby over-subscribed schools enjoy more scope to be selective than do under-subscribed schools), the fact remains that non-government schools are legislatively permitted to select and exclude without having to demonstrate transparency and procedural fairness. The same is not true for government schools. It follows that where non-government schools can screen themselves from unruly and/or low-performing students, government schools become gathering points for such students (Forsey, 2006; Teese, 2000). This clearly detracts from the ability of government schools to compete with non-government schools, especially in light of the finding reported in Chapter 6 that a school's reputation for student discipline is among the top-five indicators of what parents consider to mark a good school (see Table 6.1).

Secondly, in addition to a marked increase in recent years to the proportion of Commonwealth funds received by non-government schools, they also have more scope to raise special-purpose funding from alumni and school communities (Bonnor & Caro 2007, Vickers 2005) because they are able to impose compulsory fees and levies that government schools are prevented in legislation from charging (*School Education Act, 2001*). A further limitation for government schools is that they must compete with each other – and all other sections of government – for funds to pay for capital works, despite the fact that many government secondary schools in Western Australia were built over 40 years ago and are now shabby and dated (Caldwell 2005; Campbell 2005). Vickers (2005, p. 269) claims that one of the most visible signs of how the current Commonwealth funding policy benefits non-government schools is their recent spending on opulent buildings and facilities that “contrast sharply

with those of their public sector competitors". When this is considered as a backdrop to the finding reported in Chapter 6 that the top-ranking indicator of a good school in the eyes of parents is the quality of its facilities, the competitive edge enjoyed by the non-government sector further broadens.

Thirdly, just as non-government schools have more scope than government schools to pick and choose their students, they also able to select their own staff (Angus 1998, Bonnor & Caro 2007, Reid 2005). As discussed in Chapter 2, a key feature of the Western Australian government school system from inception was its centralised staffing arrangements designed to ensure security of tenure for teachers, fair and transparent transfers in and out of more and less desirable teaching locations and an even distribution of expertise and experience (where possible) across all government schools. Despite these worthy intentions, the centralist staffing policies prevent principals from choosing their teachers and security of tenure policies make it difficult for principals to dismiss teachers who are underperforming (Angus 1998, WASSEA 2007). In contrast, the principals of non-government schools can advertise for and engage their own teachers, offer incentives to top-performing teachers and more easily dismiss underperforming teachers (Angus 1998, Reid 2005). It is not surprising, therefore that findings reported in Chapter 7 show that the participating parents perceived the reputation of teachers in the government schools to be less favourable than the reputation of teachers in the non-government schools (see Figure 7.23).

2. Innovation, breadth of curriculum and diversity of provision are not being enhanced by the current version of competition

A central argument made by Friedman (1955) and subsequent advocates of allowing parental choice and market forces to apply to school provision has been that competition enhances innovation, diversity and efficiency (Donnelly, 2006; Kemp, 2001). Evidence from prior research (Caldwell, 2005; Levin &

Belfield, 2003; Lubienski, 2006) and findings from the enquiry reported here at Section 4 suggest otherwise.

Researchers from Australia and elsewhere have commented on the wave of conservative modernism that has swept across Western nations through this current age of anxiety (Apple, 2001; Bonnor & Caro, 2007; Bosetti, 2006; Campbell, 2005; Davies & Aurini, 2006; Hargreaves, 2003; Lubienski, 2006; Popkewitz, 2007). This tendency towards conservatism, safe options and all things 'traditional' means that today's parents are risk-averse and have little enthusiasm for their children's schooling being characterised by new-fangled innovation, expressions of individuality or socio-cultural diversity. As outlined in Section 4, this enquiry found that factors of conservatism and conformity (such as student appearance, discipline and TEE track record) rank much higher than factors of diversity and innovation (such as inclusion of diverse cultures, encouragement of individuality and VET track record). These findings echo the compact of 'traditional values' that Beavis (2004) found to be highly attractive among Australian parents when choosing schools for their children.

The effect of this prevailing conservatism on Australian schools – including many government schools that want to avoid being consigned as 'sink' schools – is to bolster their traditional credentials (Symes & Gulson, 2005). Accordingly, rather than working to broaden the range and diversity of school choices available to parents, market forces have had the effect of increasing the range of providers offering the narrow, traditional product that the conservative market demands (Bonnor & Caro 2007, Campbell 2005, Holmes, 2006b). In accord with predictions from Friedman (1955), Bonnor and Caro (2007) have predicted that such duplication will render the least popular schools unviable and they will be forced to close. Most commentators have predicted that government schools will be over-represented among those forced to close (Bonnor & Caro, 2007; Milburn,

2005; Vickers, 2005; WASSEA, 2007). Certainly, among the eight schools participating in the case study reported in Section 4, two of the three low-rating schools were from the government sector. Such school closures would force remaining students from the closed schools to travel ever-increasing distances to attend the next-nearest government school that he/she can afford or that will accept him/her onto the roll (Bonnor & Caro, 2007).

The present enquiry found that the potential for diversity and breadth of provision – prospective strengths of the government school system in Western Australia due to its sheer scale, student profile, specialist programs, range of school types and locations, and its links with TAFE – were not highly valued aspects of secondary schooling by participating parents. This is further illustrated by the finding that a school's track record in VET is almost entirely overlooked as a factor that might indicate a good school. It was ranked 29th out of 30 factors – just ahead of school brochures but behind reputation in the media and camps and trips. This is consistent with the comment made by Marks (2004, p.43) that the diversification strategy is widely “interpreted by parents as government schools ‘giving up’ on university entrance”.

3. The purpose for Australian public schooling has diminished in focus

The frequently cited rationale for the establishment of government schools during the 1870s was that schooling should be “free, compulsory and secular” (Aulich, 2002; Bonnor & Caro, 2007; Burke & Spaul, 2001; Reid, 2005). In contemporary terms, this rationale implies an undercurrent of inclusion and emancipation, but as discussed in Chapter 2, the intent of the day was more about wresting socio-political control from church authorities and quelling (then harnessing) the hearts, minds and talents of (largely working-class) children to achieve social order and to amass the skills required by industry (Angus et al, 2002; Boston, 1999; Burke & Spaul, 2001; Parkes, 1892). Accordingly, the nature of government

school provision through the first few decades – with strictly regulated routines and a curriculum that focused as much on diligence and compliance as it on literacy and numeracy (Potts, 2005) was configured around the community benefits for which government schools were established and publicly funded to serve.

It was shown in Chapter 2 that the purposes that schools serve today are harder to divine. Despite the fact that Commonwealth, state and territory ministers for education jointly endorsed a set of National Goals of Schooling nearly ten years ago (MCEETYA 1999), those goals serve a largely ceremonial function. They are not the hinges from which Australian school planning, funding and provision hangs; indeed, analysis conducted by Angus, Olney, Ainley and Caldwell (2004) found the current levels of funding are not sufficient and not properly directed towards the realistic attainment of those National Goals. Further, the National Goals are notably absent from statements of strategy and intent recently issued by the Department of Education and Training in Western Australia (DET, 2008). The department's current stated goal is based on earning community respect (O'Neill, 2008) and the peak body of government secondary school principals asserts that "the essential purpose of all schools is quality teaching and learning" (WASSEA 2007, p. 6). These statements confuse the 'purpose of schools' with 'what schools do' and are bereft of the community-gain and democracy-building intent of school provision that dominated the establishment of public schooling across Australia in the 19th century (Boston, 1999). The current goals reflect a high level of populism within current education policy. They also hint at the vulnerability of senior education department public servants who, in recent years, have had their fixed-term contracts terminated along with the dismissal of the Ministers to whom they report.

It seems, as Bonnor and Caro claim that "we have forgotten why public education was established" (2007, p 197) and that "there has been no interest

at the state or federal level in properly defining the role and purpose of private schools in a subsidised system" (2007, p. 208).

4. *Increasing class-related divisions within the community are emerging*

As discussed in Chapter 4, research from Australia and other western nations has consistently shown that levels of parental education (and by extension, family income levels) are strong predictors of choosing schools other than the local government school (Beavis, 2004; Bosetti, 2006; Campbell, 2005; Davies & Aurini, 2006; Kelley & Evans, 2004). This pattern was repeated among the eight parent groups involved in the present research; all five non-government school parent groups were wealthier and most of them were better educated than all three government school groups (see Figures 7.1 and 7.3 respectively). This indicates a strong tendency for the children of wealthy, well-educated parents to go school with each other, while children from low-income households with less social capital attend (different) schools together.

In his book, *Postcodes: the Splintering of a Nation*, Swan (2005) observes that schools are places of shared experience at a highly impressionable point of a person's life. He predicts that if the tendency for children with different socio-cultural/economic backgrounds to be separated into different schools from an increasingly early age, opportunities for the children of doctors, lawyers, police, market gardeners, plumbers, artists, etc to all share the same playground diminish. Swan claims that if this were to happen, the only time the children of high- and low-income parents are likely to meet in future will be on the sporting field where their divisions will be formalised as 'teams' competing against each other. In the context of Popkewitz's (2007) notion of Other, such a situation will drive shared suspicion among groups within the community and may entrench the level of isolation and anxiety described by Hargreaves (2003) and Bosetti (2006).

5. The importance of high quality public education has diminished in community consciousness

As discussed in Chapter 2, when free, secular and compulsory public schooling was first established in Australia more than a century ago, it was a source of state pride and was understood by the community as an important investment in the future of the fledgling nation (Boston, 1999; Burke & Spaul, 2001). It was noted that two important changes have occurred since then. Firstly, the personal benefits of schooling have gained precedence over community benefits (Angus et al 2002, Caldwell 2005, Levin & Belfield 2003) and secondly, instead of education policy and regulation being determined primarily by public servants with high levels of expertise in school provision, the administration and funding of schooling in Australia has become more politicised and more closely linked to the ideology and policies of prevailing governments (Angus, 1998; Barcan, 1991; DES, 2001; Nelson, 2003; Reid, 2005; Whitlam, 1972). Together, these changes have created a funding and regulatory climate which significantly favours the non-government schooling sector in Australia (Brennan, 2006; Caldwell, 2005; Campbell, 2005; McGaw, 2004; Reid, 2005; Vickers, 2005). This climate makes radical changes to current arrangements politically unpalatable because, as an echo of the political motives that played a part in the initial provision of public to non-government schools (ABC, 1997a; Potts, 2005) a large and ever-increasing proportion of the electorate now depends on public support for non-government schooling to send their children to the non-government schools of their choice (Nelson, 2003a).

It is important to note that this is not just a numbers game. The demographic make-up of the parents who are moving their children to the non-government sector is also significant. As shown in Tables 7.1 and 7.3, most of the drift to the non-government sector comprises families with high social capital. In contrast, a growing concentration of those who remain in government schools are drawn from marginalised groups (Bonnor & Caro, 2007; Campbell, 2005).

It follows that the political influence of those who remain to advocate for a strong and viable system of government schooling is dropping more quickly than the raw numbers would suggest.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Having teased-out the range of findings, factors and issues that influence secondary school choice in Australia today, attention will now turn to framing pragmatic recommendations for action to be undertaken by governments in an effort to shore-up the capacity of government schools to “fulfil their fundamental role in sustaining a socially-cohesive, productive and just community” (Robson, Harken & Hill 2001). If implemented, the following recommendations will help to arrest the drift of students away from government secondary schools.

The recommendations address the priority issues revealed through primary and secondary research, and incorporate personal, local and global contexts within which those issues have arisen. They are underpinned by the assumption that two levels of (sometimes oppositional) government (state and Commonwealth) will continue to jointly shape Australian school provision in the foreseeable future.

1. It is recommended that state government school systems articulate (and make public) a 10-year meta-plan for government secondary schooling

The secondary research reviewed in Chapters 2 and 3 shows that the historic systemic cohesion and clarity of purpose that once characterised government schooling in Western Australia has diminished, especially at the secondary level, since the mid-80s (Angus, 1998; Burke & Spaul, 2001; WASSEA, 2007). While the argument has been made that the government school system was previously encumbered with excessive micro-control from the centre (Angus, 1998; Burke & Spaul, 2001) and an overly narrow curriculum (Boston, 1999), the present enquiry found that recent efforts by the system to

diversify and to establish specialist programs in music, performing arts, languages and sport have not captured the interest of many parents, particularly those that choose non-government schools for their children. Meanwhile, the enquiry also found that the quality of the mainstream curriculum in government secondary schools is perceived to be a systemic weakness. This suggests that the effort put into establishing specialist programs may have been counter-productive in the eyes of parents because it was also found that parents attribute more importance to mainstream provision than they do to specialist programs.

Secondary research in Chapter 3 also shows that the goals of the Department of Education and Training in Western Australia are currently framed in terms of securing public confidence through quality teaching (DET, 2008). This goal lacks the moral purpose evident in the “compulsory, secular and free” mantra upon which the establishment of schooling in Australia in the 1870s was based (Bonnor & Caro, 2007; Caldwell, 2005), and leaves systemic planning captive to populist whims and gimmicks.

Research reviewed in Chapter 5 discussed the current period of conservative modernism and the repeated observation that parents across the Western world are risk-averse (Apple, 2001; Bosetti, 2006; Campbell, 2005; Hargreaves, 2003). Further, parents assume a strong sense of parental responsibility in relation to making wise and careful choices about their children’s schooling (Bosetti, 2006; Campbell, 2005; Walford, 2006). With this high-stakes mind-set, parents are radiating towards school traditions they understand and consider to be low-risk (Beavis, 2004; Campbell, 2005; English, 2006; Forsey, 2006).

It is possible that school traditions *per se* at many non-government schools are a major draw-card in this regard; the enquiry found that parents perceive non-government schools to possess more ‘traditional’ attributes than

government schools, but the attraction towards traditional school features was stronger among parents who choose Catholic schools. Parents who choose non-Catholic non-government schools were less keen on traditions *per se*.

In the context of conservative modernism and the perceived need for 'good' parents to make low-risk choices on behalf of their children (Campbell, 2005; Walford, 2006), it is likely that a major part of the attraction that non-Catholic low-fee non-government schools hold for many parents is that many of them offer a traditional school setting that parents feel they understand (Symes & Gulson, 2005). In this regard, it is noteworthy that a high proportion of parents across all school groups in the enquiry felt that they not know enough about the school they had chosen to rate it on many of the school factors that were explored through the enquiry: it seems that school choice for many parents remains a leap of faith. It follows that government schools need to make themselves more understandable – both individually and as a system – to re-build the faith of more parents. This is not to suggest that they need to abandon specialist programs and return to the way things used to be done but rather, that the government system needs to better explain how things are now done in its secondary schools, and why they are done that way.

Parents and the wider community will have more confidence in the government school system when they better understand where it was going and why – when they can see that the direction of government secondary schooling in this state is subject to a well-articulated long-term meta-plan that gives purpose and cohesion to what may otherwise look like a random set of localised initiatives that seem like a good idea at the time.

2. *It is recommended that the disparity that exists between the quality of buildings and facilities in government and non-government schools is reduced*

The enquiry found that the single most important factor that parents look for as an indicator of a good school is the quality of its facilities. This may in part be because a school's facilities is one of the more tangible school factors that parents were asked to rate but it is important to note that this factor's high rating was separate from, and much higher than, the mere appearance of the school. This suggests that in the eyes of parents, access to state of the art facilities (science and technology equipment, performing arts venues, well-appointed gymnasiums) enhances learning opportunities for their children. As reported in Chapter 6, new and modern facilities are more prevalent in non-government than in government secondary schools (Symes & Gulson, 2005; Vickers, 2005; WASSEA, 2007). This is partly because while most of Western Australia's government secondary schools are 30-40 years old (Angus, *et al*, 2001; WASSEA, 2007), most of the low-fee non-government schools to which students are drifting are less than 20 years old (ABS, 2001). It is also because it is easier for non-government schools to attract special purpose funding for capital works from private and public sources (McGaw, 2004; Reid, 2005) without jeopardising the level of recurrent funding they receive from Commonwealth and state coffers because a school's existing assets are not currently taken into account when determining the financial needs of that school (Vickers, 2005).

To implement this recommendation, two complementary actions will be required.

Firstly, it will be necessary for the Western Australian government to significantly boost the amount of funding it directs towards maintaining and upgrading government school buildings and facilities across the state.

Secondly, it will be necessary for the Western Australian government to lobby the Commonwealth government to incorporate a school's existing assets within the formula used to determine a school's financial needs. This will ensure that schools which already boast opulent facilities do not continue to draw significant levels of public funding while neighbouring (government and non-government) schools with inferior facilities are left waiting for the cash injection that they need to bring their facilities up to scratch.

3. *It is recommended that state government school systems establish mechanisms in every government secondary school to better target and support individual student needs*

The enquiry found that parents attribute significant importance to the extent to which a school supports students' individual needs; after the quality of school facilities, support for students' individual needs was the second-ranked school factor explored in the enquiry. It is therefore significant that the enquiry also found that all of the participating government schools rated lower in relation to supporting individual needs than all of the participating non-government schools. This echoes previous research discussed in Chapter 7 that relations between government school teachers and parents are often adversarial and contrast with the positive alliances that often develop between parents and teachers from non-government schools (Campbell, 2005; Davies & Aurini, 2006; Freebody *et al*, 1995). These findings mark this aspect of government secondary schooling as a clear strategic target for systemic attention: working towards (or better communicating) a greater focus on the needs of individual students.

A major impediment to secondary schools achieving a greater sense of attention to individual student needs, as noted in Chapter 3, is that there is an increasing short-fall of required teacher numbers in government schools (DET, 2005; McGowan, 2008). Also, while pastoral care is intimately linked

with student learning, such activities are outside the subject-specific training that most secondary teachers undertake and outside what they understand their responsibilities to include (Townsend, 2005).

One approach to implementing this recommendation may be to employ para-professional school officers with particular expertise in (and responsibility for) pastoral care and home-school links. Such officers will not need to have the level of pedagogical or curricular expertise required to be a teacher.

Accordingly, they will not attract the same level of pay but will help to address an identified need within government schools. A side-effect of employing such para-professional school officers would be that the expertise of fully-qualified teachers could be released from pastoral care and they would be able to focus more explicitly on curriculum, assessment and learning.

A FINAL IDEA FOR CONSIDERATION

The following idea was not included above as a recommendation, but is offered below as provocative food for thought. The idea is bolder and more potentially transformative than the three recommendations outlined above, but also entails a high level of political risk so fails the test of pragmatism advocated by Gerwitz (2007). The idea has not been plucked from the air, but rather, goes to the heart of key funding and governance issues that are contributing to the uneven playing field on which government and non-government schools currently operate.

What if a non-government school's eligibility to receive public funds from state and Commonwealth sources was tied to the number of student places that the school elected to release from its own enrolment control?

The impetus for this idea is that many non-government schools are selective about the students they accept (Bonnor & Caro, 2007; Reid, 2005; Symes & Gulson, 2005; Teese, 2000). Not only does this enhance their capacity to

manage their reputations in relation to achievement, discipline and work ethic (Forsey, 2006; Symes & Gulson, 2005) – all of which were found in the enquiry to be compelling ‘good’ school indicators in the eyes of parents – but it also resonates with a hint of discrimination. Further, the students they choose not to enrol or subsequently expel have no choice but to attend a government school which consigns such schools as a gathering point for disruptive and challenging students (McGaw, 2006; Teese, 2000). It is inexplicable that non-government schools are allowed to apply potentially discriminatory enrolment criteria – on the grounds of ability, religious background, family connections or behaviour – and remain eligible for the receipt of public funding.

Under this proposal, a non-government school that wishes to maintain full ‘pick and choose’ control over all of the students it enrolls will forfeit the right to receive any public funds. If, however, it opts to release a number (up to 100 per cent) of student places to an open and transparent enrolment lottery conducted by a third party (such as the Department of Education Services), that school will be entitled to per-capita public funding, based on the same or similar allocative mechanism currently used, for that number of students.

This is not a publicly funded voucher system (Aulich, 2003; Lubienski, 2006).

The parents of students who gain a place at a non-government school through this lottery arrangement will still be required to pay the relevant school fees, so if they apply for and accept a place for their child at a non-government school, they will be required to meet fee payments on the same basis as all other parents with children at that school.

Non-government schools that expel a student who came to it through this lottery system would incur a significant financial penalty.

The key intention of this proposal is to reduce the ‘bad-boy ghetto’ status of an increasing number of government schools (Forsey, 2006; Teese, 2000) and to

more equitably share the burden of catering for high-needs students across as many secondary schools as possible. Non-government schools that do not wish to enter into this arrangement may opt-out, but in doing so, they would forfeit any claim to public funding because such enrolment practices will not be open, equitable and fully transparent.

This idea echoes the options laid-out for privately-run schools in the 1870s when Australian public school systems were established: schools that wanted to retain their independence and opted-out of the public school system were allowed to continue, but in so doing, forfeited the opportunity to receive public funds (Burke & Spauli, 2001; Reid, 2005). A crucial difference with this idea, however, is that non-government schools would not be forced into an all-or-nothing ultimatum: they could make a greater or lesser proportion of school places available to the open lottery thereby choosing to have less or more control (respectively) over the make-up of their student body.

Non-government schools that completely opt-out of this arrangement would be permitted to do so, but given that such a decision would be foregrounding the individual benefits of schooling over the public benefits, all costs associated with that decision would be borne privately.

While this idea may at first appear to be an attempt to level the playing field by handicapping high-performing and attractive non-government schools, this is not its driving purpose. Rather, the idea seeks to reduce key impediments to school improvement that are currently concentrated on the government sector and are largely outside the control of school or systemic administrators. Given the nature of competition, however, it is inescapable that any move aimed at more evenly distributing responsibility for providing schooling to challenging and/or disruptive students will inevitably introduce new obstacles to schools that have previously chosen to exclude such students, and simultaneously reduce obstacles faced by schools that have been required to accept a large proportion of such students.

The idea is offered here largely to provoke discussion in the hope that it may function as a catalyst that will lead governments and schools to revisit the fundamental purposes that schools serve in Australia and, more particularly, the rationale for providing public funds to non-government schools.

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APPENDIX 1

PARENT SURVEY

PARENT SURVEY



Research Project:

Factors that Influence Parents' Choice of Secondary Schools

Phase One
March 2007

Your assistance in completing this survey will be **greatly** appreciated.

Information from this survey will be for research purposes only. It will be combined with other responses and summarised so that it will not be possible to identify any single respondent. Your confidentiality is assured.

Please use the reply-paid envelope to return your completed survey to me before Easter. You might prefer to receive and complete this survey via email. If so, please send an email to me at racahill@student.ecu.edu.au asking for a copy of the survey and I will happily forward it to you.

Thank you

ROSEMARY CAHILL
Doctoral Student, Edith Cowan University

FAMILY BACKGROUND

The following questions focus on the educational and financial background of the families of Year 8 children. These factors are known to influence the range of school choices available to parents, so they are important to this research. As you answer these questions, please remember that all of the information you provide in this survey can be anonymous and your confidentiality is guaranteed.

1. What is your total annual **COMBINED** family income before tax? Please circle **ONE** of the following:

Under \$30,000 \$30,000 - \$70,000 \$70,000 - \$100,000 \$100,000 - \$140,000 Over \$140,000

2. Which of the following educational institutions did **YOU** attend, if only for a short time?

a. Parent/guardian 1: Please circle **ALL THOSE THAT APPLY** to Parent/guardian 1

primary school government high school private high school university technical college

b. Parent/guardian 2: Please circle **ALL THOSE THAT APPLY** to Parent/guardian 2

primary school government high school private high school university technical college

3. How many brothers and sisters does your Year 8 child have? Please circle **ONE** of the following:

none one two three more than three

4. Is this the first time you have had a child at **THIS** high school? _____ (please write YES or NO)

HAVING CHOICES

While this survey is about factors that influence parents' school choices, it is understood that some parents feel they don't have much choice. Questions 4 and 5 focus on how much choice you feel you had, and what factors (if any) limited the range of options you had.

5. To what extent do you feel you had a choice about the school to which you have sent your child for Year 8? Please circle **ONE** of the following:

No choice

More than one option

Several options

Lots of options

6. At what age/stage was your Year 8 child when you decided on this high school?

Please circle **ONE** of the following:

Baby or toddler, before
he/she started pre-school

Early in primary school,
before the end of Year 3

Sometime during years
4, 5 or 6 of primary

During his/her last year of
primary school

7. What factors (if any) limited the range of school choices available to you?

Below is a list of factors that could limit the range of school choices available to different families. For each factor in the list, please circle the comment that best describes how much that factor limited your choices.

Other schools we looked at were too expensive for us

This was not a
limitation for us

This limited our
options a bit

This was a huge
limitation for us

Waiting lists at other schools we liked were too long

This was not a
limitation for us

This limited our
options a bit

This was a huge
limitation for us

Our child missed out on a specialist program/school

This was not a
limitation for us

This limited our
options a bit

This was a huge
limitation for us

Other schools we liked are too far away or too hard to get to each day

This was not a
limitation for us

This limited our
options a bit

This was a huge
limitation for us

Our child flatly refused to go to any other school

This was not a
limitation for us

This limited our
options a bit

This was a huge
limitation for us

Other factor/s that limited our choice:

(please specify): _____

YOUR YEAR 8 CHILD'S SCHOOL

8. How do you feel about different aspects of the school your Year 8 child is attending?

The table below (and on the facing page) contains a list of factors that parents might like about their child's school, or that could also detract from the school's overall appeal. In relation to the school your Year 8 child is attending, please work through the list, ticking the column with the comment that most closely matches how you feel about EACH aspect.

APPEARANCES	drawback of this school	irrelevant or don't know	I like this more than I dislike it	quite attractive factor	extremely attractive factor
Appearance of students					
Appearance of staff					
School brochures					
Facilities at the school					

School appearance – buildings, gardens, layout, etc.					
REPUTATION	<i>drawback of this school</i>	<i>irrelevant or don't know</i>	<i>I like this more than I dislike it</i>	<i>quite attractive factor</i>	<i>extremely attractive factor</i>
Reputation of student behaviour					
Media reports about this school (or this type of school)					
School's track record in Tertiary Entrance Exams (TEE)					
School reputation – according to "inside" information from other parents/friends					
School's track record in Vocational Education and Training (VET)					
Reputation of teachers					
Reputation of principal					
LOGISTICS	<i>drawback of this school</i>	<i>irrelevant or don't know</i>	<i>I like this more than I dislike it</i>	<i>quite attractive factor</i>	<i>extremely attractive factor</i>
Proximity to home					
Easy transport getting to/from school					
School choices of child's friends					
CURRICULUM	<i>drawback of this school</i>	<i>irrelevant or don't know</i>	<i>I like this more than I dislike it</i>	<i>quite attractive factor</i>	<i>extremely attractive factor</i>
Extra-curricular offerings, especially sport					
Extra-curricular offerings, particularly art/music					
Specialist programs available					
Range and quality of the mainstream curriculum provided					
Opportunities to pursue individual interests and talents					
Range of camps and trips					
FAMILY VALUES	<i>drawback of this school</i>	<i>irrelevant or don't know</i>	<i>I like this more than I dislike it</i>	<i>quite attractive factor</i>	<i>extremely attractive factor</i>
Family tradition – previous generations attended the same or similar schools					
Notion of "old school tie" – connections that will be useful for our child in later life					
SCHOOL APPROACH AND VALUES	<i>drawback of this school</i>	<i>irrelevant or don't know</i>	<i>I like this more than I dislike it</i>	<i>quite attractive factor</i>	<i>extremely attractive factor</i>
Single-sex <i>versus</i> co-educational classes					
Religious affiliation					
Inclusion of students from diverse cultural backgrounds and family circumstances					
High achievement is expected and valued					
Teachers encourage/allow students to be themselves – not required to always conform					
Confidence that the school will listen to (and deal properly with) any concerns that I raise					
Confidence that my child's individual needs/talents will be recognised and supported					

Comments: _____

Please see over ...

GOOD SCHOOLS

9. What factors are key indicators of a GOOD school?

The same factors appear again in the following tables. Please read them through again, this time thinking in terms of what makes a GOOD school. Select up to **THREE** (only) factors that indicate a good school, and place a tick in the box on the right of those **THREE** factors.

APPEARANCES	
Appearance of students	
Appearance of staff	
School brochures	
Facilities at the school	
School appearance buildings, gardens, layout, etc.	
REPUTATION	
Reputation of student behaviour	
Media reports about this school (or this type of school)	
School's track record in TEE	
School reputation – according to "inside" information from other parents/friends	
School's track record in VET)	
Reputation of teachers	
Reputation of principal	
LOGISTICS	
Proximity to home	
Easy transport getting to/from school	
School choices of child's friends	

CURRICULUM	
Extra-curricular offerings, especially sport	
Extra-curricular offerings, particularly art/music	
Specialist programs available	
Range and quality of the mainstream curriculum	
Opportunities to pursue individual interests and talents	
Range of camps and trips	
FAMILY VALUES	
Family tradition – previous generations attended the same or similar schools	
Notion of "old school tie" – connections that will be useful for our child in later life	
SCHOOL APPROACH AND VALUES	
Single-sex <i>versus</i> co-educational classes	
Religious affiliation	
Inclusion of students from diverse cultural backgrounds and family circumstances	
High achievement is expected and valued	
Teachers encourage/allow students to be themselves – not required to always conform	
Confidence that the school will listen to (and deal properly with) any concerns that I raise	
Confidence that my child's individual needs/talents will be recognised and supported	

Comments: _____

Invitation to participate in follow-up survey

Responses you give to questions in this survey will be extremely valuable. They will be greatly enhanced if, after your child has been at high school for a full semester, you would comment on the extent to which you and your child are happy with the school.

You are invited to take part in a follow-up survey in Term 3 to ask more (but similar) questions about your school choice. Please indicate your willingness to take part in a similar survey in August 2007 by ticking the box below and providing contact details:

☐

Yes – you may send me the follow-up survey in August 2007 using the following address:

Name (optional): _____

Postal address: _____

and/or

Email address: _____

THANK YOU!

I wish your child a successful start to high school.

APPENDIX 2

COVER LETTER ACCOMPANYING PARENT SURVEY

March 2007



How many times in the past few years have you been asked, *"... so what high school will your child be going to?"*

As a doctoral student in the School of Education and Arts at Edith Cowan University, I am hoping you will be willing to revisit the "... so what high school" issue once more to answer questions in the attached survey about why you have gone with the particular high school that your Year 8 child is now attending.

The range of reasons parents give will vary a great deal, but there may also be patterns that will help to better understand what parents are looking for from high schools these days.

As the mother of two teenage children, I know this is a frequent topic of discussion among parents. I also know that some parents feel they don't have much choice – they might not be able to afford the school they'd like their children to attend, their child might insist on going to a school they don't like, or there might be a long family history of going to a certain school. Other parents feel there are just too many choices, and hanker for the days when you just sent your kids to the local high school and supported their progress as best you could.

Your participation in this research will be anonymous, and your confidentiality is assured. You do not need to give me your name, but it would help to understand parents' choice-making patterns if you would answer questions in the attached survey about income, family make-up and occupation.

This research involves three phases, and you are encouraged to participate in all three, but you are free to stop participating at any point along the way. **Phase 1** involves completion of the attached survey. **Phase 2** involves completing a similar follow-up survey early in Term 3. If you are willing to continue into phase 2, you are asked to provide contact details so I can send the second survey to you in August. When you complete the follow-up survey, you will also be asked if you are willing to participate in **Phase 3** which will involve short interviews about school choice. These interviews may be conducted over the telephone if you prefer.

Information you and other parents from your child's school provide will be combined in a report to the school, outlining aspects of the school that attracted parents and any aspects that detract from the school's overall appeal. It will not be possible to identify individual students or parents in the report that I provide to the school. The information about your child's school will also be combined with survey responses that I receive from the parents of children attending other schools in this part of Perth. Key findings will form the basis of my doctoral thesis. They may also be submitted for publication in education research journals and shared with interested education systems.

Please take the time to complete the attached survey and return it to me in the reply-paid envelope by Easter.

If you have any questions about the survey, or would prefer to receive it via email to complete and return, don't hesitate to contact me, Rosemary Cahill, on [redacted] or email: racahill@student.ecu.edu.au

This research project has been approved by Edith Cowan University's Human Research Ethics Committee. The supervisor for this work is Dr Jan Gray, Senior Lecturer, Education and Arts Faculty. You may contact Dr Gray on [redacted] or email: jan.gray@ecu.edu.au. Alternatively, if you have concerns about the research and wish to talk to an independent person, you may contact ECU's Human Research Ethics Officer on 63042170 or email: research.ethics@ecu.edu.au

Your assistance will be greatly appreciated.

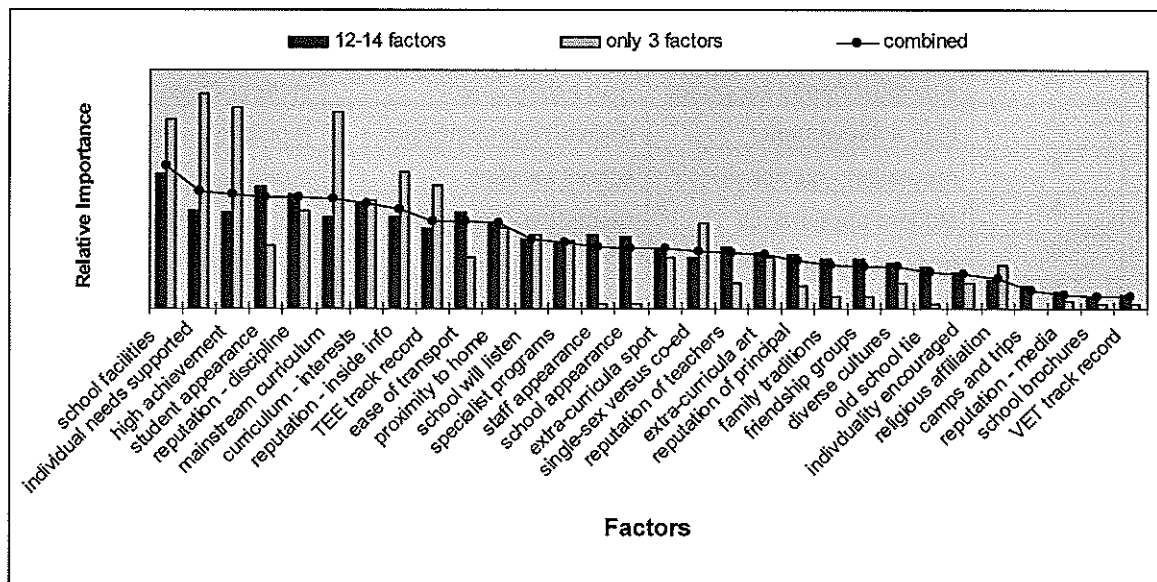
Regards

ROSEMARY CAHILL
Doctoral Student, ECU

APPENDIX 3

COMPARISON OF DIVERGENT RESPONSE-TYPES TO QUESTION 9

Comparison of Divergent Response-types to Question 9



While the ranking of various school factors is taken up in Chapter 6, the above graph illustrates the *qualitative* differences that were evident between the divergent response-types derived from Question 9.

Selections made by the *twelve to fourteen factors* group are less sporadic and more evenly spread across the thirty school factors than are selections made by the *only three factors* group.

The table overleaf provides factor rankings for three different data-sets:

- Overall data (a combination of 3-only factors and 12-14 factors data)
- 3-only factors data; and
- 12-14 factors data.

Comparison of Divergent Response-types to Question 9 – Factor Rankings

Ranking	Overall (Response-types combined)	3-only factors	12–14 factors
1.	school facilities	individual needs supported	school facilities
2.	individual needs supported	high achievement	student appearance
3.	high achievement	mainstream curriculum	reputation - discipline
4.	reputation - discipline	school facilities	curriculum - interests
5.	student appearance	reputation - inside info	individual needs supported
6.	mainstream curriculum	TEE track record	high achievement
7.	curriculum - interests	curriculum - interests	ease of transport
8.	reputation - inside info	reputation - discipline	mainstream curriculum
9.	TEE track record	single-sex <i>versus</i> co-ed	reputation - inside info
10.	ease of transport	proximity to home	proximity to home
11.	proximity to home	school will listen	TEE track record
12.	school will listen	specialist programs	staff appearance
13.	specialist programs	student appearance	school appearance
14.	staff appearance	ease of transport	school will listen
15.	extra-curricula sport	extra-curricula sport	specialist programs
16.	school appearance	extra-curricula art	reputation of teachers
17.	single-sex <i>versus</i> co-ed	religious affiliation	extra-curricula sport
18.	reputation of teachers	reputation of teachers	extra-curricula art
19.	extra-curricula art	diverse cultures	reputation of principal
20.	reputation of principal	individuality encouraged	single-sex <i>versus</i> co-ed
21.	family traditions	reputation of principal	family traditions
22.	diverse cultures	friendship groups	friendship groups
23.	friendship groups	family traditions	diverse cultures
24.	old school tie	reputation - media	old school tie
25.	individuality encouraged	staff appearance	individuality encouraged
26.	religious affiliation	school brochures	religious affiliation
27.	camps and trips	school appearance	camps and trips
28.	reputation - media	VET track record	reputation - media
29.	school brochures	old school tie	VET track record
30.	VET track record	camps and trips	school brochures

APPENDIX 4

COMPARISON OF 'GOOD SCHOOL' FACTOR RANKINGS FROM QUESTION 9 BY SCHOOL GROUP

COMPARISON OF 'GOOD SCHOOL' FACTOR RANKINGS FROM QUESTION 9 BY SCHOOL GROUP

The table on the facing page supports comparison of how parent groups, sorted according to school sector, ranked 'good school' factors at Question 9 of the Parent Survey.

As noted in Chapter 6, an important feature of this comparison is the extent to which the three groups agree in relation to what constitutes a 'good' school. In the table on the facing page, the factors highlighted in colour are those for which relative diversion occurred across the three groups. In particular:

The red factors pertain to individuality and show that the Catholic parent group rated these factors generally lower than was the case for the other two sectors.

The blue factors pertain to traditional versions of school achievement and the rankings suggest that the government parent group rated these factors lower than was the case for the other two sectors.

The pink factors pertain to specialisation. Rankings suggest that the government parent group ranks these factors slightly higher.

The single-sex versus co-educational factor in brown and the religious affiliation factor in green returned qualitatively different results with markedly more cross-sectoral variation for these factors.

Rank	Overall	Government means	Catholic means	Independent
1.	school facilities	school facilities	school facilities	school facilities
2.	individual needs supported	individual needs supported	single-sex <i>versus</i> co-ed	individual needs supported
3.	high achievement	student appearance	student appearance	high achievement
4.	student appearance	curriculum - interests	reputation - discipline	mainstream curriculum
5.	reputation - discipline	reputation - discipline	high achievement	reputation - discipline
6.	mainstream curriculum	reputation - inside info	mainstream curriculum	student appearance
7.	curriculum - interests	ease of transport	reputation - inside info	curriculum - interests
8.	reputation - inside info	high achievement	ease of transport	proximity to home
9.	TEE track record	proximity to home	curriculum - interests	reputation - inside info
10.	ease of transport	mainstream curriculum	TEE track record	TEE track record
11.	proximity to home	specialist programs	extra-curricula sport	school will listen
12.	school will listen	school will listen	staff appearance	ease of transport
13.	specialist programs	TEE track record	religious affiliation	school appearance
14.	staff appearance	reputation of teachers	individual needs supported	extra-curricula sport
15.	school appearance	extra-curricula art	family traditions	staff appearance
16.	extra-curricula sport	staff appearance	specialist programs	specialist programs
17.	single-sex <i>versus</i> co-ed	school appearance	proximity to home	reputation of teachers
18.	reputation of teachers	friendship groups	school appearance	reputation of principal
19.	extra-curricula art	extra-curricula sport	extra-curricula art	single-sex <i>versus</i> co-ed
20.	reputation of principal	reputation of principal	school will listen	diverse cultures
21.	family traditions	diverse cultures	reputation of principal	extra-curricula art
22.	friendship groups	individuality encouraged	reputation of teachers	old school tie
23.	diverse cultures	family traditions	old school tie	family traditions
24.	old school tie	old school tie	friendship groups	friendship groups
25.	individuality encouraged	camps and trips	diverse cultures	individuality encouraged
26.	religious affiliation	reputation - media	individuality encouraged	camps and trips
27.	camps and trips	single-sex <i>versus</i> co-ed	reputation - media	religious affiliation
28.	reputation - media	school brochures	camps and trips	VET track record
29.	VET track record	VET track record	school brochures	reputation - media
30.	school brochures	religious affiliation	VET track record	school brochures