

A Model For Studying Parental Choice of Secondary School

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Abstract:

It is surprising that, although there is widespread political desire to give parents a wider choice of schools for their children, comparatively little research has been focussed upon the process of parental decision-making. This paper outlines a model for decision-making derived from a study of a set of parents who were choosing a secondary school for their children.

This model has three sets of dimensions arising from the following questions:

- a. 'What was the process of making a decision?'
- b. What are the externally-imposed limitations upon the number of schools available.
- c. Which criterion influenced the choice of one school over another school.

This model is used to give meaning to the data gathered in a qualitative study based in Melbourne.

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The purpose of this paper is to give details of a model for choosing schools which was derived from a recent study of parents choosing secondary schools in suburban Melbourne. Some of the data is considered which relates to schools, especially the interaction between schools and parental views of status. Further details are available in Seiffert [1993].

1. A model for parental choice of secondary school

1.1 Introducing a theoretical model

A review of the literature on parental choice of school demonstrates the lack of coherent and explicit models to explain the ways that parents make their choice of school, with the exception of Morrison's model [Morrison 1983] which appears to be inadequate to account for the task required of it. Each study appeared to approach the task in a different way from the others,

and to have failed to reflect upon the model of choice implicit within the design. Levin's paper [1990] entitled 'The theory of choice applied to education' considers the macro level question rather than analysing parental behaviour which is the goal of this study.

Without a coherent framework, it is difficult to introduce new questions such as 'How can choice of school be related to attempts by parents to manipulate events to optimise chances of entry into prestigious positions?' In addition, one is left without a coherent framework within which to develop a research study. The present study began with the assumption that parents are informed actors in a social system, and that they are actors who generally work intelligently to secure the best solutions for themselves and/or their family.

The goal of this study was to obtain an overview of choice of school that would, amongst other things, allow the development of a framework for interpreting the data within the appropriate context, and allow a clearer approach for subsequent study.

The theoretical model described here is derived from an intensive study of 23 parents of grade 6 children in a group of adjoining suburbs in suburban Melbourne; the students were transferring from grade six in a public primary school to year seven in a secondary school at the beginning of 1989. Most of the data were gathered via semi-structured interviews. The prepared questions in the interview were developed from a review of the quite considerable literature on parental choice, as well as the development of an approach which allowed the possibility of parents choosing schools for reasons of social status, as well as the commonly reported educational reasons. It is common to see these two sets of factors apposed to one another such as in Morrison [1983, 1985] and Partington [1989].

The theoretical model which is presented below is derived from analysis of the data that was gathered, so it is a post hoc development. It arose from reviewing the data, seeking to find the most basic questions which could, in a comprehensive and coherent way, describe the considerations of the parents. This is a grounded theory approach after the ways of Strauss and Corbin [1990], although not arising from the details of the coding process they advocate.

The act of making a choice of school can be considered to have three sets of dimensions: process, constraints and criteria.

The set of 'process' dimensions arises from a set of answers

arising from questions which elucidate the question: What was the process of making a choice? The dimensions arise in answer to questions such as the following: Was there a choice? Who made the choice? When was the choice made? Each of these questions opens up a new dimension in understanding the process of choice of school.

The 'constraint' set of dimensions answers the question: 'What can constrain the choice?' Constraint is here defined as an externally-imposed limitation upon the number of schools available for a parent to choose between. A factor is considered to be acting as a constraint if it eliminates any school from possible consideration. There are constraints which are generally outside the control of the average parent, such as the nature of the schools which might be chosen, or the distance from home to school. There are also effective constraints which are far more personal, such as financial priorities, religion and ideology; whilst a parent may have the choice in some of these factors, that choice may limit available schools, for example, people have freedom of religion, but having chosen not to be a Catholic, a parent may be excluded from choosing a Catholic school. Lack of knowledge can also act as a constraint, although its origins can be diverse. The set of 'constraint' dimensions is separate from the process dimensions, although there is an interplay between the two, for instance it is likely that wealthy people have the choice of schools which charge high fees, resulting in a wider range of schools from which to choose. This may change the process by which parents make their choice.

When a parent is able to choose between one or more schools, he or she will select certain criteria or standards against which they will judge the possible schools. Criteria arise out of the answers to the question: 'What criteria influenced the choice of one school over another?', thus a factor will not be a criterion

for choice of school if parents do not use it to distinguish between schools. There may be personal criteria such as the parents' personal goals for the child, or the child's academic skills, through to nature of the school programme, or class size. There will be some criteria which parents will freely acknowledge, such as school facilities. However, there will be other criteria which some parents will be reluctant to acknowledge.

The literature reveals only a little about either process or constraints, but gives a lot of information about criteria. For example, the goals of the Victorian [1983] study was 'to identify the general factors which parents as a group or groups, consider to be important', thus directing the investigation into being a

study of criteria.

Some constraints may operate regardless of the processes by which a school is chosen, an example being the nature of the schools from which a choice may be made. However, the number of schools from which choice may be made very much depends on process, such as the amount of information-gathering. Other constraints such as family finances may in fact have a major influence upon the process. It is possible that one or more of the process variables may influence the constraints which operated, for example, different constraints are likely to depend upon who actually makes or influences the decision, be it mother, father, child or someone else.

The relationships between constraints and criteria are complex. As defined here, constraints will operate to define the set of schools from which a parent may make a choice, whereas criteria operate to distinguish between a number of alternatives which could have been chosen. If a criterion for choosing, such as requiring compliant behaviour, does not result in establishing a priority of schools, then it may be a criterion of selection but not a distinguishing criterion of choice. If a parent thought that academic results were important in choosing a school, but accepted that the academic results of all considered schools were acceptable, then academic results is not a critical criterion of choice. To take another example, finance is clearly a constraint which will affect people on lower incomes eliminating certain schools. However, for a better-off family, the constraint of finance may not restrict their final choice; they may choose the expensive school for some other reason than available finance, or they may choose a less expensive school for a different reason.

There will also be a complex interaction between criterion and processes. It is possible to consider circumstances where processes work to restrict the criteria that were used. For example, a parent's data-gathering process may reveal some unsatisfactory information about a school, which then becomes a criterion for choosing one school rather than another. Had the data-gathering process been different, that information may never have been gathered and never have had an influence. Alternatively, there are instances where criteria will influence process. An example would be where a parent has decided that their child must go to one of a set of private schools which charge high fees. This is likely to mean that the decision would be made earlier than if only public schools were being considered, and the child might be expected to sit for scholarship examinations.

1.2 The set of process dimensions

As outlined above the model proposes a set of process dimensions,

each of which will influence the outcome of a particular choice-making process. They are listed here in the sequence which they are most likely to occur. Firstly a name is given to each dimension, then a question which will assist to define the dimension:

1. Types of data.
What data did the parent gather about the choice?
2. Sources of data.
What were the sources of information used by parents?
3. Explicitness of choice.
Was there an explicit choice of school?
4. Personnel.
Who made the choice and who influenced the choice?
5. Timing.
When was the choice made?
6. Style.
How was the choice made?
7. Satisfaction.
How satisfied were the parents with their choice?
8. Ambivalence.
Was there enduring ambivalence about the decision?

Whilst a chronological order has been attempted, this is not very meaningful in the ordering of a number of the questions, especially 3 and 4. In order to describe the process which any parent or pair of parents has gone through, it is necessary to give an answer to each of the set of questions.

For each parent or family, it should be possible to give an answer to each of these questions. Because this is a post hoc analytical framework it is not possible to give an answer to every question in every case within this study, but it is possible to expect that this could be done in a subsequent study.

1. What data did the parent gather about the choice?

Parents are likely to vary in the amount and type of data that they gather; they will also differ in whether or not their data came from a deliberate effort to seek data or whether there was some more random process. They might gather information such as the academic nature of a school's programme, its style of discipline, uniform, who goes there, who does not go there, the students' academic results and the careers of the ex-students.

2. What were the sources of information used by parents?

Different people will have access to different sources of data, and rely on different sources in different ways. It would be expected that people with a close association with teachers might rely on their knowledge. Others might distrust teachers. Some parents may wish to visit schools to gather information, others might be more ready to rely on hearsay. Some parents will use networks to obtain information. Willingness and ability to use various sources of information will vary with class, gender, ethnicity and other contextual influences.

3. Was there a choice of school?

In some circumstances there may be no choice of school, or parents may think that there is no choice. There will not be a choice where there are strict zoning policies in place, for example if the education department decreed that all children living in X Street must attend school Y. Alternatively there is effectively no choice of school if no member of a family is informed of the opportunity to make a choice, or if the school of

destination seems so obvious that no other possibility is considered.

4. Who made the choice and who influenced the choice?

Was the choice made by the education department, a teacher, the child, the mother, the father, a grandparent or someone else? Alternatively, what was the balance between these different elements?

Grandparents may influence, as may other relatives, neighbours, teachers, electronic and print media and the child's peer group at school or in other children's groups such as youth club. It is a difficult question to find out who influenced the choice because many people are not aware of who influences them, or if they are, they may be reluctant to admit to being influenced.

5. When was the choice made?

Was the choice made during pregnancy, as is sometimes alleged for children from families who have 'always' sent their sons to a particular prestigious private school; was it made in early childhood, early primary school, middle primary school, early in the grade 6 year, or some other time. Considerable numbers of children change schools after their initial entry at year 7, thus re-considering their earlier choice, although this process is outside the scope of this study.

6. How was the choice made?

There are many different ways that such a choice could be made. Three relevant questions are:

Was the choice made after considerable family discussion, with equal input from both parents and the child, or was it a decision of one person alone?

Was the choice made on the basis of evidence which had been gathered, or was it spontaneously made, based upon random impressions or prejudices.

Was the choice carefully considered or did it one particular school seem inevitable?

7. How satisfied were the parents with their choice?

Are the parents, and the child, satisfied with the choice that has been made? It is quite possible that one or more of the main social actors will be dissatisfied with the final choice. This might have considerable consequences for a child or a family persisting in a school with which they can to be dissatisfied, such as when a child's behaviour declined or when academic achievement was poor.

8. Was there an enduring ambivalence?

After a school was finally selected a parent may embrace that school with enormous and unquestioning enthusiasm. On the other hand, the parent may remain quite ambivalent about his or her choice. Whilst it is possible that a child or parents were satisfied with a chosen school, it may be that there is a continuing resistance to that school. Maybe there are some aspects which are thoroughly accepted, and others which are totally rejected, such as the religious programme of a church school.

1.3 The set of constraint dimensions

This set of dimensions arises from the question: 'What externally-imposed limitations can constrain the choice?' These can be grouped into a number of subsets:

1. Schools

What range of schools is available? In Australia the most obvious answer to this focuses on the public/private division. However there is a wide range of differences between private schools, one of their most prized characteristics being their independence from each other and public schools. Within the public system, there are also many differences between schools. One difference is gender composition of school. There are very few public girls schools in Victoria, and possibly only one public boys school. Thus it is reasonable to say that most children must attend a coeducational school.

There is a set of hidden constraints which parents would probably not think about. There are no schools in Victoria which are like the exclusive Harrow in England, likewise it is hard to find a school like A. S. Neil's Summerhill. It is government policy to close very small primary and secondary schools, especially those in suburban areas. Most parents are unaware that it is possible, under some circumstances to avoid sending children to school and to educate them at home. This is still a variant of school choice!

2. Locality

Distance from home to school will constrain parents in their choice. The influence of locality will vary between parents. Some schools will be impossible to get to, others simply difficult. There are three separate issues here, the first is the time taken to travel, the second the difficulty in travel and the opportunity for problems to arise and the third is the financial cost of travel.

A related constraint is that of zoning. It is possible for an education authority to prevent students gaining access to particular schools on the grounds of an arbitrarily-imposed zoning system. It is possible that there only be one school in a particular zone, or there may be a number in a zone. Likewise there may be an established zoning system, but some parents may know how to subvert the system and/or use it to their own advantage.

Of course the fact that members of the one economic class are more likely to be clustered than randomly distributed means that location of school usually involves a status dimension, so that constraining parental choice to one or a few schools may also be constraining a child to attend a school with a particular status composition.

3. Family Finances

The availability of finance able to be spent on a child's

education will act as a constraint to many families, especially because the cost of sending one child to an expensive private school is about 25% to 30% of average weekly earnings. It is likely also that the high costs of some public schools may constrain some parents. Finance available for schooling will also depend upon a family's ability to plan their finances

carefully, as there are sophisticated finance schemes available which maximise taxation savings and allow fees to be budgeted over many years, starting when a child is young.

Other families may have this constraint eased by well-to-do grandparents, by employers or by remission of fees through scholarships.

4. Religion

The strong attitude for the Catholic church to church-school education means that religion has the potential to act as an externally-imposed constraint amongst faithful Catholics. However it would seem that contemporary Catholic church sees the decision as a matter of personal conscience, so that religion is probably better classified as a criterion. It may be that other religious groups treat schooling within religious institutions as mandatory, thus it would act as a constraint upon school choice.

1.4 The set of criteria dimensions

This set of dimensions is defined by the question: 'What criteria influenced the choice?' a criterion being a standard against which something, in this case a school, is judged. The focus is upon the standard which is first chosen by the chooser, then applied to one or more schools. For any one chooser there will be two overlapping sets of criteria. One set will select a number of schools from within the available constraints, the other set will distinguish between the possible schools.

A parent's acceptance or rejection of the local community may lead to a criterion of choice. For example, if a parent rejects the local children and does not want his or her children educated with them, a criterion of choice will be that the chosen school does not include local children, or maybe certain 'types' of local children. However if there are say three available schools which meet the criterion of no local children, then this cannot be accepted as a distinguishing criterion of choice.

Religion can be a criterion of choice, operating in a number of ways. For instance a parent may, out of conscience, require a

religious school. This then is a self-imposed criterion. Another parent may demand a school in which there is minimal input from religious sources. For others, religion may be irrelevant, even for some parents who choose church schools.

As with constraints, it is a tall order to list all factors which can act as criteria. The literature shows many different criteria which parents list as criteria under one circumstance or another. Whilst it is possible to group some of these together, it appears to be impossible to link them in an order which reflects the way in which these criteria are used. They have usually been listed in apparent order of importance. However it seems impossible to re-analyse the reports to distinguish between those criteria which were merely important and those which were critical in deciding between schools.

A group of criteria concerned school-based matters arose strongly from the research based on questionnaires, including matters such as curriculum, characteristics of teachers, class size, uniform, discipline, academic results, costs and facilities.

Parental goals for children have the potential to become distinguishing criteria. For example, parents may want a child

to undertake a certain academic programme so that he or she can enter the family business, or they may seek entry into a prestigious profession such as law or medicine. In other circumstances personal goals may involve desire to keep a child away from situations where parents believe that drug-taking is accepted.

Response to status can become a criterion if a parent lets it become a criterion. Two parents might believe that in an environment where there is high competition for jobs, ex-students of certain private schools receive preference over ex-students of public schools. One parent may respond by accepting such a state of affairs and thus send his or her child to a public school. Another parent may reject such a situation, or alternatively ignore the observation as they choose a school; in this situation, status is not a criterion of choice.

Status can become a criterion which parents use in choosing schools in a number of ways. For example, parents may evaluate the status of the families of the children who go to the schools they are considering, and thus status becomes a criterion of choice. They may see schools with high status families and choose either to associate with such a school, or they may wish to avoid such company. On the other hand they may see people of

low status at a school and avoid that school for fear of a declining status. A second example in which status may become important is if attendance at particular schools was seen as a mode of entry into a status group with prestige, maybe prestige in gaining employment or business opportunities.

1.5 In conclusion

The model presented here outlines a framework for inquiring into parental choice of school. It separates process variables from other variables, encouraging inquiry into the nature of the process. If one is studying parental choice of schools, it is imperative to find out if it was parents who did make the choice. Similarly specification of the schools from which a parent is choosing seems to be a pre-requisite of describing the choice. Likewise it seems to be fundamental to differentiate between the criteria which were important in choosing a school and the criteria which were critical in distinguishing the chosen school from one or more others.

This model does not develop a neat sequence explaining all aspects of choice of school. It has been proposed to clarify the terminology and to allow for a purposeful analysis of data. This model arose out of analysing the empirical data, and was not directly pursued in gathering data. This situation arose because this study, to a certain degree, grew out of the studies reviewed in the literature. However the model has the potential of giving a series of useful foci to subsequent study.

The confusion shown in the literature between constraints and criteria is possibly because people must make a number of simultaneous judgements about a range of matters. The situation is made even more difficult to study if parents are either unaware of the criteria that they are choosing, or are reluctant to publicly admit to them.

2. Constraints and criteria relating to schools

The purpose of this section is to indicate some of the school-related factors which were significant in this study. Some

appear to be externally-imposed constraints, such as education department zoning, others are personal decisions such as views of the status of families using a particular school.

2.1 Perceptions of the status level of schools

Other studies revealed evidence that children from families with a higher income tended to travel longer distances to school and were less likely to choose a technical school. It was unclear if the greater distance travelled was to an area with a homogeneously higher income level, or something else. It was also unclear whether the reason for better-off parents rejecting some schools, such as technical schools, was related to the type of child attending those schools or whether it was some other factor such as curriculum.

The task of this section is to investigate the possibility that, as far as some people are concerned, the status of the home background from which the children attending a school are drawn influences the choice made by some parents. In general, parents did not make a distinction between class and status and thus some of their statements do not differentiate between the prestige which might be associated with a particular occupation and the economic benefits associated with it. Rather than attempt to analyse all of these statements, most have been left intact.

Bev and Bill rejected Daffey Green High School on the basis that it 'attracted people who liked appearances and the name of it' and who wanted to be able to say that their children went to that particular school. She thought that the parents of the school were very aware of what might be described as an inflated view of either the school or its clientele. Bill and Bev categorized both Daffey Green High and Kirby Boys Grammar as schools that they would 'definitely not want Benny to attend'. Bev and Bill were clear about equating snobbery with private schooling, and now they were connecting Daffey Green High with both. Whilst in Bill and Bev's case there is a clear rejection of the school, it is not clear if the basis is the clientele of the school or the reputation of the school, or both.

Another parent who reacted as strongly to what she called 'snobbery' was Kath, who was particularly vitriolic about the girls who went to St Julian's Girls Grammar School. Her concern was that she thought the girls thought that they were better than others because their parents could afford to send them to that school.

Kath: I think that it creates a lot of problems for the kids whose parents just do not have the money to go. I think it maintains, and I don't like it in this country, God knows that there is enough of it in England, a snobbish sort of attitude ... I don't like the way those St Julian's Girls Grammar School kids, wearing full uniform treat the other kids up the street who are not in their uniform. Most of them are snobby little witches and bitches, and I don't like that ... I don't like children ... growing up with the belief that they are better because their

parents have a bit more money.

It is almost certain that Kath's economic position would have prevented her from selecting St Julian's for Kristin, so that the elevated economic clientele of that school could not have acted as a constraint in her choice. Kath held some form of social integration as a criterion for choice of school, but the economic constraint of finance meant that this criterion did not influence her choice of school. However the situation is different with Bev and Bill who would have had no economic difficulty in

obtaining entry for Benny at Daffey Green High; for them, it would appear that there was an integrative criterion acting against their selection of that school, and that it was based upon either economic class or a related variable.

Some parents wanted to choose a school which they perceived as drawing children from a wide range of social and/or economic background, but not too skewed towards the disadvantaged. Whilst Daffey Green High was rejected by Bill and Bev because they saw it as having socially-pretentious or 'snobby' parents, the school was valued by Eva and Eric. On one hand Eric and Eva saw the school as having social diversity amongst its school community, and on the other hand they thought that the children who went to Daffey Green High were 'Pretty much the same as ours. I think basically middle class kids.' Eric wrote that one of the 'special advantages' that the school held for Ellen was 'Exposure to a cross section of the community'. He also said:

Eric: [At Daffey Green] they have got a range of races there, and they have a programme for disabled people there, paraplegics who spend time there, and [Ellen] will come in contact with those, and it has a fair spread of social strata, and again I don't want her hemmed into a narrow social ...

M: So you are saying that it is giving you more, sorry, a wider field of social background than children in private schools would get?

Eric: Yes, I hope so anyway.

Eva explained that one of the reasons that they rejected the private schools was because of the narrow range of social [or economic] background that they saw represented at them. Such children did not know or care about children from working class suburbs. Going to a private school meant that the children did not 'develop ... realistic attitudes to the world as it is, I don't think that they learn to care, I don't think they learn that there are people different from themselves, and I don't

think that they even realise that kids who are different from themselves are just as good as them'. She wanted them to go to school alongside people from different backgrounds so that they could learn to live with people who were different. However, she emphasised that if she lived in a working class suburb, her opinion might have been different.

It is paradoxical that Eva valued the social diversity of Daffey Green High, whilst Bev and Bill rejected the school because of what they perceived as its restricted social mix. There could be many explanations of this. Residential area and employment may be important. Eva commented that her daughters were the only children in her immediate area who did not go to a private school. This was less likely in the area in which Bill and Bev lived. Bill and Bev worked in an area of the public service where they would frequently encounter people from a wide range of social background, whereas this was less likely to be the case for Eric and Eva. Each family clearly held a criterion of social diversity as being necessary in a secondary school. However that of family E was satisfied by Daffey Green High with its better-off clientele whereas the criterion of family B required a more heterogeneous mix.

Like Eric, Gary also wrote that one of the positive attributes of their chosen school, Drayton High, was that its school community included 'a cross-section of society of different backgrounds as aspirations.' Gwen also valued her perception that it was 'serving [and presumably reflecting] her local community'. Gwen

saw her community as being 'very different' from the community which fed into Diss High; this meant that the 'children [at Diss High] would not have the same values as the other children. She saw these values as being a 'lower education than ours have ... because the population is not academically inclined':

M: Right. Just thinking about Diss High .. I think one of the things you said about Drayton was it had a real mix of kids?

Gwen: Yes, I know, it's a bit of a contradiction isn't it? I just think it's weighted more towards our values [inaudible] it draws on a similar sort of area to us, whereas Diss High draws on the Diss area. It's a very different area to us.

M: You're happy to have Graeme go to a school which might have some kids from the average Diss, you don't want ninety per cent who don't care about their school?

Gwen: Yes. That's a contradiction ...

Gwen went on to explain how she wanted to choose a school which was neither skewed towards 'elite' families or deprived families. She also said that she valued the diverse backgrounds of the children in their primary school.

Gwen was quite prepared to have Graeme go to a primary school which included children from a very mixed background, and wanting to have some of that diversity reflected in the secondary school that they chose, yet she was not prepared to choose a school whose population was skewed towards the disadvantaged. Bill also rejected Diss High School after having seen a bullying incident there. Whilst travel to this school would not have been easy, it seems likely that Bill's definition of diversity did not stretch that far.

The complexity of seeking diversity in social or class background can be seen in the following interchange between Cathy and Colin:

M: What sort of influence are your neighbours on Chris?

Cathy: We have a lovely mixture of neighbours, quite diverse. There's a Macedonian Greek on this side, a career family in this side, and we have a professional couple across the road. There is a huge diversity of background of age-level, of religion, interests, in the neighbours so I think that he's got a really good cross-section of um Melbourne community just here. Now that was important [emphatically]. That was very important where we chose where we lived. We didn't want to move into an area where he wouldn't get ... Where he would be restricted. ...

M: Did you think about that when you were choosing a school?

Cathy: No [Said as if surprised at herself]. We did for primary education, we did, that was an important factor in primary education, but not in secondary education.

M: Now why was that? Why was it important in one and not in the other?

Cathy: Because I thought his primary, I think that we both agree on this, that his primary education was the foundation stone of his character-building, and we thought once he had all of those things under way, then he would be able and mature enough to sort out the rest of his problems.

Colin walks by.

Cathy says to him: I was just telling Murray about choosing why

to live in this area about the cross-section of people, and he thought that it was interesting that we didn't do that in secondary education. We didn't, did we?

Colin: We considered the opposite. I did, part of being elitist or whatever, but I never really thought of it from that point of view.

Colin walks off.

Colin seems to be clear. He wanted a restricted social set at Chris's new school, although his comment: 'We considered...' might be taken to mean that he thought that this was the opinion of both of them. Cathy, on the other hand seemed surprised that this was how they were working. Either she hadn't realised it, or she hadn't placed the two approaches in juxtaposition before.

Fred thought that one of the advantages of Olney High School was that it would 'help him [Finn] later in life in mixing with down-to-earth people, and he is not going to some Kirby Boys Grammar or some grammar school where it has the silver-spoon syndrome'. He saw diversity as a positive in Olney, however he added '... but there again it could hinder him because he's not going to a silver-spoon syndrome school and if he wants to be solicitor, it might be harder for him to become. But me being, I believe, a down-to-earth person, I think that I'd like my son to be that way'. Fred wrote that one of the things that Finn would 'miss out on' by going to Kirby Boys Grammar was a 'Basic feeling of the "average" person', a similar comment to that made by Gary: 'Meeting a balanced cross-section of society'. Joan rejected Kirby Boys as encouraging materialistic values.

Lyn was keen to send Leonie to a school which away from the children of the Diss district. This was partly because of the family's previously difficulties at the local school, but also to get Leonie away from some of the children who had been with her at primary school. Lyn said: 'I'm not a snob or anything, we're just ordinary people but I believe kids need a good education.

We are thus left with a set of types distinguishing parental approaches to the mix of status amongst families in secondary schooling:

Social Mixers: who want their children to experience what they perceive to be a wide range of society; for some of this group it is important that the range not too wide: This group includes: Eric, Eva, Fred, Gwen, Gary,

Pseudo-social Mixers: who think that they are selecting a school with a considerable mix, but this is not really the case. David

and Dianne fit this category, they thought that Newton Girls Grammar was open to almost anyone, but did not realise that the fees were only slightly below that of the other private schools in the study. Bill and Bev would have categorized Eric and Eva as being in this group.

The Exclusivists, who were wanting their child to join a select group of children. Colin fits this category, as he was seeking the selectivity of a private school; also Lyn who sought to get her children away from the local children in Diss. Indira was similar in wanting to keep her son away from that 'rough area' known as Diss.

Diss High School was located in the working class area of Diss.

When faced with the question: 'Are there any schools you definitely would not want [your child] to go to?', Diss was listed by five people: Bill, Gwen, Gary, Harold and Helen. Harold said that

'it's got a pretty poor reputation, basically the discipline problems are fairly horrendous ... I think basically academically it's pretty poor too ... Because of the people they draw on. Quite frankly they draw from Diss because they live around it.'

Colin commented about a school which was similar to Diss, but was located outside the study area.

Colin: I wouldn't want him to go there [said with emotion] ... 'The social nature of the school and the condition which the children bring there and, oh boy, but this sounds awful horthy-torty doesn't it, but the children who go there bring social conditions, the expectation of their families and the curriculum and the academic success of the school rides on that, and if that's no good, there is nothing.

M: So you're sort of saying that there's a milieu that the kids create?

Colin: The families and the children. Yes, that's right, the academic standards sit on that.

So we can see Colin, Harold and to a lesser extent Lyn, outlining a strong view that the school in the working class area developed an inferior academic environment for teaching and learning. One could probably conclude that this was akin to the ideas that were in the mind of Eva and Eric, Gary and Gwen

The conclusion is thus inescapable that for most of the parents

used status related criteria when choosing between public schools. The most common consequence within public schools arose from parents looking downwards, although a balanced diversity of backgrounds was important for some parents. The status composition of a school is clearly a discriminating criterion for some parents. As a result of the economic inequities between people in different residential areas, there is a degree to which economic class can also be considered as an external constraint imposed upon parents as a result of zoning. In this case it does not act as a constraint to prevent parents choosing the more working class schools which are less popular, but it does act as a strong constraint to prevent people living in working class areas from choosing schools located in middle class areas.

2.2 Other comments about schools

Most parents were able to choose from at least three public schools, although one parent said that he had a choice of twelve schools. There was a range of private schools within easy travelling distance.

There was a system of zoning in place, but for most schools it was not applied very strictly. Appeals against zoning were commonly upheld and so, in general, the zones only acted as a guide. Amongst the thirteen children in the study, it is arguable that the placement of only one was determined by zone. There was a reluctance to expect students to travel long distances, so that within the study area, it is anticipated that the abolition of zoning would have little influence.

Within this study, ethnicity did not appear to influence school choice, although this is not surprising as most of the schools had comparatively few children born overseas, and no school had a concentration of people from any one overseas country.

Parents made a wide range of points about each of the main schools being selected. Tables 1 and 2 demonstrate the data gathered about two schools in this study. These points were gathered from analysis of all the data gathered in this study; almost all of the points were given without specific prompting arising in answer to questions such as 'What are some of the good things about the school?' and 'What are some of the bad things about the school?'. The classification system applied to these data included about 20 categories; six parents gave comments in 10 or more categories. In many ways the heading on the list which resulted appears to be similar to those of Morrison [1983]

and of Atkinson and Atkinson [1980]. Like their lists, the data such as tables 1 and 2 can be seen as being points in which parents are interested, and it is to be expected that if the parents in this study had been given a list of headings such as these tables, most categories would have been marked as 'important' or 'most important'. None of those lists indicate the criteria which were used by parents to choose one school over another. It seems reasonable to conclude that most, if not all, of the points could be described a criteria which parents consider when selecting the schools from which they will choose. However it is a very different thing to conclude which of these criteria were used as the distinguishing criteria for the critical step of finally choosing one school over another.

It probably should not be surprising if parents are able to see both good and bad points in the schools which they are choosing, nor that they find more good points than bad points about the schools which they choose. Overall the points made can be interpreted as giving a positive view of the schools being considered. The negative points do not support the contention of serious discontent over the quality of schooling amongst parents, as was suggested by some, including Jeff Kennett [The Sun 3 October 1988].

Like the earlier quantitative studies, curriculum, academic results and standards, and discipline are the categories most often listed. This confirms their importance to parents as they make their decision. Curriculum was not particularly important, except for a strong reaction against the curriculum of the local technical school.

Of the 23 points made in the category of results, all but five were positive, and three of the negative ones came from Harold and were irrelevant in his choice of school. It is arguable that there was not one school was rejected because of lack of confidence in its academic results, with the possible exception of Eric whose case is discussed below. What might be surprising is that the category of status and class associated with views of schools is mentioned by 14 people, as many as academic results. This may be an artefact of the efforts put into this question in this study, or it may be a symbol that most people have views on this topic if you look carefully, or both. Other categories commonly raised were uniform, facilities and school location with respect to home.

There was general consistency in the comments made by individuals in the wide-ranging data collected. Eric described himself as being older than most parents of teenagers, and he wanted to see a traditional approach to schooling in curriculum, discipline and student-teacher relationships. He thought that this resulted in

higher academic results, and it led him to reject Drayton High and select Daffey Green High School, thus it was a discriminating criterion from him. On the other hand, Bill rejected a number of traditional aspects of education, such as uniform, and looked towards a more free approach to student-teacher relationships than one would find in Daffey Green High. There was no other parent who was as consistent as Eric in looking for conservative approaches to school as Eric, although Fred shared something of the same approach, including being opposed to school excursions.

A number of parents placed emphasis on the community nature of day-to-day aspects of the school. This was particularly the case with Cathy who was concerned for a caring environment, and saw one of the advantages of Eagle Grammar as being 'respect for each person and their development' as shown through the approach of the school and its pastoral system. She did not see this as necessarily having an influence on academic performance, but as being important in personal development. Cathy did not believe that Olney High, or another high school just outside the area, was adequate on this dimension; interestingly she did not comment one of her closest schools was Drayton High, which was described by Gary and Bev as being caring schools. This suggests that 'caring environment' was an important criterion for Cathy, eliminating some schools, but that there was another variable. Cathy was particularly critical of Olney High School; of the 22 points of criticism made about that school, 10 of them came from Cathy. Bev also valued a caring environment in a school, and this may have been an important criterion in choosing Drayton High ahead of Daffey Green High.

2.8 In conclusion

It can be seen that many aspects of schools and the organisation of schools can act as constraints upon parental choice of school, such as the number and nature of schools offered, zoning and transport. As well as this, parents may have criteria relating to the nature of schools, such as the class composition of a school, school size and ethnicity.

A wide range of criteria was identified as being of concern to parents, but all of those criteria are not necessarily important in deciding between schools.

The data in section 2 show the way in which the model can be used to distinguish between criteria which are important, and criteria which are critical in the choice of schooling.

It is to be expected that those who seek to apply a market economy to schooling in the hope that it will lead to more effective schooling would be wanting key educational criteria such as academic achievement as being the critical criteria [Chubb and Moe 1990]. The evidence of this study challenges the assumption that this occurs, and thus adds a challenge to the conservative agenda, for if criteria other than academic criteria are the instrument of selection, the application of the market economy to schooling will not lead to better education. It is a bit like the farmers who thought they were selecting sheep for increased wool production but found that they were selecting for wrinkly skin, a problem which was a disaster for generations.

TABLE 1: SUMMARY OF POINTS NOTED ABOUT OLNEY HIGH SCHOOL

FEATURE	POSITIVE POINTS		NEGATIVE POINTS	
	CHOOSERS	NON-CHOOSERS	CHOOSERS	NON-CHOOSERS
Curriculum:				
*The Arts much of the arts		Cathy, Gwen, Ian		Fred & Bev-too
*General scope		Alan, Alison, Lyn.		
*Languages			Bev - No Asian.	
*Academic results -uncertain.		John, Joan, Lyn	Bev, Gwen.	Colin
*'Work pressure' challenge him.'		Fran-'mightn't Cathy- not enough		
*Documentation of policy/curric Not good enough			ditto-	
*Other points on curriculum Chaplain/RE Gifted children 'has excursions' Discipline Cathy - not enough		Joan- Ian- Fred -'too little homework' and Ian-Science not as good as Kirby Alan, Alison, Fred, Fran, John, Joan, Lyn		
Uniform poor. Cathy- 'halfdressed'		Alan, Alison, Fred, Fran, Joan	Bev	Colin-
Facilities poor, graffiti		Alan, John, Joan		Cathy & Colin-
Peers from local [home] area		Joan, [Lyn-local kids didn't go]		Colin,

Ian.

Close to home Fred, Fran, John, Joan Colin. Gary-
'Would have chosen it if
closest'. Gwen-'Too far away'
Reputation Alan, John, Joan. Bev, Colin, Gwen, Ian.
Cathy -Not good.
Status factors Fred Colin -Not private school
Coeducation
Fred, John, Joan
Staff Alan, Fred, John Ian Ian
Communication
with parents Alan, Alison, Bev Cathy
Overall Alan-'pretty well
set up'
ditto-'well run'
John-'a very, very
good school' Cathy-didn't like approach to
children.
do .- apparently lacked enthusiasm
do. -'didn't have its act together'.
Ian- 'noisy'

TABLE 2: SUMMARY OF POINTS NOTED ABOUT KIRBY BOYS GRAMMAR
SCHOOL.

FEATURE	POSITIVE POINTS		NEGATIVE POINTS	
	CHOOSERS	NON-CHOOSERS	CHOOSERS	NON-CHOOSERS
Curriculum:		Sound education		
- Gwen				
*Academic	results	'High standards in many areas'		
- Ian	Good academic record	- Fred		
Good HSC results				
- Gary & Ian	Results not good enough	- Harold		
Tertiary results not good		- Gary		
*'Work pressure'	'They'll work him harder'	- Ian	Extends	
boys				
- Fran	Pressure makes			
some boys feel				
failures - Bev				
*Documentation				
of policy/curric			Extra-curricular activities -	
Fred				
Discipline	Good			
- Ian & Indira	Good - Fred		Authoritarian and stifled	
- Bev				
Uniform		Too much		

emphasis - Bev
Facilities Good, especially
science - Ian Excellent - Gary
Good - John Too much
emphasis - Gary
Peers from local
[home] area Locals/friends not going there
- Fred & Joan
Narrow band of
society - Gary
Reputation Better name
- Indira Ethic of achievement
- Gary
Status factors Favoured by
certain employers
- Ian & Indira Good contacts in business - Fred No contact
with the average
person - Fred
Elitist - Gwen
Keeping up with the Joneses - Joan
Coeducation
Single sex - Ian Single sex - Gwen, Gary, John
& Joan
Communication
with parents Lack of parent input - Gwen
Overall 'Boys encouraged' & 'competitive'
- Ian Materialistic
- Joan. Cathy: Too competitive.
Not caring - Gary
Traditional &
conservative Tradition is impressive - Ian Very
conservative
- Gwen
Other points 'Better children'
- Ian Good sporting
record - Fred Religious bias
- Ian
From next column
Individual needs ignored - Bev
Religion could be pushed too far -
Gwen
Too big - Gary Too religious
- Harold
Children who are excluded do well elsewhere - Bev
Entrance exam excludes children
- John
Continued left

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