

GROO1054 Choosing Schools in a Volatile Market.

Refereed Paper Presented to:

Australian Association for Research in Education Annual Conference

Perth, December, 2001

Susan Groundwater-Smith, University of Sydney

This paper discusses a project undertaken in one metropolitan school district within the Department of Education and Training, New South Wales. In the context of the marketisation of schools and the rationalisation of schooling provisions, the study sought to explore the basis upon which caregivers and their children made choices regarding school selection. Three teachers from each of the thirteen state secondary schools in the district were provided with research training regarding the conduct of focus group inquiry. Following a pilot study, which tested the methodology, teachers investigated, using a common procedure, the factors which influenced caregivers and their children in making choices regarding the secondary school the students would attend. A number of factors were rank ordered and clearly indicated that the perception of the school as a safe environment, where student welfare had primacy, and where curriculum choice was available were the first considerations; whereas links to primary schools and travel concerns were relatively unimportant. Other factors, such as the role of the school leader varied. Focus group discussions made clear the ways in which the students themselves were active agents in the making of choices. The paper will present the results of the study and will also discuss the implications for the ways in which schools may present themselves in a competitive educational market. It will also examine ways in which schools can work in concert with one another, across a district, while still maintaining their own distinctiveness.

The Context:

In providing a context for this study it is important not only to attend to policy issues with respect to the marketisation of schools and the intensified competition between and within government and non-government sectors; but also to note significant restructuring practices within the government sector in New South Wales. These policies and practices are interacting one with the other to produce very real pressures and tensions upon existing schools within given Districts. Such was the case with the Sutherland District, a distinctive and bounded geographic location in metropolitan Sydney.

Schools and the Marketplace:

The discussion paper *Needing Each Other, Secondary Schools and Their Communities* (Groundwater-Smith, 2000) presented to Sutherland District Principals late last year, briefly spelled out the context of public and private schooling provisions in Australia and the trends towards private school enrolments within a rhetoric of choice. The paper

argued that schools were now faced with an environment in which education is treated as a commodity which can be marketed like any other.

The current Liberal/National Coalition Government has been a strong advocate of choice in education. It is difficult to argue with Marginson's allegation that the coalition government which has held federal power since 1996 has been seeking to deregulate the education market (Marginson, 1996, p.15).

Australian parents are being encouraged to make their choices about secondary schooling in an environment where education is being marketed as though it were a commodity like any other. They are led to believe that there is a great distinctiveness between schools. But the implicit message is that the distinctiveness is not between schools in general, but between government and non-government schools in particular.

Market theories of education see the consumer as the beneficiary. But, of course, matters are not so simple. Certainly, individuals can and do benefit from a market orientation. It has already been widely argued, for example, that elite, prestigious schools can act to support the individual's access to power and status. This can be said to be more to do with cultural capital than cognitive attainment. The student gains membership to a club. Anderson (1993) has further suggested that Catholic secondary education with its norms of discipline and conformity also give individuals assets which they can take to employment within certain regimes of power and control.

Many schools in the UK have opted for prestige and the avoidance of conflict as a market attractor rather than value added attainment (Boyd et al, 1994) In doing so, these schools have sought to ensure that they avoid enrolling students who will not contribute to that prestige or who may engender conflict by their behaviours. Rather than deal with difficult students, UK schools are opting to exclude them.

Furthermore, in the United States, students with disabilities or who are serious discipline problems are seen as more expensive to teach and may be refused admission to profit-making schools. (Shanker & Rosenberg, 1992).

So while relatively small numbers of students may benefit from a market orientation it could be argued that the social stratification which results from it can be a significant cost to others and to the society at large.

It is also possible to speculate regarding collective beneficiaries. Specific communities, based in particular racial, ethnic and/or religious practices may wish to claim that there are important benefits to them in maintaining these practices and that this is best undertaken through schooling processes.

A concern that has been expressed regarding schools whose clientele base is related to race, ethnicity and/or religion in the United States of America is that they can contribute to greater isolation of specific groups within the broader society (Cookson, 1994). Here we have a classic dilemma, the rights and needs of groups within the society vs the rights and needs of the society as a whole.

Finally, it has been argued that the nation state can benefit from a market orientation. A crude case can be made for investing in public education purely on the basis of human capital development. The argument here is that our youth are as much a national asset as our other resources, such as minerals, agriculture, business and industry. Our society will ignore the educational needs of groups of youth at its peril. We simply cannot afford to leave

such a rich resource untapped and it is thought that the market place will determine the best means for developing such human capital.

A more significant and contrary case can be made on the basis of social capital development - a healthy society is one where its members are equitably recognised and valued (Marginson, 1997). Gewirtz, Ball & Bowe (1996) in their analysis of the effects of a market orientation on schooling in the UK have argued that there has been a problematic values shift which has consequences for the larger society. They contrast the inherent values of a comprehensive schooling system with one which is market driven and suggest that the trend is against the national interest.

Much of the British discussion has been regarding competition within a largely government driven sector, however, in New South Wales, whilst this is the case it is also notable that there is strong competition between government and non-government sectors. A second paper *Secondary Education in Sutherland District* (Matthews, 2000) presented to the Sutherland District Principals provided specific data regarding demographics. It indicated that at the State level the drift to the non-government sector continues with 66.9% of secondary age students enrolled in government schools in 1998, compared to 67.5 in 1997 and numbers dropping further in 1999 and 2000.

Regional Restructuring:

In addition to changing policies regarding the marketisation of schooling, it is also the case that the government school sector is undergoing massive restructuring. In its proposal *Building the Future* the State Government of New South Wales has developed a strategy for rationalising inner Sydney secondary schools. Key elements to the proposal include: the development of a partially selective senior secondary college; the creation of a number of 7-10 single sex comprehensive schools, where successful coeducational 7 – 12 schools had previously existed; the creation of a secondary campus with a special Aboriginal focus at Alexandria Public School site; an Intensive English Centre campus at Surry Hills; and amalgamations and closures affecting seven High Schools. A number of primary schools are also scheduled for amalgamations and closure. At the time of writing this paper it would appear that the bulk of the proposals will go forward, although negotiations are continuing, particularly with regard to Aboriginal education.

All the same, the inner Sydney restructuring policy is clearly multidimensional and controversial. More modest restructuring has already occurred in areas such as the Northern Beaches district, and in the formation of Collegiates, which combine senior High School, TAFE and University facilities.

The Sutherland District, with which this study is concerned, is not immune from these changing, and in some cases quite radical, policies. Currently it contains thirteen secondary schools; including comprehensive, selective and some designated purpose schools. While the drift to the non-government sector has not been as great as in other areas in the State, it is clear that the market will become increasingly more competitive as new independent schools are established. Currently within the district there are 9 non-government secondary schools; six within the Catholic systemic schools sector and three independent schools all related to Christian denominations.

In her summary of *Secondary Education in Sutherland District* Marianne Matthews proposed a number of flashpoints. These included:

- The impact of Georges River Collegiate on district schools;
- Enrolment practices among schools in the government sector;

- Recruitment by independent schools;
- Rationalisation of vocational education in the district; and
- The variety of time-table structures across the district's government schools.

She also drew attention to the social and physical geography of the Sutherland Shire and the implications for school choice and cooperation between schools. The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) indicates that the Shire is relatively homogeneous, ethnically, economically and demographically.

The relative affluence and levels of education among parents suggests that they will be discriminating in their choices and decisions regarding their children's schooling. As well, it has been anecdotally reported that there seems to be a high level of loyalty to the "Shire" with some conservatism regarding change. As one Principal observed "this is very much an area where 'if it 'ain't broke why fix it' prevails."

So the arguments in relation to the beneficiaries of choice in schooling are complex and competing. However, there may be some other ways of exploring benefit and that is the benefit to schooling itself in a context where there is choice and diversity and where schools seek to simultaneously engage in the market, and to work cooperatively and collegially with each other. Such has been the case with the Sutherland District, where schools are continuing to affirm their distinctiveness, but are seeking for ways to work more successfully together.

It is in this context, then, that a decision was taken to investigate the motivations which underpin the choices which parents and their children make about which secondary school they will attend. Basically, the decision was taken to use a qualitative methodology, *focus group inquiry*, to enable key stakeholders' views to be heard. This element of the study would build upon the statistics which had already been gathered and which had informed the earlier mentioned paper *Secondary Education in Sutherland District*.

While the emphasis was upon those already in the district's secondary schools it was clear that further research should be undertaken inquiring into the intended choices of parents of primary school children.

Methodology:

Focus group inquiry was seen to be particularly salient as a research tool for this investigation. Focus groups are group discussions exploring a specific set of issues. The emphasis is upon the dynamic of the group interaction which is designed to facilitate the voicing of the widest range of opinions which may exist within it. It is a strategy which avoids consensus and encourages debate (Kitzinger & Barbour, 1999).

In the case of the Sutherland district project it was decided to also include some information which could be quantified. To this end eleven statements, derived from the research, and which were said to be factors which influenced school choice, were presented:.

1. The school encourages students to take a pride in it and its achievements.
2. The school provides a wide choice in the school's curriculum program from vocational education to academic programs and including after school activities, such as sport and music.
3. The school ensures student safety, happiness and welfare while at school.
4. The school is easy to reach
5. The school has a Principal who provides visionary and strategic leadership.
6. The school has a helpful, courteous and approachable teachers.

7. The school has a strong reputation for academic achievement.
8. The school encourages communication with its parents and its students.
9. The school reinforces the values and teaching of the home.
10. The school has connections to the local primary school.
11. The school cares about and values children as individuals.

Participants were asked to rank these statements and subsequently discuss their rankings and the variations which existed. Thus the study had access to both the ranking data, which could be accumulated both within and across schools, and to the reasoning which lay behind the ranking decisions.

All participating schools have used the schedules which were prepared by the reference group which designed the study. A copy of one such schedule, that was used with parents, is attached as Appendix A.).

The decision was taken to adopt a practitioner research model in which three teacher-researchers from each participating school would be trained in the conduct of focus group inquiry. This was regarded as an important and innovative strategy. It was reasoned that the process would build up the schools' and hence the district's research capability. The methodology will lend itself, in the future, to other inquiries which schools may wish to undertake at the local level.

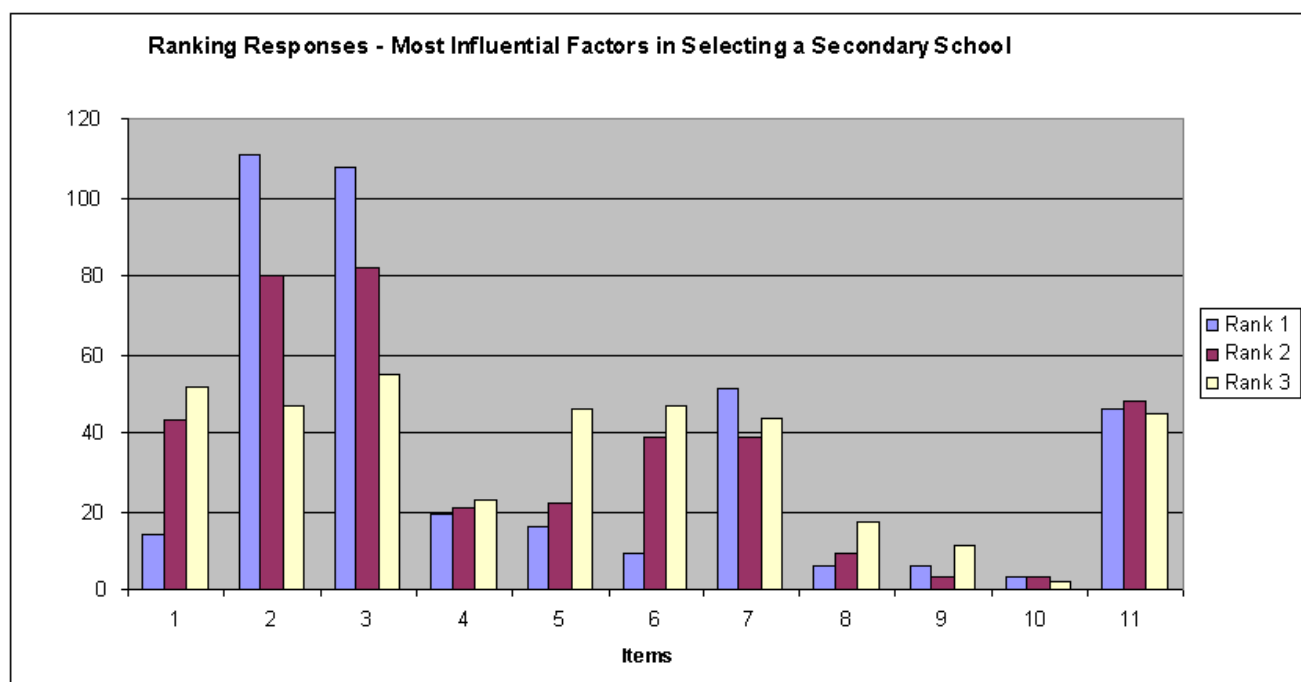
Prior to the training of the teacher-researchers a pilot study was undertaken by the university associate. This allowed the methodology to be tested and enabled a core of teacher-researchers to observe and participate in the focus groups.

It is argued here that the training of the teacher researchers was a powerful form of professional development. During the one day preliminary workshop teachers were familiarised with the context of change in which they found themselves and which forms the first part of this paper. They were presented with a guide to focus group inquiry. Those who had taken part in the pilot project then engaged all participants in focus groups as a model for what would take place in the schools.

A strategy was developed for the documentation of the school studies. In order to assist the teacher-researchers a checklist was designed which ensured that the operation of the focus groups within the schools would conform to the agreed process which was that there be: 2 x Year 7 parent groups; 1 x Year 7 student group; 1 x Year 11 student group and 1 x staff group. Care was taken to observe ethical practices regarding informed consent and opportunities for feedback to members of focus groups.

A debriefing workshop was held at the conclusion to the project. Schools tabled and discussed their individual studies and these are available within the schools themselves. The reference group then met to elicit the major themes. The results component of this paper reflects their decisions.

Results:



Taking the consolidated data from the participating schools, N = 389, it is clear that items 2 and 3 drew the most responses as being of high priority to stakeholders in making decisions about school choice. Item 2 refers to "The school provides a wide range of choice in the school's curriculum programs from vocational education to academic programs and including after school activities such as sport and music." Item 3 refers to "The school ensures student safety, happiness and welfare while at school."

Item 7, "the school has a strong reputation for academic achievement", and Item 11, "the school cares about and values children as individuals" were also clearly of importance.

Below appears some of the discussion related to the two most highly ranked items.

Curriculum Choice:

The provision of a range of choices including after school activities was of vital importance to parents and students alike. In the case of specialised schools the nominated area of excellence was also a consideration:

Students perceived the school as having a strong focus on sport with junior students identifying general facilities and (that) a good balance existed between sport and academic opportunities. Senior students, however, identified the multi-cultural mix as a valuable characteristic and strongly emphasises the need and importance of students fulfilling academic potential. While junior students promoted sport as an important feature of the school they also saw the need to concentrate on school work. (School 3)

On the other hand the comprehensive schools saw that they too had curriculum strengths:

Without a specialisation, the school offers a satisfying choice of subjects as well as sporting options. Specialist, or label schools present a focus in one area and a certain amount of competitive intimidation. (School 5)

The school's ability to provide a wide range within the curriculum and extra curricula activities has a significant impact upon the selection of schools. It was seen as necessary to provide a wide variety of subjects across the KLA's e.g. Dance, Drama, Japanese, extension HSC subjects etc. If schools that didn't offer subjects within the school encouraged courses via correspondence this was seen as positive. The parents expressed concern that the decline of some KLA's may lead to the exodus of talented students, to the private system. These concerns were also expressed in the need parents felt to employ private tuition. (School 7)

Many students chose the school for the variety of extras offered such as drama, music, singing, dance, band and vocals. (School 9)

It was also seen, in a number of schools, that a curriculum which recognised the varying strengths and competencies of the students was important:

As one participant said ' we can't all be geniuses, we need a well rounded curriculum to provide for all students'. (School 10)

Year 11 students were generally more aware of the implications of curriculum choice than those in Year 7.

Students (Year 11) felt that it was important that you could have a choice of subjects so that you enjoyed school and that it fitted in with career aspirations. ... Extracurricular activities were considered important because 'they get you away from the seriousness of school.' (School 7)

Student Safety and Welfare:

It was strongly recognised by all groups that students should feel safe and happy at school.

The student welfare network in place at the school was seen as very positive and one which ensured student safety and happiness. Parents recognised the happiness of their child to be paramount in ensuring a happy, well adjusted, educated young adult at the conclusion of their education. (School 4)

In ranking reasons to select a secondary school, several staff members rated the option 'student safety, happiness and welfare while at school' as a key factor. This choice was made in close connection to the school 'valuing children as individuals'. Staff members were of the view that all other aspects of the school experience would fall into place if students felt valued. 'My bottom line is my children are happy, nothing else works unless that works'. (School 4)

'If they are happy everything else fits into place, there is a better environment at home as well as at school.' (School 5)

Students felt that you should always be safe at school and it didn't matter what subjects were available if you felt unsafe. (School 7)

It was paramount for parents that the school ensured the safety, happiness and welfare of the students. The school's policy on anti-bullying was seen as highly visible and the results were that concerns were quickly met. 'The school has a bit of an attitude to bullying. It actually does something about it'. It was seen that children's self esteem was under attack when he or she is bullied and oppressed. (School 8)

Student Choice:

An unexpected outcome of the study, although not indicated in the ranking instrument, was the indication that the students greatly influenced the choice of school. Certainly there was consultation with parents, but in the main the students made the choice after visiting a number of schools.

Eight of them (out of 13 Year 7 students) had looked at other schools. Only one parent made the choice for them. (School 1)

When it came to selecting a school, parents saw initial contact with the principal and staff as important. This was followed by discussions at home, but it was expressed by the parents that '... the child's involvement in the decision making was imperative as it enabled them to feel comfortable and happy with the decision ... (so that in the future) ... it would not backfire against the parent. (School 3)

All students felt that whilst they had made the final decision, their parents let them know that they would not be able to chop and change. Some did feel that their decision was not set in concrete and that if things didn't work out then a reassessment was possible. (School 4)

At this stage (in the parent focus group) the point was again made that the final choice of school had been the child's.... The children's choice seemed to sway the opinion of the parents. They were happy when the child went to the local school and they could make their own way there – it saved time and was less stressful. (School 9)

Students believed that the school had a very good reputation. They based this perception on discussion with friends, siblings and neighbours. The students all agreed that although the parents did the initial research, the final say was left to them on what school they wished to attend. (School 11)

In one school it was noted that while it was clear that students had a voice in their choice of school, the motivations for choice varied. The Year 7 students reported:

In choosing a High School the girls were influenced by having friends at the school, but the boys were influenced by a school with a good reputation. (School 1)

Parents of Year 7 students confirmed that their children had made the decision, but that they had sought to influence that choice. They also indicated that the motivations for selection varied according to the child's confidence:

Students who weren't as confident tended to attend the same high school as their friends, whereas more confident students were more likely to select independently of their friends. (School 1)

In their own words students indicated 'You should choose a school that is strong in what you enjoy'. (School 2)

What was important was the fact that there was a choice at all:

What was important to the parents was the awareness that they and their children did actually have a choice. 'But ultimately it's their (the students) choice. They choose.' Just as the students interviewed for this project were unanimous in saying that the decision ultimately rested with them, so too did this group of parents believe that the students' voice was critical in choosing the school. 'At the end of the day they have to be happy with it.' School 8

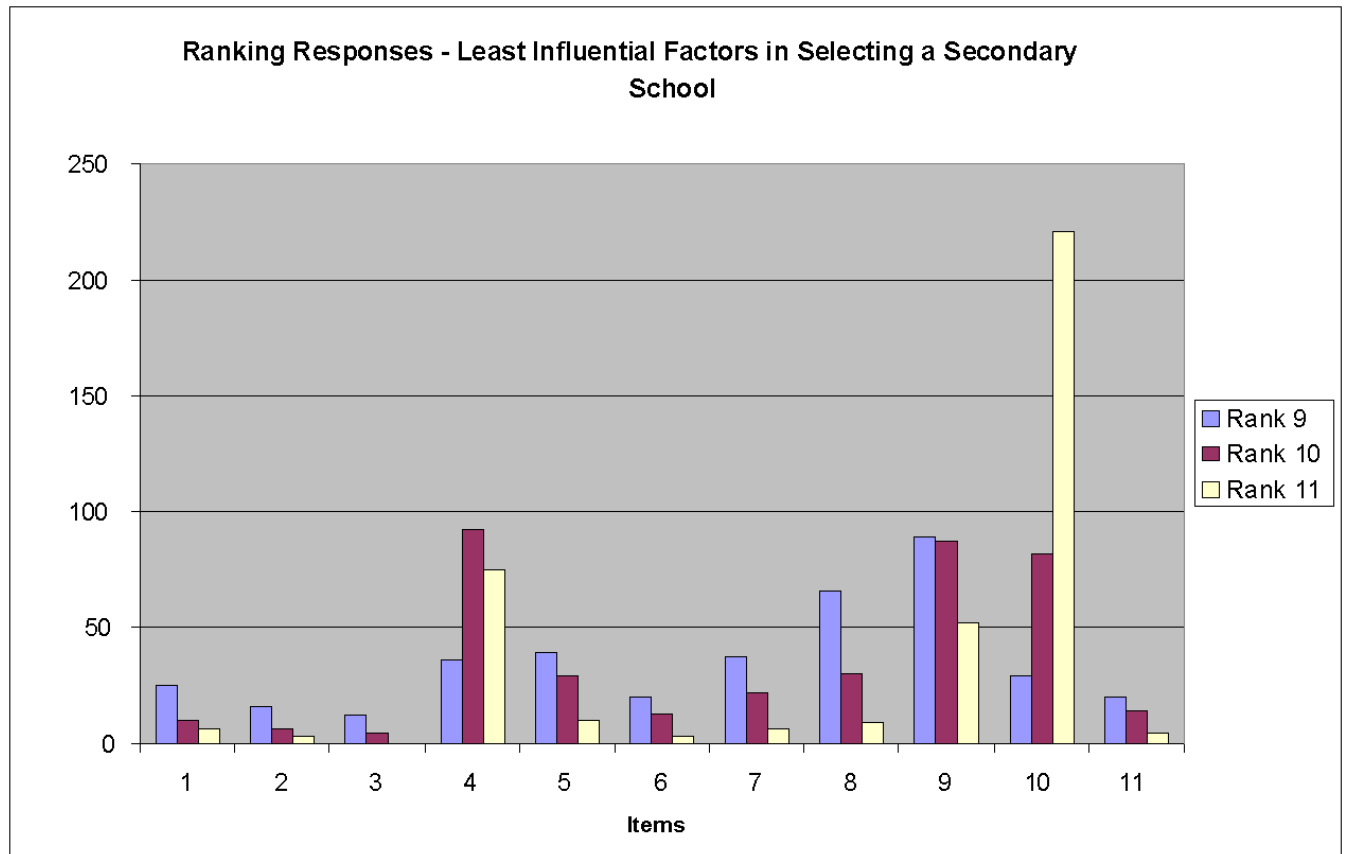
School open nights were seen as an important source of information as students and their parents arrived at their decision:

Parents and students indicated that the selection of a high school was a major family decision involving considerable research and including input from students themselves. Parents indicated that Open Night had been a major feature in the selection process. ... Open Night was a real turning point. Comments were made about the quality of information outlined – breadth of curriculum choice, welfare and safety issues, special needs programs as well as actual displays. (School 6)

There was a high level of agreement among the parents that the information night was a key to the decision making and that their sons and daughters were highly instrumental in the making of that decision. The further building of the association between the school and incoming students through the orientation procedures and interviews consolidated, for these parents, a view that a good decision had been made. (School 8)

When making the decision for a secondary school, all parents had lengthy discussions with their children. Ultimately the parents guided their children's choices on curriculum choices and the feeling they had after Open Night. After this, all parents felt that the child's decision was very important. This was seen as important to the child's welfare and for good communication in the home. (School 10).

Items of least importance were also starkly clear. Item 10 ranked eleventh in over two hundred cases. This item makes references to the school's connections to the local primary school. Item 4 "the school is easy to reach" and item 9 "the school reinforces the values and teaching of the home" were also seen to be less influential.



Again this paper turns to the discussion which lies behind these rankings.

Links to Primary Schools:

Item 10, which nominated the importance of links to the primary school was seen of little significance to students, parents and teachers alike.

The least important factor was the 'links to the primary school'. They (students) now saw primary school as unimportant and that they had left it behind but they also conceded that when in primary school the links to the high school had been important. They all had speakers from high schools, some staff, but also ex-students and they found this valuable. They feel now however that primary school hold little interest for them – they don't visit or continue contact. (School 9)

Even in the case of the Primary School which fully participated in the study, and whose ranking data was not included in the analysis, this item was not seen as significant:

It was the statement about links to the primary school which continued to surprise. It was ranked lowest by most participants. It was seen that there were so many high schools in the area, that there was no one feeder school and friends would be made not matter what. (Primary School)

Travelling:

Parents generally reported that they were willing for their children to travel some distance to attend the school which they had chosen.

'I would walk over broken glass to get my kids into this school' (an out of area parent). (School 2).

Most (parents) seemed to think that many children travel long distances to school these days because they see that if they want a school for a particular reason then the effort has to be made to reach it. (School 9)

Reinforcing Values:

The low ranking of the item referring to the congruence of home and school values elicited some interesting responses:

(It was felt that) the statement was too broad. In a school environment there may be a variety of values brought to the school by a large variety of students from a large variety of homes, therefore, there may be conflicting values and this would be very difficult to reinforce. It may be possible for a school to acknowledge values rather than reinforce them.... It was argued that values are taught in the home and with the variety of backgrounds in any given school it would be too difficult to cover all issues. It is also too difficult to know what is taught in the home. In addition, students behave differently at home and at school. (School 7)

Further discussion attended to matters such as: the role of the Principal; the size of the school; disruptive students; the ways in which the appearance of both school and students count; and, the manner in which parents heard about the school.

School Principal:

Item 5, which referred to the influence of the school Principal, tended to fall into the mid to lower range of priority among parents and students. Responses varied from school to school, but a number saw the role of the Principal changing from educational leader to institutional manager:

The school Principal was seen as one of the lowest priorities by some parents rising to the mid range by the remainder of the group. Their discussion focussed on the Principal being a 'businessman' rather than the head of the school. There was an acknowledgment that a principal's role has changed since their own schooling. (School 2)

This item was ranked below 5th priority by all students. The Principal's role was seen as unimportant. 'They're never in the school anyway', 'they don't affect us directly' were typical comments. 'We don't really see the Principal – it doesn't bother us.' School 7

All the same, the role of the Principal was acknowledged as being of importance to the ways in which the school was developed:

While generally, the ranking of the statement regarding the vision of the Principal was towards the middle of the scale, during the discussions a number of positive references were made to the centrality of the Principal in shaping the culture of the school. This was seen as particularly the case in that she was involved and visible on the orientation nights and conducted some of the student interviews herself. As an aside there was some concern that there was uncertainty about how long a Principal would stay. The general stability of the school was seen as important. (School 8)

Parents in this group stressed the approachability of the school. They were impressed with the staff and the promptness with which problems were dealt with at all levels from the receptionist to the Principal. Some considered the leadership of the Principal to be very important in this. Most agreed that the fair and consistent discipline and uniform policies were very important to them and helped them reinforce those practices from home. (School 11)

In one case the influence of the Principal who provides visionary and strategic leadership was more highly valued:

The group (parents) was clear that this was one of their top deciding factors. One parent was very strong in expressing that it was her sole reason for choosing the school, suggesting that the current Principal had her trust. Many parents said it (leadership) went hand in hand with criteria associated with helpful, courteous and approachable teachers; academic achievement; and sound communication. (School 10)

Size of School:

Another issue which was unanticipated was the emphasis which was placed upon the size of the school. The general feeling was that smaller schools were seen as more caring environments.

The size of the school was seen as significant in parents choosing the school. The school population of 533 and growing was seen as a positive factor in the provision of a personal caring environment for all students. (School 4)

Overwhelmingly, students and parents considered the smaller size of the school as significant in their choice of the school. Students indicated that they felt less threatened, and parents viewed the size as an opportunity for their children to receive some individual attention. 'The school picks out the talents of the kids as well as their problems and helps them.' (School 5)

School size seemed critical to this group of parents. They believed that the school was small enough for teachers and students to come to know each other reasonably well. (School 8)

It was also the case, however, that some argued the merits of the larger school. School 9 formed a focus group of students who had changed high schools:

The discussion then moved to the ranking of responses and the wide choice in subjects was ranked first by most students. They agreed that the school has a large variety in subject choice and this availability meant students moved here from other High Schools (particularly) in Year 11. They came for the Music, Japanese, Textiles and Design, and Drama courses which were

not offered in their own high schools. The range of subjects opened up a number of career choices. Another student believed it was easier to change subjects because of the number of choices on each line. They believed the size of the school meant more choices were available than if they had been in a smaller school. (School 9)

Disruptive Students:

Parents from all schools were concerned about the influence of disruptive students on their own children's learning. They appreciated that the schools were trying to address the needs of such students; but felt that there needed to be more support provided to the schools.

Disruptive students were a concern, however, virtually all said that there was need for more support for these students, particularly those from disadvantaged home backgrounds. (School 1).

Teachers were equally concerned regarding the provisions made for students who acted out their alienation from schooling.

(It was) strongly emphasised 'the inability of public education to get rid of troublemakers' was a contributing factor (in the drift to non-government schools). This became a topic of some discussion including consideration of suitable placements for behaviourally disordered and 'at risk' students. (School 1)

Students also drew attention to the effect of having those in the class who were not engaged in their learning, particularly during the senior years where high stakes assessment played such an important part:

An unexpected observation, supported by the whole group, was that 'discipline was much more important for seniors than juniors'. This was elaborated upon by the group who regarded Year 11 as being only for people who are serious and non-serious students 'shouldn't wreck our chances to do the best we can'. This group did comprise a few of these possible non-serious students, who interestingly enough wholeheartedly agreed with the group sentiment. (School 2)

Appearances Count:

All stakeholders believed that judgements were made about the high schools on the basis of their appearance. They perceived that the District's High Schools should be strongly aware of the messages which were sent to the community based upon the maintenance of the school and its grounds:

The physical environment is also important with a clean, aesthetically pleasing one being preferred. Negative feelings can come from a dirty, unpleasant surrounding. (School 1)

Although teachers were very positive, they did see the untidy environment, for example the messy playground, as a negative. (School 11)

Attractive, well maintained settings were noted and appreciated:

Parents enthused over the 'nice setting' which was 'like the country'. They reported this feeling was also experienced by their child. (School 2)

Parents believed that the external appearance of the school is important. The school has good playing fields, but the buildings look a bit run down. They were impressed that the school is open – no barbed wire or security guards. (School 9)

Students themselves were also aware of the effect that their own appearance had on the ways in which the community might judge the school.

The issue of school uniform was a factor mentioned outside the original 11 choices for school selection. Students conceded that the wider community often judged them on their appearance. They saw the uniform as a selling point for the school and were embarrassed to see students from the school acting inappropriately while in uniform. (School 4)

Hearing About the School:

While parents and students were influenced by the physical appearance of the school and its students, another source which had the potential to sway them was local knowledge, gained by talking with others in the district.

Word of mouth was the most common way that people heard about the school. Parents seemed to canvass other parents within the community and noted comments from local primary schools. (School 3)

When asked how did parents hear about schools in the area, most said that it was the main topic of conversation for almost a year before their child's entry to high school. The talk was generated at school gates, sport and social occasions and took the form of gossip and rumour in some cases. All agreed the decision was a very difficult one. (School 9)

During the debriefing day participants focussed upon what had been learned as a result of the study and as a preliminary to developing recommendations.

Learnings:

In considering what they had learned from the project the participants distinguished learnings which were useful to the school and those which were useful to the district. These have been collated in point form. A number of these arose directly from the school papers; others from issues which were broadly tabled and discussed during the debriefing meeting.

Learnings Useful to the School:

- That parent and student feedback is important to schools in developing and implementing policy;
- That schools need to develop positive images of themselves and communicate these to the community at every opportunity. For example schools can ensure that the achievements of past students, as well as those presently attending the school, are recognised and applauded. Also the ways in which the school presents itself on open nights and similar occasions is a valuable way of presenting information about its policies and practices;

- That attention should be given to the appearance of the school in its grounds and environs and its students, because these are used by the community in making judgements about it;
- That if the school does not attend to the above three points then rumour and speculation will become the source of information about the school;
- That transparency in school discipline and behaviour management is essential – teachers, students and parents need to feel confident that discipline problems will be dealt with openly and effectively;
- That there is an appropriate and engaging curriculum for lower achieving students, particularly those in the senior school;
- That students commencing secondary school see this as a fresh start and that this can be capitalised upon by the school.

Learnings Useful to the District:

- That there is a perception that government schools have a disproportionate number of behaviour disordered students and therefore have serious discipline problems;
- Parents have a perception that teachers in the non-government sector are better qualified and more competent than their counterparts in the government schools, and that this may be a result of media representations;
- Inclusiveness should be presented to the community as an asset, not a deficit;
- That it is important to build a concept that learning is "cool" and that achievement is applauded and recognised;
- That there is great diversity among schools in the District and that this is one of its strengths;
- That there should be occasions where there is a District wide "expo" of government schools and their achievements, and that greater use is made of such facilities as the internet and local media;
- That the knowledge that students are major decision makers regarding the selection of schools should influence the ways in which they are marketed to the community.

Conclusion:

This paper raises major issues for the District and its secondary schools in terms of developing strategies to ensure that government schools are seen as an attractive option by students and their parents. It is clear that choosing a school, where there are good opportunities for diversity in curriculum selection in a safe and happy learning environment, is of paramount concern. At the same time and in a number of cases, positive statements were made regarding schools which were relatively small in size. This presents an interesting challenge to the District. Cooperation across the District's high schools may be a way of ensuring market share. Schools will need to find creative strategies for sharing resources and strengths, rather than pitting themselves one against the other. Such strategies will require commitment and support from the District Office.

The study has had collateral benefits in that it has provided significant opportunities for the voice of students and their parents to be heard and valued. The notion of training teachers as practitioner researchers is now firmly embedded in the District's schools and a number of participants have indicated that they fully intend to continue to use focus group inquiry to pursue questions of significance to them.

These are difficult and challenging times for those educating the nation's children in the State's schools. However, this research has indicated higher levels of enthusiasm for our schools than most teachers had imagined would be the case. Now is not the time to look backwards with nostalgia to an era where there was comparatively little threat from non-

government schools, but rather to look forward in positive and creative ways to ensuring that the strengths and capabilities of public schooling are maintained and enhanced.

Recommendations:

In the light of the study the following recommendations were made:

1. That the District continues to operate in the collegial and cooperative manner modelled in this project.
2. That the District facilitate structural arrangements being put into place in its secondary schools. These should allow for shared physical and human resources and timetables, thus enabling students to take advantage of the range of curriculum offerings across the whole area while still being able to attend the school of their choice.
3. That strategies are developed for enhancing District wide communication and marketing directed to both students and their parents. These could include: establishing a web page; developing a District wide diary of school events; publishing an interschool newsletter on a regular basis.
4. That there are District policies and resources for supporting the needs of students with behaviour disorders and senior students who cannot participate fully in the competitive academic curriculum, but are not identified as special needs students.
5. That there is recognition and celebration of teacher achievements and competence drawing attention not only to outstanding individual performances, but also to the general quality of teachers employed by the government sector in the District. Local media could be regularly advised of accomplishments in specific areas, for example, "Maths across the District", or "Teacher of the Month", or the like.
6. That there is recognition and celebration of student achievements, both of those currently attending the District's secondary schools and those who have attended in the past. For example, many universities publish profiles of high achieving graduates who may have attended some years in the past. Again, using local media, there may be a regular "Where are they now?" column.
7. That there is a recognition and celebration of attractive schools in their settings.
8. That a District advisory committee be established, comprising teachers, students, parents and community members, to further the work of this study and its recommendations.

References:

Anderson, D. (1993). Public Schools in Decline: Implications of the Privatisation of Schools in Australia. In H. Beare & W. Lowe Boyd (eds.) *Restructuring Schools*. London: Falmer.

Boyd, W., Crowson, R., & van Geel, T. (1994). Rational Choice Theory and the Politics of Education. In *Politics of Education Yearbook*. pp. 127 - 145.

Cookson, P. (1994). *School Choice: The Struggle for the Soul of American Education*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Gerwitz, S., Ball, S., & Bowe, R. (1995). *Markets, Choice and Equity in Education*. Buckingham: Open University Press.

Kitzinger, J. & Barbour, R. (1999). The Challenge and Promise of Focus Groups. In R. Barbour & J. Kitzinger (Eds.) *Developing Focus Group Research*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, pp. 1 - 21

Marginson, S. (1996). *Educating Australia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Marginson, S. (1997) *Markets in Education*. Sydney: Allen & Unwin

Keywords: Markets, Stakeholders' Perceptions.

Presenter: Groundwater-Smith, Susan,

University of Sydney. All correspondence to: Dr Susan Groundwater-Smith, 32 Terry Street, Tempe. Phone (02) 9559 4029, Fax (02) 9559 7174, email susangs@bigpond.com

Appendix A.

Parent Focus Group:

Informed Consent:

Seek parents' consent to record the session. Explain procedure for negotiating the account of the focus group. Obtain list of names and addresses.

Opening Discussion:

As a means of opening up the discussion regarding the making of choices, members of the group are asked:

Which kind of choice is selecting a secondary school for your child's education most like and why?

- choosing a car
- choosing a doctor
- choosing a neighbourhood in which to live
- choosing a renovator

Emphasise that it is the process of choosing that we are discussing. So, for example, could first discuss choosing an outfit and the comparisons between choosing a one size fits all garment (economic, easy to wear, readily available) and a tailored outfit (costly, attractive, suits the occasion).

Written Response:

Ask group to individually, and anonymously, on the sheet provided, rank the following reasons for selecting a secondary school, from [1] most important to [11] less important:

The school encourages students to take a pride in it and its achievements.

The school provides a wide choice in the school's curriculum program from vocational education to academic programs and including after school activities, such as sport and music.

The school ensures student safety, happiness and welfare while at school.

The school is easy to reach

The school has a Principal who provides visionary and strategic leadership.

The school has a helpful, courteous and approachable teachers.

The school has a strong reputation for academic achievement.

The school encourages communication with its parents and its students.

The school reinforces the values and teaching of the home.

The school has connections to the local primary school.

The school cares about and values children as individuals.

Other

Discussion:

The initial discussion will focus upon the responses to these questions. A quick tally can be made around the table; this will ensure that everyone speaks. A number of issues will be picked up along the way.

The questions can then move to:

How did you hear about the secondary school which your child now attends?

How much discussion did you have with your child regarding the selection of the school?

How strongly did that discussion influence your choice?

What other information would have been helpful to you when you were making your choice?

Did your own school experiences influence the choice you made?

What would you tell parents who are about to make secondary schooling choices that would be of help to them?

Conclusion:

Turning to the paper on which the rankings were made, list five keywords or phrases which you would use to highlight the features of the school.