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Abstract

In keeping with the global trend amongst governments towards the marketisation of school education, the bulk of Australian parents, newly positioned as education consumers, are generally novice shoppers. In an extension to traditional roles, it is overwhelmingly the mothers who do the 'school shopping'. In choosing high schools for their children, it seems that the mothers of 'Middle Australia' in particular, expend considerable amounts of time and energy on an extensive and extended shopping excursion largely informed by a serendipitous array of market research, and driven by a desire to minimize risk of failure in a market place where the stakes are high.

This paper outlines some initial findings from a year long research project following the decision-making processes of a group of mothers of year 6 children as they deliberate high school options. The study is sited in Sydney's inner west where there is a volatile demographic of social change and changing school options. Like other studies of school choice this research shows how seriously, if not always willingly, mothers have responded to the 'school choice' agenda. This in-depth study highlights the agony of choice for those who see secondary education as the most significant opportunity available to them to mitigate against failure for their children. The study offers fascinating revelations of the aspirations, hopes and fears of ordinary mothers for their adolescent children; it speaks volumes for educators.

Introduction

My interest in this topic arose from my personal experience as a parent, and from a concern about how global trends are played out in local communities. These interests have been further cultivated by my readings of the literature on global trends towards the marketisation of education and particularly on the social and educational impacts. In addition of course the local media has devoted considerable attention in recent years, to debates about public and private schooling in response to the massive shift away from public education in NSW.

Research here and overseas indicates significant effects of this marketisation of education on schools and their communities (David, West & Ribbens, 1994; David, 1993; Gewirtz, Ball & Bowe, 1995; Kenway 1990; Marginson, 1997). Social scientists have pointed to various effects when schools compete for funding and/ students, including the use of marketing and policy tactics which tend to favour the academically more able students (Conway, 1997, Kenway & Fitzclarence 1998; Marginson, 1997; West and Pennell, 2000) which results in the 'commodification' of education (Kenway & Fitzclarence, 1998) and has a conserving influence on the curriculum and on educational approaches (Thomson, 1998; Whitty, 1997; Bowe, Ball & Gewirtz, 1992; Edwards, 2002). Affects on school management practices and on teachers have also been recorded in Australia (Burrow & Martin, 1998; Connell, 1998 Marginson, 1997, 1998; Reid, 1998) and elsewhere.

In addition, sociological critiques have documented the negative social impact of this shift to marketisation. Discussions about how the market has worked to increase inequalities have occurred in Britain, New Zealand and the USA (Moore & Davenport, 1990, cited in Ball,

1993, Gewirtz et al, 1995, Goldring, 1997, cited in Conway 1997; Marginson 1997; Ball et al, 1995, cited in Conway, 1997; Lauder & Hughes, 1999; Whitty, 2001; Edwards, 2002).

Central to the notion of educational marketisation is school choice. To date, much research into school choice has focussed on how and why parents and children make decisions about secondary schooling. This research shows that irrespective of ethnicity, race or class, it is principally mothers who make these schooling decisions. In addition, it is also the mothers who carry the burden of those choices in terms of managing the domestic impacts, of school interactions, transportation and homework obligations (David, 2001; Blackmore, 2000a; David et al, 1994). And yet it would appear that in research and theorising about the effects of education reform, the impact on families and gender has been largely overlooked and certainly understudied (David, 2001; Blackmore, 2000b). It is only recently that feminist studies in school education are beginning to show a concern for "how the gendered implications of the market are changing state/market/home relations" (Blackmore, 2000b, p. 4).

By exploring in detail the experiences of mothers my research hopes to fit with this emerging area of feminist concern about the implications for women of the marketisation of school education. My focus is on the experiences and perceptions of mothers in particular because,

It is women (as mothers, teachers, principals, and caregivers) who bear the responsibility and ultimately the burden of [school] "choice" or "lack of choice", whether it be transporting children to "good" schools outside the neighborhood, contributing most of their salaries in paid work to pay education fees, or doing the unpaid voluntary labor in schools as pseudo-teachers/caregivers or as school governors/counselors in self managing schools.

(Blackmore, 2000b, p.4)

My research aims to highlight these effects by following a small group of mothers through an intense period of school choice making and transition for their child from primary to secondary school. In this way my study will help to build up a detailed and gendered picture of the familial impact of this global phenomena, as it is perceived by this group of Australian mothers. In particular my research aims to explore how the mothers engage in this and how such engagement may affect 'mother's work' and familial relationships involving mothers and their families.

Methodological Approach

The methodology I employ in my research arises from my aim to explore in depth the experiences, views and perceptions of mothers engaged in school choice making. That is, my research does not aim to gather data or evidence that will prove or disprove a hypothesis, but rather aims to collect data that is multi layered, embracing both behaviour and emotion, and thought and feeling. My intention is to enable the participants themselves to talk about how they have made meaning of their experiences. My research aims to recognise the emotional as being as valid as the rational, it aims also to give voice to both the spoken and unspoken discourses of the lives of these women at this particular time.

For these reasons this study is primarily qualitative and uses interviewing as the main research tool for the collection of data. My approach is eclectic, drawing from a range of perspectives according to their usefulness in achieving my research goals. I try to bring a phenomenological approach to my interactions with the mothers I am interviewing as my study aims explicitly to emphasize the subjective aspects of the ways in which they make

meaning out of their circumstances. Feminist theorists such as Oakley (1981) have influenced my appreciation of the power dynamics inherent in social situations including the interviewer interviewee relationship. In the analysis and write up I am aware of the tensions feminists researchers have described as "public knowledge and private lives" (Ribbens and Edwards, 1998).

I have also been influenced by aspects of grounded theory that encourage researchers to be responsive to new and unpredicted themes as they collect data and allow those findings to inform new responses and directions in an organic and evolving way. My data collection schedule has been structured in a way that facilitates a kind of theory generation alluded to in grounded theory. This became evident in the development of the second interview schedule where follow up questions and themes grew directly from collected data.

Method

This study recruited 20 mothers by advertising for participants who were choosing a high school for their child to commence in 2003. The mothers were to be interviewed three times over a 12 month period in order to gather a deeper understanding of the fluctuating tensions and dynamics involved in school choice making. These semi-structured interviews typically took one to two hours and commenced with an invitation for the women to reflect on their own experiences with schooling - both as a child and as a parent. It was from this base that I asked them about their engagement in high school choice making for their children. Through open-ended questions we explored the how, why and what of their involvement in assessing schools for their children.

The second round of interviews was conducted from August through to November, 2002. In these interviews mothers were given the opportunity to share any new thinking about their school choices and to talk about the nature and impact of their involvement in school choice making. By the time of the second interview some families had reached a resolution about which school their child would attend - these were parents who had received a letter of acceptance from either the private or public school of their choice. Many others however, were still waiting for their desired outcome - these were parents of children who were on waiting lists for selective school places, private school scholarships, and places in public schools that were out of the normal catchment area. This second round of interviews by contrast was far more emotionally charged as earlier hopes and desires brushed up against changing realities often arising from the competitive nature of the educational marketplace.

The final round of interviews is scheduled for Term One 2003. The focus of this interview will be to find out where the child has commenced high school, to explore how the family has adapted to the demands associated with the new school and to measure expectations against first impressions.

In addition to exploring the individual stories of school choice making, the data collection aims to build up a contextualised and detailed picture of the mother's role and involvement (physical, emotional and financial).

The site of the study

Participants for this study were recruited via the distribution of leaflets around a 5 kilometre radius, within one Local Government Area (LGA) of inner western Sydney. This location was chosen because of its rapidly changing demographic which includes a highly mobile population, easy access to a range of schooling options, and a mix of socio economic and cultural groupings.

One of Sydney's earliest suburbs, much of this area was occupied by workers and trades people until the 1960s when blue collar workers began to be replaced by professionals and white collar workers. The large post-war influx of migrants into the area is still a defining characteristic of parts of the region. While the LGA still retains some of the traditional population groupings its character is undergoing rapid change. There are pockets of high wealth and of significant hardship. In some parts of the LGA real estate prices are amongst the highest in Australia, while the same neighbourhood accommodates people on welfare benefits living in public housing. The 2001 Census recorded 7,478 out of 54,593 people had a weekly individual income of \$1,500 or more while 5,840 earned less than \$160.00 per week of which 2,582 had a negative or no income.

Reflecting the diversity in the area the 2001 Census recorded the dominant religious grouping as Christianity (54%) with Catholic (26.6%) the biggest part. The next biggest non-Christian group was recorded as 'no religion' (23.7%) followed by Buddhism at 2%. In this local government area, 75% of the population uses English as the main language at home. The biggest non-English language group is Italian (3.3%) with at least 32 other main languages spoken in the area. In this LGA 62.6% of residents were born in Australia with the biggest grouping of foreign countries of origin being the United Kingdom 7.5%, New Zealand 3.6% and Italy 2.1%.

Recruiting participants

In order to recruit participants for this study flyers were distributed at locations frequented by mothers including such places as shopping centres, hairdressers, cafes, doctor's surgeries, neighbourhood centres, libraries, outside primary schools and via school newsletters. Throughout this process I aimed to recruit participants from a variety of social, economic and cultural backgrounds reflective of the area.

Findings: Early results

Themes began to emerge from the data within the first few weeks of collection. Currently I am nearing completion of the second round of interviews therefore have been able to pursue some early themes more closely as well as witness new ones develop and others become less significant.

However for the purposes of this paper I will focus on only two aspects of the data that have emerged primarily from the initial round of interviews. Firstly I examine the group of people who came forward to participate in this study, and secondly, I offer an initial exploration of one of the strongest themes arising from the first round of interviews; that being the impact of prior educational experiences on school choice making.

Demographics of those who came forward to participate

Home and school

Thirteen of the twenty participants heard of the study by word of mouth, and the rest responded directly to the research publicity as outlined above. All but 3 participants had children attending primary schools in the one LGA, and most of the families represented in the study lived within that area. The mothers who were interviewed had children at 9 different primary schools, of which, all but 2 were government schools, and all but one was coeducational.

Age and familial circumstances

Most participants are aged in their late 40s, with two being over 50 and 5 being under 40 years of age at the beginning of the study. The majority (all but two) of the women interviewed were in stable relationships with two adults supporting the child(ren) and contributing financially to their education. There is one single mother and one gay couple in the group. Just over half of the participants are parents with two child families, although three mothers had three child families and six participants had only one fully dependent child. There is a fairly even distribution of gender amongst the year 6 children; 11 girls and 9 boys.

Religious and cultural aspects

Between the mothers interviewed and their partners, the dominant religious connection was Catholic. Of the participants, seven named themselves as Catholic, as ex-Catholic or as having had a Catholic education, and in addition five of the non-Catholic mothers had Catholic partners. Other religions represented among the mothers were Anglican (3), Baptist (1), Buddhist (1) Muslim (1) and unstated/atheist/no religion (7).

Religion

| | |
|--------------------------|---|
| Catholic | 3 |
| Catholic education | 2 |
| Ex-Catholic | 2 |
| Anglican | 3 |
| Baptist | 1 |
| Buddhist | 1 |
| Muslim | 1 |
| Not declared/no religion | 7 |

The participants were also asked to nominate their 'cultural background' and this elicited a rich personal and ancestral heritage. Of the 20 participating mothers, just under half (9 out of 20) were born overseas in Britain (4), Asia (3), New Zealand (1), and South America (1). Eleven nominated themselves as Australian born of Anglo-Celtic heritage, and only 5 of these were born in Sydney.

Cultural background

| | |
|------------------------|---|
| Anglo/Australian (Syd) | 5 |
| Anglo/Australian | 2 |
| Anglo/Australian (Qld) | 4 |
| Anglo/New Zealander | 1 |

| | |
|-------------------------|---|
| British | 3 |
| British/Australian | 1 |
| Chinese (PRC) | 1 |
| Chinese (Singapore) | 1 |
| Thai | 1 |
| South American/European | 1 |

Occupation and Income patterns

Even though it was never the intention of this study to focus particularly on socio-economic factors vis a vis educational choice making, the study has gathered information that indicates something of the economic circumstances of the participants. Because it is my intention to explore the personal, individualised experiences of this group as they participate in the educational marketplace, I have resisted the pull to closely analyse their economic position, nor participate in debates about "class". Nevertheless I have gathered information indicating social and economic circumstances such as to enable some sense of the social position of the participants. It is within this framework that I present the following generalisations about their economic circumstances.

Fourteen of the 20 mothers are engaged in the workforce on a part time or casual basis, and for most, this was a conscious decision so that they would be able to take on the primary role of managing domestic matters. There was no one in this group who did not work at all.

Even though the income levels of the mothers were relatively low compared to their partners, it was clear that for many their earnings made an important contribution to the disposable family income. Six of the mothers reported their income to be under \$20,000 pa. The relatively low incomes recorded by the mothers can be explained partly by the casual nature of their participation (only 4 women work fulltime) also the women generally have lower status, lower earning jobs than their partners. All but one of the households had two sources of income available for spending on the child(ren), and, although five households had relatively high (over \$180,000 pa) or low (up to \$80,000 pa) income streams, the majority could be regarded as fairly comfortable. All but one of the participants indicated that they felt the family income stream was reasonably to very secure.

Mother's Income

| | |
|----------------|---|
| Under \$20,000 | 6 |
| \$20 - 40,000 | 7 |
| \$40 - 50,000 | 3 |
| \$50 - 70, 000 | 3 |
| Over \$100,000 | 1 |

Combined household income

| | |
|---------------------|---|
| \$50 - 80,000 | 4 |
| \$80,000 - 100,000 | 3 |
| \$100,000 - 140,000 | 9 |
| \$140,000 - 180,000 | 2 |
| Over \$180,000 | 1 |

The Table below indicates the range of occupations represented amongst the group. Most of these occupations require a higher education, and almost all are characterised by the propensity for part time and casual employment with school-friendly hours. Nurses and teachers are well represented. Not surprisingly the occupations of the partners indicate higher level responsibility commensurate with an uninterrupted career path. Of note is the number of unskilled jobs represented amongst the partners.

Occupation

| | |
|-------------------------------|---|
| Early childhood educator | 1 |
| Teacher, primary | 2 |
| Teacher, secondary | 1 |
| Teacher, TAFE | 1 |
| Community health educator | 1 |
| School librarian | 1 |
| Teacher (o/s), shop assistant | 1 |
| Nurse | 5 |
| Journalist | 1 |
| University student/ | 1 |
| Lawyer | 1 |
| Scientist | 1 |
| Office worker | 1 |
| Public servant | 1 |

| | |
|------------------------------|---|
| Unstated | 1 |
| Partner's occupation | |
| Teacher, secondary | 1 |
| Teacher, TAFE | 1 |
| Teacher, university lecturer | 2 |
| Manager, manufacturing | 1 |
| Manager, HR | 1 |
| Manager, print media | 2 |
| Lawyer | 2 |
| Scientist | 2 |
| Accountant | 1 |
| Business Consultant | 1 |
| Nurse | 1 |
| Medical Technician | 1 |
| Carpenter | 1 |
| Landscape gardener | 1 |
| Unstated | 2 |

Educational background

Because of the changed nature of higher education especially vis a vis vocational qualifications, and because so many of the women in this study were educated outside of Australia it is difficult to make many generalised comments about the educational background of the group. One striking, if not surprising feature of this group of mothers who came forward to participate in the study, is the strong association so many have with education. Seven of the twenty mothers are, or have worked as educators in various settings and another mother works as a school librarian. In addition most of these mothers have fairly high levels of education with two currently studying higher degrees. All but one of these mothers has participated in some post-schooling education and the most significant characteristic of this higher education was that it was largely career orientated. By comparison to their partners, it would seem that these mothers have engaged in education

as a pathway to furthering their ambitions. Amongst the partners in this study there are four who have no formal post school qualifications, however three of those four have risen to managerial positions.

Notwithstanding my reservations about making claims and comparisons arising from the demographic details of this group it would be safe to claim that in the main, this group of consumers is fairly well educated and has a reasonably comfortable and secure lifestyle. In many ways they represent 'Middle Australia'. Certainly in terms of the rhetoric of the market they are ideal consumers - well informed, with access to a variety of schools and with reasonable financial capacity. Furthermore those in my study indicated a preparedness, if not a willingness, to actively participate in the educational market. In traditional Keynesian economic terms they are model consumers.

Educational background

| | |
|-----------------------------|---|
| No post schooling education | 0 |
| Post secondary | 5 |
| Certificates and diplomas | 1 |
| Other (o/s) | |
| University | 5 |
| Graduate award | 7 |
| Postgraduate award | |
| Unclear | 2 |

Partner's educational background

| | |
|-----------------------------|---|
| No post schooling education | 4 |
| Post secondary | |
| Certificates and Diplomas | |
| Other (apprenticeship) | 1 |
| University | 6 |
| Graduate award | 7 |
| Post graduate award | |
| Unclear | 2 |

So what can a qualitative study offer that may help shed light beyond such number crunching? Just what might a close up study of this group of consumers reveal about the human dimensions of the workings of the educational marketplace? As I proceeded from this broad, number-oriented sketch, to try and flesh out meanings, I was struck by the complexity of the lives of the people hidden behind the figures.

The demographics of the participants in this study are interesting because of what they reveal about an articulate group of individuals for whom high school choice making is an important endeavour. Not with standing the fact that participation in a university study, is by its very nature, likely to exclude certain sections of the population, those who have volunteered can offer important insights to our understanding of the school choice debate.

Not surprisingly a potent characteristic of this group is their strong connection to education as parents, students and professionals. These people bring to their school choice making much insider information about how schools work, and as such their engagement in the educational marketplace has the potential to be very informative. By the same token this group is not particularly homogeneous in terms of cultural/religious backgrounds and childhood educational experiences.

The dominance of Catholicism by religious affiliation or marriage is strong, and yet interestingly only one of the participants had educated their child(ren) in the Catholic primary school system. Of the seven participants considering Catholic high schools for their children, two had no prior personal connections to Catholicism; two were Catholics married to other Catholics; one was Catholic with a non-Catholic partner and two were non-Catholic mothers married to Catholics. Other than the Catholic connection, religion was noticeably absent in the discussions by these women about what they valued in schooling for their children. If anything religion was spoken of as an irritant or side issue *"I don't like all that religion stuff"*. Even the strongest advocate of Catholic schooling stated that she would send her child to a government school if there were a good one nearby. Those considering independent schools did not cite religious belief as a reason.

Another interesting aspect of the demographics is the highly mobile nature of the group. In many ways one would presume, ideal educational consumers because they ought to enter the marketplace without prejudice. In fact it was not uncommon for the non-native Sydney-siders to say that they had to do more 'home work' on school options because they didn't have the accumulated knowledge they believed locals had. It is interesting however that even where participants talk of the relative irrelevance of past and 'different' personal experiences, these keep on intruding in their discussions. For example when asked recently, how she felt about her child's options given that she had not been accepted into the selective school of her choice, one mother said, *"I have done a lot of thinking and I tell myself I must not compare my experience in Thailand. That's different. I am at a happy situation now, but I have been so up and down. I admit I feel a bit bitter..."*

The cultural dimensions to this study are not all closely woven with religion. One women in Scotland spoke of a strong family and community tradition of valuing education. Another continually contrasted her austere schooling with its focus on rote learning to that of her child's experiences in Australia. She also spoke of the influence of the Chinese community on her decision making. When asked how she found out about the schools she was considering for her child, she said from friends in China, from Chinese newspapers here and overseas, and from the local Chinese community. She went on to say *"I do have a big pressure from Chinese friends who say to do coaching [for Selective School entrance and for private school scholarships]. I got these connections, Chinese people - they know all about the Sydney schools, they send their children from China"*

In the next part of my exploration of the data I wish to foreground one of the strongest and most pervasive themes to emerge at this stage; that being the influence of prior educational experiences. It is here in particular that the value of a longitudinal quantitative approach becomes clear as these women detail things which would be unlikely to have been voiced in a quantitative study.

The influence of prior educational experiences

Early analysis of the data from the first round of interviews has indicated an enduring connection between childhood educational experiences of these mothers and their school choice making. Round one interviews commenced with the question "What do you remember most about your own school experiences?" The participants related a huge range of personal recollections, both positive and negative, about their childhood schooling experiences. The willingness and enjoyment these women displayed while sharing their experiences was not something I had foreseen, and neither were the connections between their views on these times, and their current views about schools for their children. Although these women also shared some illustrative stories about their involvement as parents in the school of their children I will only focus on their childhood experiences here.

Throughout the interviews statements were made to the effect that a particular experience had led them to strive to secure the same or different for their own child. It has been fascinating to explore these connections either as they appear embedded in the data, or made explicit by the mothers themselves. One mother for example, began the interview by stating "*I went to a selective school and that's why I don't want selective for my child*". By contrast the other mother who attended and enjoyed a selective school in NSW was more than happy to consider this option for her child. Of course, in neither case was the present school choice making a simple reaction to a one-dimensional experience of one school or system compared to another. However the data reveals strong undeniable connections that are sometimes manifest in opinions about particular desirable or undesirable characteristics of schools. Furthermore, sometimes these early experiences are reflected more broadly in generalised views about types of schools or school systems, such as single sex schooling, private versus public education, religious schools, the selective school system and so on.

The interviews are replete with examples of particular and personal experiences informing views about what is desirable or otherwise in a school. One woman told me that in order to evaluate a potential school she seeks out current students to ask them about the worst punishment they have received at their school. Even though she had earlier told me she had had a cruel schooling I was surprised that this was the question most uppermost in her mind since her experiences took place so long ago and in a different country. Her sobering story of how, as a primary school child, she had been made to stand outside the school all day with cello tape wrapped around her mouth as punishment for questioning a teacher, offered some indication of the depth of her feelings about securing a safe school environment for her own child.

Other examples are less shocking but no less powerful in opinion forming; one woman said, "*I hope my daughter will have a better relationship with her teachers than I did. I was scared of my teachers.*" Another said, "*I didn't have any support from my parents at all...*" and later about being a parent said "*It gives me another chance, how I can help my child, how I can give my child as much support as possible, because I know what it is like to be on the other side*".

A number of the women reported feeling undervalued and under-challenged at school because of their gender. Neither the schools nor the families in these examples supported the women's educational endeavours.

"I was a bright child that didn't get the opportunity ... back then a lot of us were not encouraged to go non; we just left school and went to work". (British, government comprehensive)

"My parents expected girls to leave at year 9. My brother was very clever - the rest of us were normal. I'm trying to be there for my child, to be aware of her needs." (NSW, government, single sex)

"When I was born, for the family, boys were more important than girls. Ever since I was a little child I knew I was different because I was a girl. I was treated different because of that." (PRC, government)

All three of these women have actively encouraged their own children's academic development and supported them to sit for private scholarship and selective school examinations. All three ranked academic achievement highly as characteristic of a good school.

Thus far the data I have collected in my study indicates that negative personal experiences have a stronger lasting influence than positive ones, and they certainly draw a stronger emotional response as witnessed by the examples given above. In this study there were only two women who attended boarding schools and unfortunately neither spoke well of their experience and neither would consider that option for their own child. *"I didn't enjoy the experience of growing up and trying to fit into the model of those types of schools; private, all girls boarding schools. It was pretty strict with petty rules"* Speaking later about their own child she said, *"we just thought we just wanted him to have a nice un-pressured time at school"*.

Even where experiences were less strongly negative, their impact seems lasting. There were six women in this study who had a Catholic education. Although only one of them reported strongly negative experiences, four of them expressed regret that their schooling wasn't academically challenging and of those four, two are adamant their child will not attend a Catholic school. The majority of those who reflected on their Catholic schooling told tales of grossly over-crowded, under-resourced class rooms with unqualified teachers - as was not uncommon in parts of Australia during the 1960s and 70s. This sentiment was not unique to those educated in the Catholic system; another three mothers (all educated in the government schools) said they felt unchallenged by the academic rigour of their schooling and listed this as a priority for their own children.

The data thus far indicates quite different outcomes for those parents whose former experiences of education were generally favourable. The positive experiences not only enabled these women to regard their own school favourably but that positive disposition seemed to be generalised towards that system or type and even more broadly towards education in general. This was also reported by the mothers about their partner's experiences and views. *"Both my husband and I had a good experiences at comprehensive high schools and we want that for our children."* *"My husband went to [a local Catholic boys school] and he wants our son to go there too if he doesn't get a scholarship or can't get into selective."* In my study those parents who had a positive experience of schooling seemed more prepared to consider a wider range of schooling options, including those outside their own experience. By contrast those who reported a negative experience were more likely to restrict their options by ruling out some.

The stories of personal experience told by these women are echoed again and again as they discuss their hopes and desires for their own children's education. In fact there were very few cases where these women used their own experiences as the primary measuring stick

for decision making for their children, however all of them incorporated and reflected on the applicability of these experiences in the process of talking about choosing a school for their child.

Discussion and Conclusions

It would seem that irrespective of how well educated and how well informed this group of women are, their stories reveal constant and powerful interruptions to their school deliberations from personal childhood experiences. The strength and frequency with which this theme emerges in both sets of interview data collected to date underlines its importance. Not only have the participants responded directly to questions about prior experiences but subsequent interviews and questions are replete with stories of their own and others (friends, partners, siblings and parents) childhood experiences. Clearly and repeatedly these women compared and contrasted personal stories with updated information and a desire to reinterpret events from an adult perspective. However despite the rational and cognitive reexamination of prior events their potency seems lasting.

Specifically it would seem that the stories from this group of women illustrates how some particular experiences can influence views about what is and is not desirable in a school, and moreover how sometimes individual experiences can be transformed into generalised views about a type or system of schooling. It also seems fair to say that negative experiences have the longest and strongest impact, one outcome of which is to narrow down the options that person is prepared to consider when thinking of schools for their children. On the other hand, tellingly for policy makers, educators and school marketers, a positive childhood school experience means the adult consumer is less likely to rule out options and more likely to favour that school system which served them well.

This data does not show a linear and predictable link between former childhood educational experiences and educational decision making on the part of an adult for their child. The process is far more complex than that. In foregrounding this one theme from the data I have not yet given space to the many other very significant issues raised by these women. Things such as experiences of education as a parent, the influence of partners and others, the child's needs. Because this discussion is confined to only one small part of the data collected so far, it is difficult to position the influence of prior educational experiences against other important decision making influences. It would not be correct to imply that educational choice making is simply a reactive process, however my study has indicated the powerful nature of the influence of these personal experiences on current thinking.

The group of women who joined this study are demonstratively interested in education and purposeful in choosing the best school for their child. They are also well educated, well informed educational consumers willing and able to interpret information from a variety of sources and yet often by their own admission, are powerfully influenced not merely by current knowledge but by events which occurred 20-30 years ago. This dimension shared so willingly by these women offers another facet to those who would wish to interpret consumer behaviour as a purely rational and economic process. Educators and policy makers beware - you shall reap what you sow.

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