

# **Secondary School Choice**

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## **Abstract**

In recent years, the issue of school choice in Australia has generated anxiety among many parents. Parental school choice has been researched in the national context, but remains under-researched in the South Australian (SA) secondary schooling context. This study investigates parents' experiences of selecting secondary schools for their children and factors that influence that choice. The study was conducted in metropolitan Adelaide and included parents whose children were in Year 6 and attending government primary schools. Findings from this study suggest that parents' school choice is based primarily on two factors: parents' perceptions of school quality and their aspirations for their children.

An embedded mixed-methods design was used in this study, comprising survey questionnaire and interviews, to explore the research questions. Nine primary schools agreed to participate in this research and 369 survey questionnaires were sent to parents, yielding 56 responses. The data from survey responses were used to purposefully select eight parents who each agreed to participate in a semi-structured one-on-one interview. The qualitative data were used as the principal data in the thematic analysis.

This study makes several findings. First, educated middle-class parents are highly motivated by their aspirations when seeking the best quality schools for their children. Parents relied on their social networks to gather information that they then compared with the information available on the My School website, which was set up as part of a national education reform to give Australian parents information about Australian schools.

Second, the qualitative data together with the research literature suggest that the neoliberal-inspired school choice mantra has given rise to parents' anxiety when seeking the best school that will offer the greatest

benefits to their child. Parents are aware of the school market, and the logic of choice and competition influences their behaviour and attitudes towards schooling. They no longer trust their neighbourhood school as the best one, and gravitate to seeking better schools outside their immediate locality. The manner in which parents participate in this school choice process has been shaped by neoliberal policy imperatives that emphasise market, choice and competition and that have been prevalent for over 20 years.

Finally, parents are consumed by the notion of individual choice and individual benefits for their child, and this attitude could be envisaged as one driven by self-interest. They seek high social-capital schools that can provide better opportunities and upward mobility for their child.


The research concludes that parents' socio-economic status (SES), which is measured by parental education and occupational background, and the neoliberal ideology focused on market, choice and competition, is associated with their school choice decision. The investment in the National Assessment Program: Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) and in My School, which was intended to create accountability and transparency, was found to increase parental anxiety in their school choice experience. As a result, policy-makers need to assess whether the Commonwealth Government's significant investment in NAPLAN and My School can genuinely improve school quality.

Clearly, the implications of these findings relate to federal school funding. This study recommends that policy-makers consider a new approach to school funding to reduce the funding gaps between public and private schools, thus ensuring that every Australian child has access to a world-class education and can meet the challenges of the 21st century.

## Declaration

I certify that this thesis does not incorporate without acknowledgement any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any university; and that to the best of my knowledge and belief it does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.

Signed

A handwritten signature in black ink on a light blue background. The signature is written in a cursive style and reads "Sing Chee Yu". The signature is underlined with a single horizontal stroke.

Sing Chee Yu



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## Acronyms

ABS	Australian Bureau of Statistics
ACARA	Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority
DECD	Department for Education and Child Development
GIHS	Glenunga International High School
IB	International Baccalaureate
ICSEA	Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage
ISA	Independent Schools Australia
NAPLAN	National Assessment Program: Literacy and Numeracy
NESB	Non-English-speaking background
NSW	New South Wales
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
SA	South Australia
SACE	South Australian Certificate of Education
SES	Socio-economic status
SBREC	Social and Behavioural Research Ethics Committee
SPSS	Statistical Package for the Social Science
SRS	Schooling Resource Standard
STEM	Science, technology, engineering and maths
TAFE	Technical and Further Education
VCE	Victorian Certificate of Education
VET	Vocational Education and Training

# **Chapter 1: Introduction**

## **1.1 Introduction**

In recent years, the issue of school choice has been the focus of much discussion in political and educational arenas, as well as in the news media (McCarthy, 2007). Australia's education system today is radically different from the school system of the 1970s and preceding decades and an increase in parents' desire to choose their children's school has been caused by a change of focus in Australian education (Beamish & Morey, 2013). According to Campbell, Proctor and Sherington (2009), this mantra of 'school choice' is associated with the new era of neoliberalism in which individuals are expected to take more responsibility for their families' future. Parents consider choosing the right school for their children as one of their responsibilities. They are anxious about the quality of their children's schools and education and also about their children's future in the labour market (Campbell et al., 2009). Since the 1970s, school choice has become an even higher priority for many families in Australia, and the anxiety of choosing the right school affects parents from all social classes, although it is especially pronounced in middle-class families with economic resources (Beamish & Morey, 2012; Bonnor & Caro, 2012; Campbell et al., 2009).

This trend of school choice has been brought about by shifting government policies: in 1973, the first public funding flowed into non-government schools. This change in funding policies encouraged the proliferation of newer, low-to-moderate-fee non-government schools (Bonnor & Shepherd, 2016), thus creating greater choice and opportunities for families (Cahill, 2009; Campbell et al., 2009). This increased the diversity of schools from which parents could choose and led to competition among schools. This increased diversity is particularly linked to secondary schools, with both government and non-government

secondary schools contributing to the choice dilemma in the education marketplace. Thus, education has become a commodity in the school market to be accessed by consumers (parents), as they are free to choose between competing products to maximise their self-interest (Campbell, et al., 2009; Reid, 2019).

Since the 1970s, Australia's education system allows some scope for parents to make choices when selecting a school for their children. They can choose to homeschool or select from the government, Catholic and independent (private) sectors. Within the independent sector, there are established 'corporate schools'<sup>1</sup> and a number of religious schools. Parents' choice of school depends on many factors, and they generally choose the one that meets their children's needs (Firth & Huntley, 2014).

This opportunity to choose is evident in metropolitan and large regional areas that feature an array of government and non-government schools (McCarthy, 2013). However, this opportunity to choose is unevenly distributed, as parents with limited means have limited choices (Cahill & Gray, 2010; Rowe & Lubienski, 2017); wider choice only for those who can afford it (Campbell et al., 2009). This process of choice has been found to be labour-intensive, emotionally and intellectually challenging for parents (Cahill & Gray, 2010; Campbell et al., 2009; Proctor & Aitchison, 2015).

Thompson, Hogan and Rahimi (2019) have reported that two thirds of Australian students are enrolled in government schools and another one third is enrolled in non-government schools. According to an Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS, 2019) report, total enrolment in government schools increased between 2008 and 2019, but there remains a significant proportion of students attending non-government schools. The increase in government school enrolment has only occurred at the primary-school

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<sup>1</sup> Corporate schools are modelled on English boys' public schools, but with Australian character. They are founded by corporate bodies such as churches and operate under governing trusts.

level, while secondary student numbers remain static. However, enrolment in non-government secondary schools has increased, since 2008, although more so in the independent sector (ABS, 2019). Thus, it is useful to explore why parents choose certain schools. This study seeks to understand how and why parents choose certain secondary schools in the South Australian (SA) educational context.

## **1.2 Background**

For most of the twentieth century, parents were not anxious about choosing schools for their children because the government provided schools for the vast majority of the population (Campbell et al., 2009). Children were expected to attend local, government-funded schools, and if there was a family tradition of attending non-government schools, the family followed that tradition. Parents were more concerned about whether a child might leave school before completing Year 11 or Year 12 (Campbell et al., 2009; Warren, 2015). However, now it is more likely that parents are anxious to find 'the best school for my child' so that child can obtain good results that will enable him/her to enter university and then gain employment (Bonnor & Caro, 2012; Campbell et al., 2009).

In recent years, more parents appear to be concerned about their children transitioning from primary to secondary to the extent that some parents choose schools as early as the conception stage of their child's life (Campbell et al., 2009). As an educator, I am interested in discovering why parents are anxious to choose secondary schools for their children and what factors influence this choice. This facilitates a better understanding of how parents from different family backgrounds, especially different cultural backgrounds, choose secondary schools for their children.

As a parent who migrated to Australia to access better educational opportunities, I often meet families who migrated here for similar

reasons. As a leader in the church community dealing with migrant families, I meet and talk to parents from diverse communities. I frequently hear conversations about children's education at dinner parties and barbeques. Parents are anxious about the school choice they have made or are about to make, and often discuss their concerns and frustrations with the education system. Most parents want their children to achieve their best and be successful in their career, so they make an effort to choose a suitable school in which to enrol their children, and this process can generate anxiety for parents across all social groups in Australia (Campbell et al., 2009). However, these experiences may differ along several dimensions, such as expectations and aspirations, and these may vary based on immigrant status and socio-economic status (SES) (Campbell et al., 2009; Windle, 2015).

My experience of dealing with families from diverse groups has allowed me to gain knowledge of different educational expectations and aspirations from parents who have various family backgrounds. My interactions with these families have given me insights and helped pique my interest in this issue of school choice, which in turn has led me to investigate the issue rigorously by discovering how parents choose secondary schools in SA.

### **1.3 Statement of the Problem**

I chose to conduct this study because while extensive studies on school choice have been undertaken in other states (for example: Campbell et al., 2009, in New South Wales [NSW] and Windle, 2015, in Victoria), there are currently no published studies that focus on this subject in an SA context. Further, there is limited literature on the process of secondary school choice in SA on the part of families from diverse backgrounds. In SA, unlike other states, such as NSW, Victoria, Queensland and Western Australia, there are no selective public secondary schools. All government schools are comprehensive schools, and a few government schools offer

specialist programs or special-interest schools. Parents can choose a public high school of their choice, but admission to specialist-program schools is based on a merit selection process or a student's residential address. In SA, Year 8 is the first year of secondary school and from 2022, Year 7 will be the first year of secondary school at all SA schools (ABS, 2019). However, in 2019, some non-government schools in SA have already commenced Year 7 as the first year of secondary school

In response to the lack of research on secondary school choice in SA, this study explores how and why parents choose particular schools. Parents' experiences in the school choice process fill a gap in our knowledge of how families from diverse backgrounds choose a secondary school for their children in the SA context. By conducting this study, I want to privilege the voices of these parents as I document their experiences that contribute to the findings on parental school choice.

In recent years, the school choice policy has amplified inequality across the school system (Firth & Huntley, 2014; Bonnor & Shepherd, 2016) and family's postcode determines their ability to enrol in certain schools (Fahey & Joseph, 2020). Most of the public secondary schools in metropolitan Adelaide are zoned and children who live inside that school zone are given priority enrolment. In SA, certain public schools with strong academic performance drive demand for geographic zones that determine who can enrol at those schools. These public schools are experiencing an increase in demand for enrolment because more parents are moving to certain postcodes so that they can enrol their children at the local school. This issue on school zoning has caused much anxiety for some parents (Boisvert, 2019). An eastern suburbs public secondary school stated on its website, 'As of 17 July 2015 Glenunga International High School (GIHS) reached student enrolment capacity. For 2019 the school will be unable to offer enrolment placements to prospective students regardless of residential location'. Parents seem to be flocking to certain suburbs with schools that offer quality public secondary education;

the demand for high school zones was driven by their strong academic performance. This has caused rising demand for properties in those suburbs and has caused property price surges (Bowden, 2019). This suggests that our public schools have varying academic standards.

In the period following World War II, secondary education in South Australia was divided between technical and high schools. The Technical Branch administered 'the techs' and the Secondary Branch administered 'the highs' (Jolly & Swenson, 2001). The division between the supposed 'academic' and 'non-academic' were to cater to those seeking industrial and trade occupations so that they can work and study in technically oriented schools, and the provision of 'academic' education for those seeking opportunities in higher education at university (Commonwealth Schools Commission, 1985). In the second half of the twentieth century in South Australia, and Australia more broadly, comprehensive high schools were established which are largely academic oriented (Campbell et al, 2009). However, South Australia retained separate technical high schools into the 1970s (Campbell & Proctor, 2014). Since the funding shifts of the 1970s, the recommendation by the Karmel report on the distribution of funds to schools saw the rise of the idea of market and has encouraged the marketisation of schools (Campbell et al., 2009). This created a market in education where parents are free to choose schools that are of the best quality and meet their children's needs.

In South Australia, all public secondary schools are comprehensive and offer different programs and with students being able to choose which secondary schools to attend based on programs offered. However, as a response to changes in employment patterns, there is a growing demand for educational credentials as a pathway to university. Parents now seek quality government secondary schools that best meet their children's needs and interest, thus creating more competition between local government schools, contributing to school inequality, and creating a very segregated school system (Firth & Huntley, 2014).



Parents have the right to a choice of schools, and in this school market, they act as consumers, using similar skills to those they would use when choosing or buying services or products. They worry about the quality of their children's schools and education, and particularly about their children's future in the labour market (Campbell et al., 2009). They are anxious about where and how to school their children and uncertain if their child can obtain a place at the school of the parents' choice. Many feel pressure to conform to market expectations and have reported feeling anxious and frustrated by the whole school choice process (Proctor & Aitchison, 2015). Changing societal demand for higher level qualifications and higher level skills seems to have shifted the emphasis in education from a focus of students learning a particular skillset to developing the knowledge, understanding, skills and values that are necessary to their participation in today's multicultural society (Reid, 2019).

## **1.4 Research Purpose and Scope of the Study**

The purpose of my study is to explore how and why parents choose a particular secondary school and what factors influence their choice. This study seeks to determine how parents operate in this education market and to explore their experiences in choosing a secondary school for their children. Therefore, the general research question for this study is as follows:

- How do parents in SA select secondary schools?

The literature review (Chapter 2) generated two research questions, which, in turn, focused the research design:

1. How does family social background influence parental aspiration in their choice of secondary school?

## 2. How does the school marketplace influence parents in their choice of secondary school?

The intent of the study is to ascertain how parents choose secondary schools; homeschooling is not considered as this is beyond the scope of this study. The study is limited to parents of children in Year 6 at government primary schools, so it does not consider choices made by parents of children in non-government primary schools or in Reception to Year 12 schools.

This study is limited to a particular period of time as the research occurred before the decision to make Year 7 part of all SA secondary schools in 2022.

### **1.5 Significance of the Study**

Choosing schools has become a higher priority for families in recent years. My hope is that the findings of this study on parental school choice will strengthen the empirical and conceptual basis for developing future policies and reinforce the ties between families and schooling. With its focus on school choice, this study offers insights for policy-makers by providing more information on parents' expectations of the Australian schooling system, which ultimately affect their children's educational outcomes and their future pathways for work or further studies.

I believe this study is especially important to SA, which has an ethnically diverse population, and the information obtained from different families will contribute to the literature on parental school choice. This study intends to provide an understanding of the current situation regarding secondary school choice among parents with children in government primary schools. It aims to better comprehend their experiences by exploring the factors that influence their school choice. This yields insights into how schools can meet the needs of parents and their children.

Finally, this is a policy-focused study that will be useful to policy-makers in terms of their future policy directions.

## **1.6 Structure of the Thesis**

This thesis is structured into six chapters, including this first chapter, which introduces the study. Chapter 2 reviews the existing literature and research on parental school choice that led to the research questions.

Chapter 3 describes the study methodology. To explore the phenomenon of school choice, the study adopted a mixed-methods design. This chapter details the data collection process, data analysis and ethical procedures.

Chapter 4 presents the key findings from an analysis of the qualitative data. It also provides a brief descriptive analysis of the survey questionnaire.

Chapter 5 summarises the findings that contribute to the discussion, with reference to the literature review.

Chapter 6 states the study conclusions and proposes recommendations for further research.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

This chapter reviews the relevant literature that contributes to an understanding of this study to contextualise the research. It first explores the history of Australia's school system and the emergence of the school market. Next, it examines this aspect of Australia's education system (i.e. the school market) and school choice. It then discusses studies on influences that shape parents' construction of the notion of school quality and their choice of school. By drawing on the limited scholarly evidence available on school choice, the chapter highlights key areas that evidence the gap in the literature.

These sections are organised as follows: (1) history of schooling in Australia; (2) Australia's education system; (3) educational market and school choice; (4) previous research on parental school choice; (5) challenges in school choice; (6) effects of school choice.

### **2.1 History of Schooling in Australia**

This section begins by discussing the emergence of school systems in Australia to better understand how they influence the school market.

The earliest Australian schools established in 1800 were either endowed private schools or schools run by church-affiliated groups and usually supported by some funding from the colonial governments (Bonnor & Shepherd, 2016; Cahill, 2009). Most of these schools focused on grounding students in basic literacy and numeracy and catered to the wealthy (Cahill, 2009; Campbell et al., 2009). By 1850, the colonial government had established free government schools and corporate schools. Corporate schools were modelled after English public schools but with Australian character. They were funded by corporate bodies such as churches and were governed by independent trusts or council (Campbell et al, 2009; Campbell,2014). These corporate schools met the educational

needs of the middle class and were considered elite institutions and dominated Australian secondary education; they are still considered high-status schools today (Campbell, 2005; Campbell et al., 2009). The newly established government-funded schools under the administration of William Wilkins reflected on the benefit of schooling and he reassured politicians that schooling was not only for the rich, but also for the poor (Bonnor & Shepherd, 2016; Campbell et al., 2009). Government schools became popular even among the middle class, as they offered a competitive academic tradition against that of corporate schools without charging high fees (Campbell et al., 2009). Non-government schools did not receive public funds and charged high fees, which meant they were limited to high-status wealthy families (Cahill, 2009; Campbell et al., 2009).

In 1901, the Australian Federation was formed and began to establish its own government schools. In 1906, the director of education from each state advocated that all children were entitled to secondary education (Cahill, 2009; Campbell et al., 2009). Government high schools incorporated elements of corporate school culture, which emphasised examinations and gaining useful credentials for further education and making careers (Campbell, 2014). This appealed to many new middle-class parents as some of the secondary schools had the capacity to better meet their educational needs. They sought secondary schools that have the capacity to confer 'distinction' and 'enhance' cultural capital of one kind or another (Campbell, 2005) and by 1950, government high schools were becoming predominant in the secondary school market (Campbell et al., 2009). Before the 1960s, most private schools were financially independent; however, some did benefit from various tax concessions and indirect subsidies from the government, and these differed from state to state (Forsey, Proctor, & Stacey, 2017).

In 1963, Prime Minister Menzies surprised his cabinet by providing grants to finance building science laboratory classrooms in public and private

secondary schools (Forsey et al., 2017). This marked the start of direct Commonwealth funding to private schools. Through to the early 1970s, non-government schools received very little public funding, and their running costs were mainly covered by sources such as student tuition fees and church contributions (Cahill, 2009; Campbell et al., 2009). By the late 1960s, Catholic schools were beginning to struggle financially and were facing collapse. Government comprehensive schools were established in most Australian states; the majority of students attended these government schools, and enrolment in the non-government sector was stagnant. Many middle-class parents were satisfied with government comprehensive high schools. In 1972, the newly elected Whitlam Labour Government established the Australian Schools Commission to investigate declining enrolment in the non-government sector. The Karmel Report recommended that school funding be distributed according to measures of need and equity to overcome social disadvantage (Campbell et al., 2009; Forsey et al., 2017).

Since the first public funding flowed into non-government schools in the mid-1970s, it has brought non-government schools within the reach of many Australian families (Cahill & Gray, 2010). The introduction of this funding gave rise to the idea of the school market, and after 1977, total enrolment in government schools began to fall because of the larger number of non-government school places made possible by government funding (Campbell et al., 2009).

In the early to mid-1980s under the Hawke Labour Government, private schools collectively received higher levels of funding than public schools (Forsey et al., 2017). Many new faith-based schools and other low-to-medium-fee independent schools were established with the aid of government funding, and the growing number of non-government schools that were affordable to middle-class parents caused a shift away from government education (Campbell et al., 2009).

In the late 1980s, the Hawke Government introduced 'school choice' by encouraging state governments to provide more specialist programs schools and selective high schools, hoping to arrest the middle-class shift to non-government schools. Apart from that, most states began to relax the zoning of local school districts and parents were allowed to choose government schools outside their local area; this promotional strategy employed by government schools was designed to attract middle-class parents to the public system (Campbell et al., 2009;Ho, 2020a).

However, the main driver of school choice policies came from the Howard Government (1996–2007), under which funding for non-government schools tripled (Ho, 2020a). This dramatic growth in public funding of private schools hugely expanded their resources, and the increase in federal funding was intended to promote both school choice and private schools. Many new Bible-based Protestant schools were founded, and the Islamic school sector experienced dramatic growth (Forsey et al., 2017). This funding disadvantaged government schools, and enrolment in these schools fell while it rose in non-government schools (Campbell et al., 2009; Connors & McMorrow, 2015; Reid, 2019). Between 1977 and 2014, enrolment declined in government schools as students moved to non-government schools (ABS, 2016).

Over the last 40 years in Australia, changes to government policies have increased the funding given to non-government schools, and this has promoted school market and choice. Thus, this creates more opportunities for parents to exercise school choice for their children (Cahill, 2009; Campbell et al., 2009; English, 2005; McCarthy, 2007). However, the outcome of this school market is that the Australian schooling system has become more segregated (Reid, 2019).

## **2.2 Australia's Education System**

Schools in Australia belong to one of three main sectors: government, Catholic and independent. The independent sector comprises Protestant church schools, Jewish and Islamic schools, and various community institutions, such as Steiner and Montessori schools (Forsey et al., 2017). Government schools in Australia are also called state or public schools, and this government sector is the largest school sector in Australia. The Catholic school sector is the next largest—Catholic schools belong to the Catholic education system, which provides Catholic education across the country.

These three sectors are funded by three different sources: government funding comes from two different strands of government, and private funding comes from parents' fee contributions or donations. The two levels of government funding are from the Federal (Australian) Government and from state or territory governments.

Government schools are run by state governments and funded mainly by public funds, with the majority coming from state or territory governments; the Australian Government is a minority funder. The other source of funding is parents' fees for materials and services.

Non-government schools are not government-owned, but they do receive funding from the Australian Government and, to a lesser extent, from state governments. Catholic schools are systemic schools situated within the Catholic system and are coordinated by Catholic education offices across states and territories (Buckingham, 2014). Like most non-government schools, they receive government funding on the system level rather than the individual school (Joseph, 2017). There is no direct funding flow from the federal government to Catholic schools because Catholic education offices make their own decision in the distribution of funds to individual schools (Joseph, 2017; Gerrard, 2017). Catholic



schools are funded by a combination of public funds, church assets and fees charged to parents.

Independent schools are administered by individual school boards and are funded by a combination of public funds and private funds from fees charged to parents and contributions or donations from parents (Cahill, 2009; Forsey et al., 2017). Most of the independent schools received government funding from their board (for instance, the Lutheran schools association), however, there are some individual independent schools received funding directly from the government (Joseph, 2017). According to an Independent Schools Australia (ISA) (2018) report, about 46% of independent school income came from government sources, and the government funding each individual school receives varies widely. However, contributions from parents and communities comprising fees, donations to school building funds and fundraising activities are these schools' main capital income.

In 2017, the reforms proposed by the Turnbull government introduced a funding model based on needs-based funding, the Schooling Resource Standard (SRS)<sup>2</sup> and branded as *Gonski 2.0* (Goss, 2017). The government hopes to transition towards this new funding arrangement over a period of 10 years, which is calculated according to students' needs as recommended by the Gonski et al. (2011) *Review of Funding for Schooling*. This needs-based funding will ensure that students with greater needs will attract higher funding from the Commonwealth regardless of the state in which they live. By 2029, the Australian Government will increase its funding to an 80% share of the SRS for non-government schools and a 20% share for government schools, with state governments to fund the remaining 80% for government schools.

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<sup>2</sup> The SRS is a per-student funding amount that is calculated for each school each year based on the students it enrolls as well as its size and location.

Under the new Gonski 2.0 model based on Gonski 2018 review recommendation, state governments will be expected to maintain their funding level of eighty-twenty rule to qualify for the full commonwealth funding (Goss, 2017). This means that under the current Morrison Government's new funding arrangement, public schools will only be funded at 91% of the SRS, while private schools will be funded at 100% or more by 2023 (Cobbold, 2019). Currently, most public schools are funded by the government at just 70–75% of the SRS, which means that the public-school system receives a lower percentage of total government funds compared with private schools (Goss, 2019; Reid, 2019). As stated by Department of Education, Skills and Employment (2021), the Australian government share of school funding has been increasing over time from 71.6% in 2008-2009 for non-government schools to 75.7% in 2017-2018 and 11.2% in 2008-2009 to 15.4% in 2017-2018 for government schools, the total combined public funding that the government sector receives is around 71%. According to the productivity commission it shows that Australian government funding for non-government schools is still growing faster than the public schools despite the Gonski2.0 needs-based funding legislation in 2017 (Karp, 2021). Government schools educate the bulk of disadvantaged students and are very underfunded, while non-government schools typically receive close to their funding target or more. Funding discrepancies have grown over the past decade, and this funding system is inequitable and unjust: non-government schools, which are already well resourced and privileged, receive the full 100%, of the SRS and yet government schools are still underfunded relative to the SRS (Goss, 2019). The hope of reducing the disparities between schools has been dashed because some schools are receiving much more than they would under the SRS formula and other schools, notably government schools, are receiving much less as state governments decrease their expenditure on public schools (Reid, 2019).

The government school funding model has enabled independent schools to improve their position in the education market by making themselves more attractive relative to public schools (Reid, 2019). Non-government schools receive funding from the three aforementioned sources, and their income from those sources is much higher than that of government schools—this makes a difference to the quality, resources and facilities available to students (Reid, 2019). According to Cobbold (2017), the average income of independent schools in 2016 was nearly 50% higher than that of public schools. In that same year, public funding for non-government schools paid for approximately 40% of their running costs and enhanced school facilities, resources and programs—therefore, the affordability and availability of the non-government schools has caused a drift of students from government to non-government schools, as parents now have more opportunities to exercise their choice (Cahill & Gray, 2010; Campbell et al., 2009).

In SA, all metropolitan government secondary schools (excluding specialist programs schools) and some country secondary schools are zoned, and placement in those schools is based on a child's residential address. The specialist programs schools offer special-interest programs in areas such as music, language, sport, drama, dance and the arts, agriculture, gifted and talented programs (Ignite), science, technology, engineering and maths (STEM) and the International Baccalaureate (IB). Specialist programs schools have a merit selection process for entry into their specialist programs, and this may include an audition, test or interview the year before a student intends to start at the school. Most government schools are co-educational; SA has only two girls-only public high schools. All secondary school students in Years 10–12 are offered the South Australian Certificate of Education (SACE), and a few schools offer the IB. Some provide Vocational Education and Training (VET) and STEM pathways for students undertaking their SACE.

The majority of SA’s Catholic and independent schools are based in Adelaide and include single-sex and co-educational institutions. They offer the SACE, and a number of them also offer the IB. Most provide broad co-curricular and sports programs and vocational courses.

According to a 2019 ABS report, across Australia 65.7% of students were enrolled in government schools, 19.5%, in Catholic schools and 14.8% in independent schools, indicating that two thirds of students are enrolled in government schools and another third in non-government schools. Although total enrolment in government schools increased between 2015 and 2019 (see Table 2.1), a significant proportion of students still attend non-government schools. In the last five years to 2019, there was a slight increase in enrolments in government schools (ACARA, 2019). However, independent schools experienced the biggest proportional increase in enrolments during 2018–19, from 14.6% to 14.8%, the strongest growth in the independent sector in the last 10 years (Carey, 2020). Catholic school enrolment is on the downward trend.

**Table 2.1: Student Enrolments by School Affiliation, Australia, 2015–19**

	Government		Catholic		Independent		Total	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
2015	2445130	65.2	765539	20.4	540304	14.4	<b>3750973</b>	<b>100.0</b>
2016	2483802	65.4	767050	20.2	547374	14.4	<b>3798226</b>	<b>100.0</b>
2017	2524865	65.6	766870	19.9	557490	14.5	<b>3849225</b>	<b>100.0</b>
2018	2558169	65.7	765735	19.7	569930	14.6	<b>3893834</b>	<b>100.0</b>
2019	2594830	65.7	769719	19.5	584262	14.8	<b>3948811</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Source: ABS Cat. No. 4221.0 (2019)

According to Rowe (2020), the increase in government school enrolment was more pronounced in the primary school sector, while secondary school enrolment did not increase for the period 2015-2019 (Table 2.2).

Although enrolment in government secondary schools slightly increased in 2016–17, it has not returned to what it was like in the mid-1970s, when most (approximately 75%) Australian students were enrolled in public secondary schools (Forsey et al., 2017; Rowe, 2020). Conversely, enrolment in independent secondary schools has consistently increased from 1996–2018 (Rowe, 2020); the independent school sector is now the fastest growing school sector in Australia (Watson & Ryan, 2010). This trend indicates that government and independent schools are becoming more popular than Catholic schools (Endekov, 2019; Rowe, 2020).

**Table 2.2: Secondary School Enrolments by School Affiliation, Australia, 2015–19**

	<b>Government</b>	<b>Catholic</b>	<b>Independent</b>
2015	59.4%	22.4%	18.2%
2016	59.3%	22.4%	18.3%
2017	59.4%	22.1%	18.5%
2018	59.4%	21.9%	18.7%
2019	59.3%	21.7%	19.0%

Source: ABS Cat. No. 4221.0 (2019)

### **2.3 Educational Market and School Choice**

In the context of this research, ‘choice’ is defined as parents’ ability to choose between the various schooling options available for their children. This process is significant because it is important to parents in terms of planning for their children’s future (Bosetti, 2004). However, parents’ ability to choose schools depends on a confluence of many factors, such as their financial capacity to pay fees, their knowledge of schools and their understanding of schooling options.

In Australia, the concept of choice is situated within the current ideology of neoliberalism. This market economy discourse has become prominent over the last 40 years and shaped the current educational narrative. Since the 1990s, Australia’s education policies have strengthened the notion of

school market, and the Howard Government's commitment to increase federal funding encourages parental school choice (Connors & McMorrow, 2015; English, 2005; Forsey et al., 2017). Neoliberal ideology promotes competition among schools, and parents who are consumers in this competitive school market are free to choose the schools that best suit their children's needs. They may choose schools from the 'tripartite' system to educate their children (Firth & Huntley, 2014). However, only those who have the resources are able to exercise the widest range of choice opportunities to access the 'best' private schools or the most 'high-performing' public schools (Angus, 2015; Campbell et al., 2009; Firth & Huntley, 2014).

To provide information to parents about various schools, the My School website was developed in 2010 as part of the education reform driven by the then-Commonwealth Minister for Education Julia Gillard. It was intended to improve educational outcomes by increasing public accountability measures, which focused mainly on academic results, literacy and numeracy benchmarks statistics and other measures (McCarthy, 2013; Reid, 2019). My School attempts to enhance school quality through competition and choice to meet market demands (Bonnor & Shepherd, 2016; Reid, 2019).

My School aims to provide Australian parents with important information about Australian schools. The information on the website facilitates comparison of school performance in National Assessment Program: Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) tests and displays the relative SES of school students as measured by the Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA). The ICSEA mainly reflects the occupations and educational levels of parents who send their children to a particular school, as well as some measures of advantage created by a school's enrolment and location (Bonnor & Caro, 2012). The ICSEA value is set at an average of 1,000 across Australia—the higher the ICSEA, the higher the level of educational advantage for the students attending that

school (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority [ACARA], 2015). My School is a quick and easy way for parents to access information about any schools about which they are interested to learn. This enables them to make informed school choices as they go through the school choice process (Angus, 2015).

Australia's education policy dictates that all students are zoned to their closest government secondary school, and these government schools must enrol all students in their designated zone who apply to attend (Buckingham & Jha, 2015). However, parents are free to choose a non-government (fee-paying) school or a government school outside their catchment area; enrolment in the latter will depend on whether that government school has any availability to accept students outside its catchment area (Buckingham & Jha, 2015; Rowe & Lubienski, 2017).

Australia's education system gives parents options to educate their children, and a high proportion of students attend non-government schools (Firth & Huntley, 2014). Well-funded non-government schools continue to market themselves effectively as more elite schools and to capture a growing proportion of the market; this is especially the case for secondary schools (Rowe, 2019). Non-government schools capture the more affluent segment of the market and educate the majority of students from higher SES backgrounds, while government schools educate the majority of those from the lower SES backgrounds and most disadvantaged students (Gonski et al., 2011; Rowe, 2017; Watson & Ryan, 2010; Windle, 2015).

Policies encouraging school choice have led parents who are rational decision-makers to choose schools on the basis of their children being with 'people like us' (Ho, 2020a) and a sense of belonging to a group who are from the same social background (Campbell et al., 2009). This indicates that parents seek a school community that shares the same values and beliefs as they do (Bosetti & Pyryt, 2007; McCarthy, 2013).

This rationale needs to be explored to ascertain how family social background affects how parents choose schools for their children.

The intention of school choice was to promote competition between schools to raise their quality. However, it has failed to improve student academic results; instead, it has increased social segregation between schools (Bonnor & Shepherd, 2016; Cobbold, 2018).

How does the marketisation of schools influence parents' choice of school? Generally, the parents', children's and school's social context plays an important role in the choice of school process. Parents and students who are consumers in this education market seek the 'best' school in the social and academic sense that align with their own beliefs, values and interests.

## **2.4 Previous Research on Parental School Choice**

Research on parental secondary school choice is a relatively unexplored area in SA, as most studies on this subject have been conducted in the context of other states. In approaching this issue on parental school choice, the literature discussed below is valuable. It helps develop an understanding of how parents navigate school choice, focusing on their behaviours in undertaking this decision-making process and the factors associated with it.

### **2.4.1 Family Background and School Choice**

The literature suggests that school choice varies according to family background factors, such as SES, gender, ethnicity, parents' level of education, family history, parents' social network, their motivations, beliefs and values, their preferences for type of school and their children's interests. All these factors are interconnected.



## *Parenting Role*

Parents are aware of their parenting role and are bound by their concept of being a 'good parent citizen' (Campbell et al., 2009), carrying out their 'individual responsibility' by participating in the education market and choosing the 'best' school for their child (Reid, 2019). This participation in this school choice process seems to be a common and expected role among middle-class parents in urban Australia (Campbell et al., 2009; Windle, 2015): they believe in the importance of successful schooling, useful credentials and profitable labour market entry (Campbell et al., 2009). These parents are concerned that if they do not participate in choosing a school for their child, they will be condemned for a 'lack of caring' or for 'irresponsible parenting' (Campbell et al., 2009). To most of them, choosing a 'good' or 'right' school that best fits their child has become synonyms with good parenting (Aitchison, 2006; Firth & Huntley, 2014; McCarthy, 2013).

Parents generally seek schools that reflect their values and beliefs, which may reflect their social status and aspirations for their child (McCarthy, 2013). This approach to school choice could also be due to the commodification of education, where parents are understood to be customers (Reid, 2019) taking part in a competitive education market, shopping for schools that offer the highest 'quality' education (Aitchison, 2006). Some parents think that 'good parents' provide the best for their children by paying for them to attend non-government schools and assume that if something is free, its quality might be questionable (Bonnor & Caro, 2007; Campbell et al., 2009). Therefore, parents increasingly view school choice as a necessity, associating it with the concept of social positionality: 'schooling in Australia, as in many OECD nations, has become the site par excellence for class formation' (Rowe & Windle, 2012). This school choice process has been found to be associated with parents valuing the quality of the education a school offers as a positional good that allows their children to maintain or

improve their social and educational advantages (Campbell et al., 2009; McCarthy, 2013). This concept of positionality is linked to the notion of status maintenance or economic advancement through school choice (Campbell et al., 2009) and parents seek school that are in a position to enhance the cultural capital of their children (English, 2005).

### *Socio-economic Status*

SES, which is commonly measured by parental education, occupation and income, is a powerful factor in school choice, which can depend on financial resources. In a study on parents of secondary students in NSW, Campbell et al. (2009) found a strong association between parental education and occupation and choice of school. Educated middle-class parents have more resources, are more likely to be choosers of schools (Campbell et al., 2009; Preston, 2018) and can exercise the most choice by choosing the 'best' school for their child; those without many resources are unable to exercise the same level of choice (Firth & Huntley, 2014; Windle, 2015). Parents who are dissatisfied with government schools usually send their children to non-government schools—this is associated with their SES, which enables them to make this choice (Beavis, 2004; Cahill, 2009; Campbell et al., 2009).

A recent ISA (2018) report shows that 51% of children attending independent schools, 35% of children attending Catholic schools and 28% of children attending government schools are from families in which the main breadwinner is a university graduate. This indicates that parents' education levels (a proxy for SES) influences school choice. Parents with higher levels of education are more likely to have higher aspirations and greater access to resources, thus allowing them to exercise school choice, as they are not price-sensitive and are willing to pay tuition fees (Bosetti, 2004; Campbell et al., 2009; Le & Miller, 2002; Preston, 2018).

Mukherjee (1999) shows a direct relationship between SES and non-government school enrolments. He reports that in the secondary school

context, 60% of students from the highest economic status decile attend non-government schools, while 80% of students from the lowest economic status decile attend government schools. This suggests that parents with resources can choose to send their children to non-government schools, while parents who cannot afford non-government schools are restricted in their choice.

Although school choice research in Australia portrays parents as active consumers in the school market, none of this research specifically compares the process of school choice between the middle-class and working-class families (Cahill, 2009). This could be because drawing class boundaries in Australia is highly contested (Campbell, 2005). In a study by Campbell et al. (2009), middle-class parents were found to be 'significant players' in the educational market, and these middle class parents were classified according to their occupational grouping, such as professionals, managers and semi-professionals.

However, Rowe and Windle (2012) define the Australian middle class according to ABS (2007) data showing that those with a median disposable income of \$46,613. Although there is a blurring of distinct categories, a key commonality of the middle class is their relationship to education (Rowe, 2017). This is reflected in Campbell et al.'s (2009) study showing that the middle-class parents in Australia are increasingly defined by their connection to schools and their perception that successful schooling is related to educational credentials and profitable labour market entry. High-level educational credentials including university degrees were important to these middle-class parents. Therefore, it could be argued that middle-class families depend on the credentials bestowed by the education system to maintain their status and position (Ball, 2003; Ball, Bowe, & Gerwitz, 1996; Rowe & Windle, 2012). This concept of class as a form of capital is linked to Bourdieu's definition of cultural capital and parents choosing schools compatible with their income, lifestyle and SES

(Rowe & Windle, 2012). This indicates that parents' SES is related to their aspirations for their children, which influence their choice of school.

### *Cultural Heritage*

According to the Cambridge Dictionary, 'Heritage' (n.d.), is the history, traditions and practices of a particular country or society that are rooted in the past and continue to be important. Therefore, cultural heritage is an expression of ways of living that are developed by the community and passed on from generation to generation, including customs, cultural practices and values. Ethnicity refers to the shared identity or similarities among a group of people based on characteristics such as cultural tradition (family and social customs), common geographic origin, common language and being a minority (ABS, 2019).

Parental ethnicity is an important factor to consider when examining parents' aspirations for their children's educational achievement. According to Considine and Zappalà (2002), ethnic background or immigrant status influences parents' aspirations for their children's educational achievement, as they perceive education as an upward mobility pathway for their children. This pursuit of upward mobility may affect parental expectations of and aspirations for their children, as they place a high value on education (Spera, Wentzel, & Matto, 2009). Parents of different ethnicities hold unique educational aspirations, goals and values, thus enacting unique parenting practices, and they may be involved in their children's education in different ways (Spera, 2005).

Francis and Archer (2005) found that the British-Chinese parents aspire for their children to obtain a good education, as they believe that this will provide them with a good job and the potential for social class mobility. Similarly, Chua (2011), the daughter of Chinese immigrant and author of the book *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother*, articulates the superiority of Chinese parenting practices in terms of children's academic and other

outcomes and perceives differences between Chinese and Western parenting practices.

Phillipson and Phillipson (2017) found that education and cultural background influences parental aspiration. Parents with higher education levels have higher aspirations for their children's educational achievement, and parents from different ethnic backgrounds have different aspirations for and expectations of their children: the cultural emphasis on education influences these aspirations. For example, Ho (2017) reports that the majority of Indian and other Asian parents believe education is the key to success and recognise education as a factor in upward mobility—therefore, this cultural emphasis on the importance of education affects their attitudes towards education (Phillipson & Phillipson, 2017).

In a multicultural country such as Australia, it is notable that parents born overseas have different expectations of their children. According to Campbell et al. (2009), parents from first-generation immigrant backgrounds have different expectations than those who have lived here for many generations. Ho (2020b) contends that Australia's migration policy, which prioritises skilled migration, has enabled many highly educated migrants to move here. In her study on Asian immigrants in school choice, Ho found that the majority of Asian migrants who have moved here in the last two decades are middle-class professionals are anxious about their children's academic performance and opt for government schools that have outstanding educational outcomes. They believe in the importance of education and want to reinforce that by sending their children to 'good' schools, and are determined for their children to attend university to secure jobs (Campbell et al., 2009; Windle, 2015). Similarly, Aris (2017) found that a group of migrant parents from an Indian background looked for schools that prioritised academic success and focused on selecting academically selective schools for their children. As Australian schooling is becoming more competitive

and hierarchical, many Asian migrants use their experience of schooling in their home countries and apply that to navigate their approach to the Australian education system (Ho, 2020a).

According to the literature, there is a relationship between parents' cultural heritage and their choice of school. In SA, since state-sponsored skilled migration was introduced in 2004, there has been an influx of skilled migrants from diverse cultural backgrounds. In addition, the school choice process undertaken by families from diverse social and cultural backgrounds is relatively unexplored in SA and is important in determining how family social background influences school choice.

### *Parental Aspiration*

According to the Sellar (2013) aspirations are formed in relation to a set of promises about the future and it usually connotes a strong desire to achieve something great. In this research, parental aspiration refers to the level of schooling to which parents aspire for their child and can indicate goals for the future. It is assumed that higher educational and occupational aspirations connote more motivated individuals (Gutman & Akerman, 2008). However, the meaning and importance of aspirations vary and can be influenced by a number of factors.

SES has been found to be a significant predictor of parents' aspirations for their children (Campbell et al., 2009; Le & Miller, 2002). Campbell et al. (2009) found that middle-class parents are motivated in their school choice by their aspirations for and expectations of their children. Research by Beamish and Morey (2013) and Windle (2015) yields similar results, indicating that parents have high aspirations for their children to fulfil their potential and follow a career path of their choice. In addition, these studies found that middle-class parents are more likely than working-class parents to have clearly defined aspirations for and expectations of their children (Campbell et al., 2009; Windle, 2015).

Parents are particularly keen for their children to fulfil their academic potential, and expect schools to provide a diversity of experiences to help their children perform well academically. They are willing to invest in a better 'quality' education system for their children (Li & Mumford, 2011). However, these aspirational parents' involvement in choosing the right school is often threaded with anxiety (Campbell et al., 2009). The role of parental aspiration has not been given much attention in school choice literature; to address this gap, this study explores how family background influences parents' aspirations in their choice of school.

### *Parental Anxiety*

According to Campbell et al. (2009), the anxiety of choosing the right school occurs across all social groups in Australia, but is especially pronounced in middle-class Australia. Similarly, Rowe and Windle (2012) found that even the most socially and economically advantaged families experience anxiety when dealing with school choice. This growing anxiety among the middle class when choosing the 'right' school for their child is fuelled by neoliberal education policies (Ho, 2020a; Reid, 2019). The emphasis on choice and parenting responsibility is intended to reduce risk and ensure positive outcomes (Cucchiara, 2013).

Ho (2020) found that Asian migrant parents who have uprooted their families to move to Australia have greater anxiety about making the right school decision due to their absence of a support network here and their lack of knowledge of the local school system. Their anxiety is attributed to their own schooling experience, compounded by their anxiety about schooling and the labour market in Australia. Similarly, Campbell et al. (2009) found that middle-class parents are more involved in their children's schooling and anxious about their children's future in the labour market and about the quality of their children's schools and education. These middle-class families' strategies are to find the 'best' schools, the

'best' universities and the most suitable peer groups for their children (Angus, 2015; Campbell et al., 2009).

Bonnor and Caro (2012) found that parents' anxiety around choosing secondary schools starts as early as when their children are in Year 4, particularly for middle-class parents (Bonnor & Caro, 2012; Campbell et al., 2009). However, a recent study by Firth and Huntley (2014) shows that school choice anxiety now begins even earlier, with parents worried about where to send their child to kindergarten. Education has thus become a private commodity: parents and students are consumers who are anxious to choose the 'best' school to maximise their self-interest (Reid, 2019).

### *Parents' Social Networks*

According to Rowe and Windle (2012), privileged parents tend to rely on their relationships with their social networks when choosing schools, and they tend to choose schools that will enable further networking opportunities. Word-of-mouth information from parents' social networks has been found to be the most influential for them in choosing a quality school for their child (ISA, 2017). Proctor (2011) reports that mothers, in particular, gather information about schools and advice from their friendship networks and families. This has also been found in a study on a group of mothers who reported that they trusted firsthand information from their mothers' network more than official information (Aitchison, 2006). This school search process is similar among migrant families in Australia, who source their information about desirable secondary schools from family, friends and neighbours (Campbell et al., 2009).

Windle (2015) reports that skilled migrants depend on advice from their friends about the availability of good schools prior to migrating and selecting their place of residence. This seems to be a common practice among skilled migrants with high educational qualifications in terms of how they access information about various schools—they trust the



recommendations of their friends in their community (Campbell et al., 2009; Windle, 2015).

Firth and Huntley (2014) found that parents with higher levels of education trust information provided by their friends more than the information presented on the My School website. Parents in this study revealed that word-of-mouth information and conversations among friends were very persuasive. This is supported by Leaver's (2016) study on high school choice, which posits that not many parents use the My School website to obtain information about various schools; rather, they find inside information from parents who already have a child at a particular school useful. Similarly, Jackson (2019) found that parents rely on information gathered from their friends in their social networks to choose a school, and that My School does not play a strong role in the decision-making process.

#### **2.4.2 School Characteristics and School Choice**

Selection of school is an important issue for most Australian parents. They choose a school based on its capacity to deliver quality education—this choice is related to a school's academic performance, which is reflected in its academic record or reputation (Beavis, 2004; McCarthy, 2013; Warren, 2015). School reputation refers to parents' and students' overall opinions and attitudes towards the school. Sagir, Dos and Cetin (2014) found that the most important component of reputation in secondary school is academic success and graduate profiles; the level of a school's reputation can differ according to parameters such as school type, location or parents' and students' SES profiles. To unpack the complexities of school reputation, it is important to examine the various school characteristics that contribute to this factor.

## *School Environment*

According to Jensen et al. (2013), parents value school environment and reputation more than academic achievement. Deloitte Access Economics (2017) reports that teaching practice, classroom organisation and environment, and school leadership are the most important drivers of school quality. Although classroom organisation is beneficial to students, Deloitte found that peer culture or how students interact with one another affect students' performance, and students' family backgrounds contribute to differences in educational outcomes.

Certainly, school academic performance and graduation rates are important, but many parents are concerned with the quality of their children's schooling experiences. Parents consider the quality in terms of their background and ability of other children at a school and believe that the ability and motivation of a child's peers have an important impact on their educational outcomes (O'Shaughnessy, 2007). They want their children to be among peers who value education (Perry, Lubienski, & Ladwig, 2016; Roda & Wells, 2013) and to be in an environment conducive to learning (Beavis, 2004; Marks, 2017). Parents not only want their children to experience positive relationship with peers, but also with teachers who inspire and motivate them in their learning (Perry et al., 2016). Teachers' attributes and practices have been found to influence students' learning outcomes, and parents assume that the quality of teachers at private schools is superior to those at public schools (Beavis, 2004; Firth & Huntley, 2014; Marks, 2017).

According to Bonnor and Caro (2012), the 'cohort' of students is what attracts the parents to a school; they are aware that children in their adolescent years are vulnerable to being influenced by their peers. Middle-class parents want their children to attend a school with other children from the same social class (Rowe & Windle, 2012). This highlights that middle-class parents not only choose which school may

offer their children the best academic opportunity, but that also offer the right community in terms but also the right school community in terms of peer group (Campbell et al., 2009).

Parents are concerned with a school's socio-economic profile, which refers to student composition, including students' and their parents' SES (Rowe & Lubienski, 2017). Parents' SES has been found to have an influence on students' academic achievement (Bonnor, 2019; Perry & McConney, 2010; Thompson et al., 2019). According to Bonnor (2019), school achievement is related to the SES of a student's cohort of peers, which is highly segregated according to parents' occupations and education levels rather than the quality of teaching.

The overall SES of a school has been consistently found to be related to the differences in the student educational achievement, regardless of students' individual SES (Bonnor, 2019; Perry & McConney, 2010; Thomson, 2018). This is supported by Perry et al. (2016), who report that student experiences between private and public schools do not vary by sector after accounting for student SES. Regardless of private or public sector, students in higher SES schools have more positive experiences compared with students in lower SES schools.

Bonnor (2019) has identified a relationship between school achievement and level of student advantage. He states that in 2017, the proportion of Higher School Certificate Distinguished Achievers from the highest ICSEA schools was 19%, whereas in the lowest ICSEA schools it was 1%. This pattern has also been seen in Queensland, where 85% of the highest achievers are from schools with an ICSEA above 1,000 and 15% are from schools with an ICSEA below 1,000. This suggests that achievement outcomes are connected to a school's level of advantage.

Students who are already advantaged are enrolled in high-achieving schools, while disadvantaged students are enrolled in lower SES schools, which are struggling and falling in achievement levels. This shows that

social advantage and disadvantage are related to educational success or failure that is linked to Australia's schooling system (Kenway, 2013). Families who have the means and resources can choose to enrol their children in non-government schools or even relocate to live within the catchment areas of higher status public schools. Unsurprisingly, parents seek high-SES schools regardless of sector, which means that enrolment is growing at more advantaged schools and shrinking at less advantaged schools (Bonnor, 2019). This widens the gap between the advantaged and disadvantage schools, resulting in school segregation (Bonnor, 2017). While school environment has been described as a factor in relation to school segregation, the literature has not really investigated how the level of school advantage influences parents' perception of school quality.

### *Academic Characteristics*

Beamish and Morey (2013) found that a range of school factors influence parents when they make school choices, and academic characteristics are an important factor. Academic quality is a primary factor in parents' choice of school—they seek schools with high academic quality and examine school performance, particularly Year 12 results. This is evident in numerous studies that have reported middle-class parents as being more academically oriented, believing schools that emphasise university entrance actively help their children work towards their future careers (Campbell et al., 2009; McCarthy, 2013).

Numerous studies have reported steady growth in middle-class Australian parents choosing non-government schools because they perceived the academic programs in these schools are better than those offered in government schools (Beamish & Morey, 2013; Campbell et al., 2009; Rowe & Windle, 2012; Warren, 2015). Parents feel nervous about the quality of education in the public school system and assume that private schools have better teachers, higher teaching quality and access to superior tools that influence that teaching quality (Firth & Huntley, 2014).

Government funding for private schools enables them to improve their infrastructure by making them attractive to aspirational parents with means (Reid, 2019). Additional funding enhances their significant advantage, allowing them to improve their teacher/student ratio, educational resources, modern buildings and equipment (Cobbold, 2019).

Middle-class parents are concerned in curriculum offering with subject choices in schools—middle-class students usually choose more academic subjects, while working-class students usually populate vocational subjects (McCarthy, 2013). Windle (2015) found that parents view schools offering vocational programs as for students who are not interested in 'getting high VCE [Victorian Certificate of Education] scores'. Access to an advanced-level academic curriculum varies substantially according to schools' socio-economic composition, and students attending middle- or high-SES schools have access to a wider range of academic subjects (Perry & Southwell, 2014). Schools with low enrolment have limited subject offerings due to declining resources. Parents are concerned about this limited curriculum and so they choose private schools that are able to offer higher level subjects that are important for entry into university. Research shows that private schools in Australia are more likely to offer advanced subjects that receive a larger Australian Tertiary Admissions Rank weighting than public schools (Perry et al., 2016; Perry & Southwell, 2014).

Therefore, there is a demand for public schools with an academic focus, especially for those who want their children to get into university; parents choose schools with access to a wide range of academic subjects. However, most public schools that offer quality academic programs tend to be concentrated in higher SES communities (Perry & McConney, 2010). The demand for such public schools is usually oversubscribed, leading to further social segregation in the public education system (Perry & Southwell, 2014). However, declining enrolments and high segregation in schools is not associated with under-resourcing, but with choice and

competition that make the task of providing equal educational opportunity more difficult (Perry & Southwell, 2014).

### *Location*

School proximity to home has been found to be a factor that influences school choice (Beamish & Morey, 2013; Fahey, 2019). If a school is located close to home, it takes less time to commute. However, location convenience can also mean that a school is near or on the way to parents' workplaces or the homes of other family members, that other family members attend the school or that it is near public transportation routes (Buckingham, 2015; Fahey, 2019).

However, a study by Campbell et al. (2009) reveals that location also refers to whether a school is the right fit in terms of academic opportunity for a child. Parents in this study were uncertain whether their local government schools could deliver quality schooling, and those restricted in their enrolment to well-regarded government high schools due to government school zoning revealed that they were willing to travel long distance so that their children could attend those sought-after schools. These parents were aware that good local government schools are situated in many middle-class areas, and felt they had limited choice because of the geographic constraints they faced (Campbell et al., 2009). Campbell et al.'s research was conducted in NSW, and this location factor can be further explored in the SA context.

## **2.5 Challenges in School Choice**

All parents have the right to choose a school from the government or non-government sector, but many factors constrain their choice. According to Cobbold (2019), school choice may be limited by several factors, such as tuition fees, access to transport and prior student achievement as part of the admissions criteria.

Campbell et al. (2009) shows that some parents favour more private schools and more choices, but money is an issue. Similarly, Fahey (2019) reports that cost is a factor that prevents parents from choosing private schools and limits them to choosing only from public schools. Although most parents can choose between government schools, some government schools might be unavailable to some parents because they are partially or fully selective, and some are limited due to zoning (Fahey, 2019).

However, those who are wealthier have more choices and can choose to buy a house in their desired school location. Bowden (2019) found that parents are willing to pay more for houses in particular high school zones because they want their child to enter a particular school. Schools that are reputable and have strong academic performance are mostly preferred, and demand to secure properties in these high school zones has driven up property prices due to competition among buyers.

There is anecdotal evidence that 'buying enrolment' in a government school with a good reputation is a common strategy for parents who seek to enrol their children in these highly reputable government schools. These middle-class parents have resorted to either buying or renting a property within the school catchment area to get their children into their preferred school. The accessibility of good government schools and school catchment areas are sometimes features of real-estate advertisements. The relationship between the popular government schools and entitlement to enrol based on the primary residence has been found to have a significant impact on where families choose to buy a home (Campbell et al., 2009). However, this is only possible if parents can afford to buy a house in a particular school catchment area or to pay the fees for a private school (Bonnor& Shepherd, 2016). The evidence thus suggests that although parents can choose schools in the marketplace, their choice is constrained by economic and policy factor.

## 2.6 Effects of School Choice

According to Musset (2012), school choice has become prevalent across two-thirds of OECD countries and the introduction of choice is to enhance parents and their right to access high quality education for their children. However, school choice opportunities for families are determined by family socio economic background. As a result where choice is provided to some and not to others, schools become more and more segregated as choice is mostly exercised by middle-class and wealthy families (Cobbold, 2019; Musset, 2012). In Australia, schools are socially segregated and inequality exists between them (Perry, 2018); the social segregation of disadvantaged students is extremely high compared with other OECD countries (Cobbold, 2019).

School composition is a significant factor in educational inequality. According to Cobbold (2019), students from varied SES families who attend schools with many students from high-SES families tend to achieve higher test results and graduation rates. In a more segregated school system, there is an achievement gap between low- and high-SES students. High social segregation in Australia's school system contributes to social inequality in educational outcomes, and the school market available to parents fosters this (Cobbold, 2019).

The issue of more students being enrolled at high-SES and high-achieving schools may lead to the issue of school segregation as shrinking enrolments in some schools (Bonnor, 2019; Bonnor & Shepherd, 2016; Firth & Huntley, 2014). Parents who have the resources and opportunity send their children to high-SES schools, and these schools continue to grow in size, with some being oversubscribed. However, those who are left behind in lower SES schools are mainly from disadvantaged backgrounds (Bonnor, 2019; Bonnor & Shepherd, 2016). Increasingly, parents are sending their children to non-government schools and high-SES public schools with good reputations. However, educational inequality



is more prominent at government schools because they still have higher enrolments of students from low-SES backgrounds (Hetherington, 2018).

School segregation is not limited to SES status alone, but increasingly takes the form of a concentration of culturally and racially similar students (Firth & Huntley, 2014; Ho, 2011). Ho's (2020a) research on Asian migrants and Australian schooling reveals that the division between Anglo and Asian students in NSW selective schools is encouraged by neoliberal education policies that foster segregation. Ho points out that parents from migrant backgrounds have different attitudes towards education, and their past experiences influence the way they value education. This social preoccupation with individualism in terms of these parents providing the 'best' for their children is not just about culture and race, but Australia's education system, which has become more competitive and hierarchical (Ho, 2020b).

## **2.7 Conclusion**

This chapter has presented a review of the literature, which illuminates the elements that influence parents in their choice of school. The literature review began with the history of Australia's school system. The origins of the education market and school choice were found to have been shaped by the rise of neoliberalism. The impact of neoliberalism on parental school choice was then explored, especially parents' participation as consumers in this competitive school market.

The literature review shows that parents' school choice is motivated by their aspirations for and anxieties about their children. They choose schools based on what those schools can offer their children in terms of preparing them for higher education and their future careers and also to enhance their cultural capital. There are significant knowledge gaps regarding how and why parents choose certain secondary schools in SA. The literature on school choice in the SA context is non-existent

As selecting a 'quality' school is one of the main factors in the school choice process, it is evident that research must investigate what factors contribute to this notion of quality schools. This concept of school quality should be explored in relation to other non-school factors, such as family and personal/individual factors.

This literature review provides the rationale for this research, which focuses on factors influencing parents' choice of school.

## **Chapter 3: Methodology**

### **3.1 Introduction**

This chapter outlines the methodology used in this study. The first section presents the research design and theoretical framework underpinning the research. The next section details the sampling design, data collection instruments, data collection procedures, data analysis, and integrated quantitative and qualitative findings. The final section addresses important ethical issues and the ways in which the study embedded measures of methodological rigour.

The purpose of this study is to explore the experiences of parents choosing a secondary school for their upper primary school children. The survey was constructed using questions framed around the general research question 'How do parents in SA select a secondary school?'; further questions were developed to address the gaps discussed in Chapter 2:

1. How does family social background influence parents' aspirations in their choice of secondary school?
2. How does the school marketplace influence parents in their choice of secondary school?

### **3.2 Research Design and Paradigms**

To understand the ways in which parents make meaning from the school choice process, I adopted constructionism as the epistemology underpinning this study. In this research, knowledge is viewed as not only constructed by the individual through their interactions in their own experiences, but also as a social activity through interaction with others who share the same experiences. Crotty (1998) states that 'all knowledge, and therefore all meaningful reality as such, is contingent

upon human practices, being constructed in and out of interaction between human beings and their world, and developed and transmitted within an essentially social context' (p. 42). The construction of knowledge involves both cognitive and social processes, and a range of information is available to construct such knowledge (Schwandt, 1994).

In researching the phenomenon of parental school choice, I explored how parents engaged in decision-making in this context and the factors that influenced their choices. In line with a constructionist epistemology, the focus of the study is to understand parents' experiences—that is, not to measure or quantify them, but rather to capture their realities as seen and experienced by them. According to Crotty (1998), 'different people may construct meaning in different ways, even in relation to the same phenomenon' (p. 9) based on diverse social, cultural, historical and political influences. Therefore, research from a constructionist stance views social objects and categories as socially constructed instead of pre-existing (Bryman, 2012). As a researcher, I gathered participants' views to generate a pattern of meaning (Creswell, 2014).

Constructionism is grounded in an interpretivist approach. A central tenet of this approach is that research can never be objectively observed from outside, but must be observed through direct experiences with people (Creswell, 2008; Guba & Lincoln, 1994). For Crotty, (1998) meaning 'is not discovered but constructed', and 'meanings are constructed by human beings as they engage with the world they are interpreting' (pp. 42–43). In adopting an interpretive approach to the research, I was able to elucidate the meanings others found in the world (Creswell, 2014). I constructed this meaning from the many data sources used in the research to contribute to the literature on school choice. The parent participants' survey questionnaires and semi-structured interviews all provided information that added to the study findings.

I adopted basic interpretive qualitative research methodology as I sought to discover and understand how participants made meaning from a phenomenon. As a researcher conducting a basic qualitative study, I was interested in determining how people made meaning of and interpreted their experiences in the school choice phenomenon. In researching this area, I was the primary data-gathering instrument, using carefully constructed questions aimed at understanding school choice through semi-structured interviews with the participants (O'Donoghue, 2006). Although the interviews involved a small number of people, I was able to interact with these people and visualise how the phenomena under investigation were perceived differently from multiple perspectives based on the detailed information gathered (O'Donoghue, 2006, p. 190).

I chose to use a basic interpretive qualitative design because the study does not seek to explain or define theory, as in grounded theory research. Neither does it convey life stories through narrative analysis or delve into history or to uncover the essence and underlying structure of a phenomenon, as in phenomenology research. Rather, it seeks to understand parents' experiences of going through the process of school choice (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015; Patton, 2002).

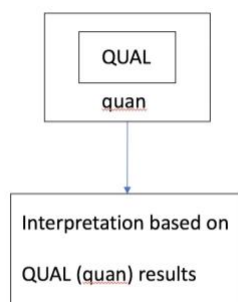
This study employed a mixed-methods design, which is defined as 'the type of research in which a researcher or team of researchers combines elements of qualitative and quantitative research approaches for the broad purposes of breadth and depth of understanding and corroboration' (Johnson, Onwuegbuzie, & Turner, 2007, p. 123). Combining qualitative and quantitative methods provides the opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of a research problem than either approach on its own (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007, p. 33). It also enhances a research study, especially when direct quotations from participants are used to support and bring meaning to the descriptive statistics (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007).

My original intention for this study was to use an explanatory mixed-methods design comprising two phases (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998). The rationale for this approach was that the qualitative data collected in the second phase would help explain and elaborate on the quantitative results collected in the first phase (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007). I expected that the combined information from the quantitative and qualitative arms of my study would enable me to produce a more complete picture of the school choice phenomenon (Bryman, 2012; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007). Unfortunately, due to the poor survey response rate (14.3%), I obtained much less quantitative data than I required in my original design. I was thus obliged to reconsider the design and adopt an embedded design (Creswell, 2014, p. 574).

In an embedded mixed-methods design, quantitative and qualitative data can be collected simultaneously or sequentially, with one set of data acting in a supportive, secondary role to the other (Creswell, 2014; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007). In this study, the sequential approach was used and the qualitative data were collected after the quantitative data. The qualitative approach was the main method used in data collection, which means the quantitative component was nested within the design and played a smaller, secondary role (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

The sequential approach, which consisted of a two-phase study, provided a wealth of data, which were useful in answering the research questions on how parents choose secondary schools for their children. The survey data and interviews yielded results on factors influencing their school choice, the reality of choosing a secondary school and how they experienced the phenomenon of school choice.

Figure 3.1 presents the mixed-methods design used in this research.



**Figure 3.1: Embedded Mixed-Methods Design**

Two distinct phases were used in this mixed-methods study, and each required different data collection methods.

### **3.2.1 Phase 1 (Survey)**

In Phase 1, a survey questionnaire was deployed, and the results were used to direct the qualitative phase through the purposeful selection of participants. Percentages and frequencies were generated from the data to analyse the question responses, and some short responses from the survey were also included and collated in the analysis of the results.

### **3.2.2 Phase 2 (Interviews)**

In Phase 2, a basic qualitative study was employed and data were collected through one-on-one semi-structured interviews. This was the more significant phase of the research, as it explored participants' experiences and views in depth, resulting in a deeper and richer exploration of the phenomenon. Participants were selected from those who completed the survey and indicated their willingness to be interviewed.

## **3.3 Populations and Sample**

The study participants were parents of Year 6 students from selected government primary schools located in metropolitan Adelaide. The schools selected were restricted to this area to make the study manageable.

Schools were selected based on information on My School website. Schools with at least 20% of students from non-English-speaking backgrounds (NESB) were selected to ensure representation of a diversity of immigrant groups. Schools were also selected from different suburbs to ensure the sample would be diverse with respect to SES background based on the ICSEA indicated on My School. Schools offering Reception to Year 12 and the New Arrival Program were excluded from this study.

In the quantitative phase of this study, 16 schools in metropolitan Adelaide that met the above selection criteria were identified. At the start of Term 1 2017, I emailed the principals of all 16 schools an email invitation for parents of the school's students to participate in this study. The email included a letter of introduction from my supervisor and a request for me to meet with the principal (if they wished) to explain my research project. I then went personally to each school and delivered a hard copy of the same letter of introduction to the principals. Not many schools responded, even though I followed up with many emails and phone calls after my first visit to the schools. Of the 16 schools I approached, nine responded to the invitation to participate in the research project, three declined and four schools did not respond. By the middle of Term 2, the principals of nine schools had confirmed their participation and signed a consent form. A total of 390 survey packs were distributed to parents of Year 6 students via the schools. Only 56 parents responded to the survey questionnaire (14.3% of the sample size). These parents were mostly from schools with a high ICSEA index. Table 3.1 details the sample in this quantitative phase of the study.



**Table 3.1: List of Participating Schools**

<b>Schools</b>	<b>ICSEA</b>	<b>Number of Year 6 students</b>	<b>Achieved sample</b>	<b>Response rate (%)</b>
School A	1,111	98	17	17.3%
School B	951	78	7	8.9%
School C	1,086	46	8	17.4%
School D	946	20	1	5%
School E	1,037	57	6	10.5%
School F	1,021	31	7	22.5%
School G	984	23	2	8.69%
School H	997	14	1	7.1%
School I	928	23	1	4.3%
<b>Total</b>		<b>390</b>	<b>56</b>	<b>14.3%</b>

In the qualitative phase, I selected participants based on those who had completed the questionnaire and indicated their willingness to be interviewed: 31 of these parents indicated such willingness. I purposefully recruited the participants using a maximal variation sampling technique (Creswell, 2014, p. 227). Using this technique meant that multiple perspectives on the issue of school choice and the factors influencing parents' choices would be presented (Creswell, 2014). I employed this technique because I needed participants from diverse demographic backgrounds. I identified the possible participants and invited a total of eight to participate in this phase. The selection was based on characteristics such as gender and cultural, educational and career background. Table 3.2 displays the key characteristics of these participants.

**Table 3.2: Selected Individual Characteristics**

<b>Name (pseudonym)</b>	<b>Country of birth</b>	<b>Cultural background</b>	<b>Own schooling sector</b>	<b>Occupation</b>
Godfrey	Malaysia	Asian	Catholic	IT professional
Kelly	Australia	Anglo-Australian	Catholic	Health professional
Krystal	Australia	Anglo-Australian	Public	Clerical
Catherine	Australia	Anglo-Australian	Public	Clerical
Alice	Malaysia	Asian	Public	Administrator
Vivian	Italy	Italian	Public	Homemaker
Bernie	Australia	Anglo-Australian	Public	Administrator
Connie	UK	Anglo-Australian	Private	Homemaker

### **3.4 Data Collection Tools**

#### **3.4.1 Phase 1 (Survey)**

In Phase 1, which was the quantitative phase, the data were collected using a survey questionnaire. This tool was chosen as the most appropriate for data collection as it could be sent home to the parents of Year 6 students via their schools. This was an economical and convenient way to distribute the survey package among the parents (Creswell, 2014). I administered the survey questionnaire in the hope of gathering information from families with children at different schools on the issue of school choice. I adapted my questionnaire from Campbell's Survey of Parents 2006 'Questionnaire for parents or primary caregivers of Year 7 students: The Australian middle class and school choice', which I modified slightly to suit my research context. Campbell granted me permission to use the questionnaire, which is a survey for parents and caregivers who have gone through the process of choosing a secondary school for their children who have just commenced secondary school in Sydney. In NSW, students enter government secondary school in Year 7; in SA, students enter government secondary school in Year 8. In my study, the survey questionnaire was targeted at parents of Year 6 students in government

primary schools who were actively engaged in choosing a secondary school for their children.

Considering the gaps in the research regarding parental aspiration and school choice anxiety, I developed additional questions pertaining to parents' aspirations for their children's educational and career achievements. In addition, I devised questions to measure the extent of the influence of parental concern or anxiety had on school choice. The survey questions are attached in Appendix 2.

The survey questionnaire was divided into four sections. The first focused on family background, including parents' country of birth, cultural group, language spoken, and educational and career background. The second focused on parents' aspirations for their child and the third on school choice; the final section featured additional questions about family. At the end of the questionnaire was an invitation for participants to take part in a one-on-one interview that would not take more than an hour of their time. The interested participants were asked to indicate their willingness to participate by providing their phone number and email address. The participants were thanked for completing the survey.

**Table 3.3: Overview of Survey**

<b>Survey section</b>	<b>Question number</b>	<b>Comments</b>
Family Background	1-7	Provided a demographic platform for the analysis of specific questions that followed in the survey.
Aspiration	8-10	Focused on parental aspiration with regard to their children's highest level of educational achievement and the kind of job they would expect from their children.
School choice	11-15	Focused on school choice with regard to the reasons for school choice and the extent of parents' concern about school choice.
	11	Asked the parents to rank the top five reasons (from 1-5, with 1 the most important) for school choice in relation to the 18 factors derived from Campbell's Survey of Parents 2006 (Campbell et al., 2009). Participants could add their own short answer if one of their reasons was not listed.
Family	16-17	Asked further information about family. Question 18 was about students' voice in this secondary school choice decision.

### **3.4.2 Phase 2 (Interview)**

Using interviews was appropriate for Phase 2, as I needed to discover more about the parents' experiences in choosing secondary schools. I chose one-on-one semi-structured interviews to enable participants to share openly. Participants' openness may have been compromised if the interviews were conducted in a group setting (Creswell, 2014). A semi-structured process is flexible, and the emphasis is on how the interviewee understands the issues and events being discussed (Bryman, 2012); it offers them the scope to pursue topics of particular interest to them. In the semi-structured interviews, I had a list of questions or fairly specific topics that were designed to elicit the interviewees' ideas and opinions on the topic of interest. I prepared and used the questions as a guide to obtain in-depth information from the interviewees regarding their personal experiences in choosing a secondary school for their children. Open-ended questions gave the interviewees the flexibility to go into detail when necessary. I used probes to encourage participants to clarify what they were saying and elaborate on their ideas (Creswell, 2014).

Prior to conducting the interviews, I piloted the questions with the mother of a Year 6 student whom I knew. Her child was not connected to any of the participating schools in this research. After this pilot interview, one question was deemed vague, and I rephrased it to ensure clarity. Based on this pilot interview, I developed the interview protocol, which included information about the interview, a project description, an explanation of the consent form and the purpose of the study, and a list of expected outcomes. The interview protocol or script is attached in Appendix 3.

### **3.5 Data Collection Procedure**

#### **3.5.1 Quantitative Data Collection**

The quantitative data were collected between Term 2 and Term 3 in 2017. I distributed the survey questionnaires after the school principals had signed the consent form for participation in the study. The schools that responded were given the survey package, which comprised a large envelope containing a letter of introduction and an information sheet, a copy of the survey questionnaire and a reply-paid envelope. The survey packages were hand-delivered to the office administrator in each school in sufficient quantities to ensure that there would be one package for each Year 6 student, and these packages were distributed to all Year 6 students in the same manner, as school notices are sent home to parents. Students took the survey packages home to their parents to complete and the completed surveys were sent to me via a reply-paid envelope. The quantitative data were entered into SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Science) (Version 25) for analysis.

#### **3.5.2 Qualitative Data Collection**

The qualitative data were collected in Term 4 2017. Once the eight participants were identified, they were invited via email to take part in the interview process. The participants were invited to nominate their preferred interview time and venue. Five chose to be interviewed at a

café and three chose to be interviewed at a public library. At start of each interview, I introduced the research purpose and gave information about the ethical issues of the study. I asked participants to sign a consent form when they arrived, the 'Consent form for participation in research by interview', as approved by the Social and Behavioural Research Ethics Committee (SBREC) at Flinders University (see Appendix 3). I informed participants that I would digitally record the interview and take notes. To make them feel comfortable, I spent time on introductions and informal chatting to establish rapport and put the interviewees at ease (Creswell, 2014, p. 247). During the interview, participants could ask me to terminate the interview at any point.

I kept a log that detailed the time and date of each interview. The interview sessions went for approximately 40 to 60 minutes each to enable me to gain extensive detail regarding interviewees' experiences of secondary school choice. I stayed within the 60-minute limit because I had told interviewees to allocate an hour of their time to participating in the interview. I stored the digital recordings of the interviews on my password-protected personal computer and Flinders University One Drive. I transcribed the interviews manually and sent the transcripts to the interviewees to review before I analysed them. The interviewees were free to correct the interview transcripts and comment on what they had said. Only one transcript came back with corrections (of grammatical errors).

## **3.6 Data Analysis**

### **3.6.1 Phase 1 (Survey)**

I received a total of 56 completed surveys across all school groups, representing an overall response rate of 14.3%. Data from the questionnaire were inputted into SPSS and a codebook was established to assist in analysing each item. The statistical analysis employed here was

largely exploratory, confined to descriptive statistics that were used to reveal any patterns that may have pointed to the possibility of group differences and trends (Creswell, 2014, p. 203). The data were used to generate frequencies and cross-tabulations that would better address the research questions. The short-response answers in Question 11 were collated and yielded further information about other reasons for school choice. Since this research design involved a qualitative study, it was important to ensure that connections were made across the various data sources, specifically in relation to how they contributed to addressing the research questions.

### **3.6.2 Phase 2 (Interview)**

Analysing qualitative data involves understanding them in a detailed way (Creswell, 2008). Once I had transcribed the interviews, I read through them several times to immerse myself in the details and make sense of them. During the reading process, I wrote down short phrases, ideas, concepts or hunches that occurred to me (Creswell, 2014, p. 267). Due to the small number of participants, I decided to analyse the data by hand using colour coding to mark parts of the text and divide it into sections (Creswell, 2014, p. 264).

### **3.6.3 Coding**

Coding is a process of organising data by dividing the text, labelling it with codes, examining them for overlap or redundancy and then collapsing them into broad themes (Creswell, 2014, p. 267). After reading through the transcripts several times, I began to highlight them and make notes. I then began the process of coding by identifying text segments, placing brackets around them and then assigning a code word or phrase that described the text segment. After coding the entire text, I made a list of all code words and groups of similar codes and identified redundant codes (Creswell, 2014, p. 268). Then I conducted a further inductive step

of aggregating the codes from all the transcripts into categories. I reduced the categories to three themes.

### **3.7 Integrating Quantitative and Qualitative Findings**

Since a mixed-methods design was used in this study, the results from the quantitative and qualitative findings were combined. This integration of the data was intended to glean a more complete understanding of the relationship between parents from different family backgrounds and the school choice factors identified in the quantitative phase. The findings from the survey and interviews were integrated using a statistics-by-themes joint display. According to Fetters, Curry and Creswell (2013), a joint display is a way to 'integrate the data by bringing the data together through a visual means to draw out new insights beyond the information gained from the separate quantitative and qualitative results'. Using this joint-display technique enhanced the interpretation of the integrated quantitative and qualitative data (Guetterman, Fetters, & Creswell, 2015).

### **3.8 Research Rigour**

Rigour in qualitative and quantitative methods is assessed in different ways, and establishing rigour in mixed-methods research is complex. In quantitative research, approaches to rigour include the reliability and validity of data, replicability and generalisability (Brown, Elliott, Leatherdale, & Robertson-Wilson, 2015). Assessing rigour in qualitative research depends on the four criteria proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985): credibility, dependability, confirmability and transferability (Houghton, Casey, Shaw, & Murphy, 2013).

#### **3.8.1 Reliability and Validity of the Quantitative Data**

The questionnaire was derived from Campbell's Survey of Parents 2006 (Campbell et al., 2009), which had been validated previously. The reliability of the two additional questions (14 and 15) was measured using



reliability analysis, Cronbach's alpha and inter-item correlation (Field, 2009, p. 677). Cronbach's alpha was 0.763 for eight items; a value of 0.7 and above is considered acceptable. Reliability is measured using and Cronbach's alpha, and values  $> 0.7$  are regarded as indicating adequate reliability (Field, 2009).

### **3.8.2 Rigour of the Qualitative Data**

The rigours of the qualitative data were measured by determining the rigour of the study using the four suggested measures: credibility, dependability, confirmability and transferability (Houghton et al., 2013). Credibility measures the integrity of the findings, and member checking was employed here (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I sent the interviewees their transcripts so that they could check them for accuracy and ensure they were true representations of what was said. There was no feedback except for one interviewee making some grammatical corrections.

The credibility of this research was enhanced by triangulation, where data from different sources increase confidence in the findings (Creswell, 2007; Houghton et al., 2013). In this study, the data gathered from the quantitative and qualitative provided a more complete and in-depth picture of the phenomenon of school choice.

An audit trail was established to assess the study trustworthiness by examining the methods used, decisions made and activities undertaken throughout the research process (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Houghton et al., 2013). Following the initial coding of several transcripts, a codebook was generated. I undertook the coding, and selected transcripts were independently coded by my two supervisors using the codebook (Creswell, 2007, p. 210).

Rich description is used to determine transferability in research rigour: 'The purpose of a thick description is that it creates verisimilitude, statements that produce for the readers the feeling that they have

experienced or could experience the events being described in a study' (Creswell & Miller, 2000, p. 128). Rich description in this research was established through detailed descriptions and appropriate narratives provided in the thesis chapter, where details such as participants' words and direct quotations were used (Creswell & Miller, 2000, p. 128; Houghton et al., 2013). This also enables readers to determine the likely transferability of the findings to other settings or similar contexts (Creswell & Miller, 2000).

### **3.9 Ethical Issues**

Creswell (2008) describes ethical concerns that can arise during research, and I adhered to all the ethical practices outlined in the literature and required by the university. I ensured participants' anonymity and kept their identities confidential. I also kept the data confidential and did not share them with anyone outside this project (Creswell, 2008, p. 238).

Since this study involved human subjects via their participation in the survey and interviews, I sought ethics approval from the Flinders University SBREC and the Department for Education and Child Development (DECD). SBREC granted approval to conduct the study (Project 7070) on 17 November 2015, and DECD granted ethics approval on 21 December 2016. Craig Campbell granted me permission to use the survey questionnaire on 23 October 2014. I gave all participants full information about the research project, and they signed consent forms.

I have ensured that the study data will be held in secure storage in the College of Education, Psychology and Social Work, Flinders University, for seven years.

### **3.10 Limitations**

As the research was performed in Adelaide metropolitan public primary schools, the findings were limited. Of the 390 survey questionnaires sent

out through nine schools, a return rate of 56 was just too small to validate the findings. I did not anticipate such an outcome at the beginning of the research. For future research, the survey questionnaire could be distributed to all public primary schools in a state rather than being restricted to only schools with 20% or more of students from NESB backgrounds. The interviews with the eight participants cannot be generalised, but are meaningful in their own right.

### **3.11 Chapter Summary**

This chapter has outlined the theoretical underpinning of the research methodology, the research questions and the research design. It has also detailed the data collection and analysis process and the steps taken to ensure the study's rigour.

The following chapter presents the study's findings and outlines the factors that influenced the school choice experiences of the study participants.

## **Chapter 4: Results of Study**

This chapter presents the results from the data collection, which used survey and interviews (as discussed in Chapter 3), and the findings that emerged from the analyses of these data. As discussed in this section, the findings from Phase 1 of the data-gathering process were used to inform the selection of participants for the interviews in Phase 2 and to support the findings from the interviews. This chapter then presents the findings from the parent interviews, while the rest of the chapter draws on and integrates both the quantitative (survey) and qualitative (interview) findings.

### **4.1 Findings from the Survey Responses**

This section presents the findings from the quantitative phase of this study. First, it presents the findings regarding the respondents' demographic backgrounds. Second, it discusses the findings regarding the parents' aspirations for their children's education. Third, this chapter presents the findings on the school characteristics that influenced the parents' choice of schools. Fourth, this chapter presents evidence about the relationship between the parents' own schooling and their reasons for school choice. Finally, the chapter explores the relationship between the parents' past school attended and the type of school selected.

The survey was distributed to nine public primary schools, and had a response rate of 14% (n = 56). The parents were invited to complete this survey via the survey questionnaire that was sent through the participating schools. Although the survey response rate was lower than expected, the results could be used as an important adjunct to further interrogate the interview data.

### 4.1.1 Respondents' Demographic Background

Table 4.1 displays the key features for the respondents in the study, including their cultural background, education level, occupation and type of school attended.

**Table 4.1: Respondents' Demographics**

<b>Variables</b>	<b>Dimension</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>%</b>
Respondents (Carer 1)	Mother of the child	45	80.4
	Father of the child	8	14.3
	Others	3	5.4
Cultural background	Anglo-Australian	33	61.1
	Southern European	6	11.1
	Asian	12	22.2
	Others	5	5.6
Highest level of education	High school	14	25.0
	Trade certificate	10	17.9
	Diploma	6	10.7
	Bachelor degree or higher	24	42.9
	Missing	2	3.6
Occupation	Home duties	10	19.2
	Manager	6	11.5
	Professional	10	19.2
	Associate professional	12	23.1
	Clerical, sales	6	11.5
	Trades and production	4	7.7
	Missing	4	7.7
Type of school attended	Government	37	66.1
	Catholic	5	8.9
	Other non-government	8	14.3
	Missing	6	10.7
<b>Total</b>		<b>56</b>	<b>100%</b>

Of the 56 respondents who participated, 80% indicated that they were mothers. The parents were also asked about their cultural background and the culture with which they identified. According to Table 4.1, the

majority of respondents (61%) had an Anglo-Australian background, followed by the second-highest group (22%) who had an Asian cultural background. The term 'Asian' encompasses very diverse groups, both at a national level (e.g. India, Singapore, the Philippines and Malaysia) and distinct groups within those countries (e.g., Malaysian includes ethnic Malay, Indian and Chinese groups). In each of these ethnic groups, there is likely to be considerable variation in parents' aspirations for their children. In this study, because of the limited numbers of respondents and the desire to maintain respondents' anonymity, all Asian background groups were aggregated. There were a significant proportion of participants from different cultural backgrounds, which could be a result of the migration characteristics of the families.

Table 4.1 indicates that most respondents had completed high school or higher, with 43% reporting completing a university degree. The table also reports that almost 31% of participants nominated occupations in the category of manager or professional, which required a university degree. However, a high proportion of the respondents also worked in the category of sub-professionals, which suggests that they held a sub-university qualification (high school, vocational or diploma qualification). Nineteen per cent of the participants nominated the 'home duties' category as their occupation; however, this does not imply that they were uneducated.

Although there was no measure of income level, these parents were well educated and hold a job in the professional or sub-professional categories. Approximately 66% of the respondents indicated that they had completed their secondary schooling at a government school.

#### **4.1.2 Parental Aspiration**

Table 4.2 presents the parents' level of education and educational aspirations for their children.

**Table 4.2: Parents’ Highest Education Level and Aspirations for Their Child**

		Parents’ highest education level				Total
		High school	Trade certificate	Diploma	University	
<b>Parents’ aspirations for their child</b>	Year 12	2	0	0	0	2
	Trade certificate	1	2	0	1	4
	Diploma	1	2	3	0	6
	University	10	8	2	20	40
<b>Total</b>		14	12	5	21	

The findings from the survey indicated that the parents’ level of education had a significant influence on their aspirations for their child. Table 2 clearly indicates that 77% (n = 40) of the parents indicated that they aspired for their children to complete university education. Of those 40 parents, half of them (50%) held university qualifications, while the rest had no degree. This result indicates that 95% of parents with university qualifications aspired for their children to complete a university degree.

However, of the 12 parents who aspired to less-than-university qualifications for their children, 11 had less-than-university education. Thus, there was an association between parental education and educational aspirations for their children. Conversely, of the 21 parents with a degree, only one wanted their child to attain less than a university qualification—a trade certificate. This finding reiterates that parents with higher levels of education have higher aspirations than do those with less than a university education. This finding raises questions about differences in school choice based on parental background: How does parents from different social and cultural background differ in their school choice? Do parents with higher education levels have different aspirations for and expectations of their children? It would be interesting to determine how parents’ different cultural backgrounds and levels of

education influence them in their secondary school choice for their children.

#### **4.1.3 School Characteristics**

The parents were provided a list of 18 reasons for selecting secondary schools and asked to list five main reasons by rating their level of importance from 1 to 5, with 1 being extremely important. The reasons were clustered into groups and categorised under four main categories of quality, convenience, type and cost.

Table 4.3 presents the five main reasons stated by respondents, alongside their degree of importance. The overall importance score was calculated for each reason by multiplying the number of responses in the categories of 'extremely important' to 'low importance' by 4, 3, 2, 1 and 0. A score of 0 indicated the least important reason. The overall importance score is shown in the final column in the table and the greater the value of the overall score, the higher the level of importance.



**Table 4.3: Relative Importance of School Characteristics as Rated By Parents**

Category	Reason	Importance					Overall Score
		Extremely	Very	Important	Moderate	Low	
Quality	Academic quality	11	8	6	5	0	85
	School reputation	13	3	4	8	3	77
	Teaching/teacher quality	8	10	4	6	2	76
	Values/school ethos	4	5	3	5	5	42
	All-round quality	8	5	1	4	5	53
	Extracurricular	0	0	2	1	4	5
	Facilities	1	3	7	5	1	32
Convenience	Proximity	4	10	4	6	5	60
	Siblings attend	0	1	6	1	2	16
Type	Single-sex school	0	0	0	0	1	0
	Public school	4	4	1	3	3	33
	Private school	1	0	0	0	1	4
	Specialist school	2	1	1	1	4	14
Cost	Low fees	0	2	5	0	5	16
Other	Discipline	0	0	5	3	2	13
	Welfare/support/care	0	1	1	2	4	7
	Family tradition	0	0	1	0	1	2
	Curriculum choice	0	0	3	4	6	10

Of the five main reasons provided, four related to the 'quality' category. The overall importance score indicated that academic quality was the most important, followed by school reputation and teaching/teacher quality. All-round quality was the least important among the five main reasons. Proximity, which fell under the 'convenience' category, was found to be one of the five main reasons. Single-sex school scored the lowest and was not a concern to the parents in their school choice. Hence,

these results indicated that the parents strongly considered school quality, followed by convenience.

#### **4.1.4 Parents' Schooling and Reasons for Secondary School Choice**

The findings on the relationship between parents' school attended and reasons for choosing secondary schools aligned with how the parents rated the level of importance of the school characteristics. Table 4.4 presents the reasons for school choice provided by the parents, based on attendance at three different types of school.

**Table 4.4: Type of High School Attended by Parent and Reasons for Choosing Their Child’s Secondary School**

		<b>School parent attended*</b>	<b>Government</b>	<b>Catholic</b>	<b>Independent</b>
		<b>N</b>	<b>37</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Category</b>	<b>Reason</b>				
Quality	School reputation	15	5	2	
	Academic quality	15	4	4	
	All-round quality	13	3	3	
	Values/school ethos	8	4	4	
	Teaching/teacher quality	12	3	6	
	Extracurricular	3	0	2	
	Facilities	6	4	2	
Convenience	Proximity	19	3	1	
	Siblings attend	10	0	0	
Type	Single-sex school	0	0	1	
	Public school	13	0	0	
	Private school	0	1	0	
	Specialist school	8	0	0	
Cost	Low fees	9	1	1	
Other	Discipline	5	2	1	
	Welfare/support/care	2	1	0	
	Family tradition	0	0	1	
	Curriculum choice	4	2	2	
<b>Total number of important reasons</b>		<b>142</b>	<b>33</b>	<b>30</b>	

One of the most striking features of the ranking in Table 4.4 is that, across the four main categories, there was a high degree of agreement between all parents, irrespective of their own schooling. For all groups, the category of quality was significant when evaluating schools. Selection based on ‘single sex’ and ‘family tradition’ was the least important for all groups, with the exception of one parent from an independent school. However, for parents who attended government schools, convenience was an important factor, yet this was not significant for parents who attended independent schools. Although there were differences between the

parents who attended government and independent schools, statistical significance was not tested, as the numbers were too small.

#### 4.1.5 Parents’ Schooling and Type of School Selected

Table 4.5 indicates the parents’ past school attended and the type of secondary school they selected for their children.

**Table 4.5: Type of School that Parent Attended Versus Type of Secondary School Selected (Percentage)**

		School that parent attended (%)		
		Government	Catholic	Independent
<b>Secondary school selected</b>	Government	59.5	40	25
	Catholic	10.8	40	12.5
	Independent	5.4	0	50
	Have not selected	24.3	20	12.5
<b>Total</b>		<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>

The data indicated that around 59.5% of the parents who attended government schools indicated that they had selected government schools for their child. Conversely, 50% of parents who attended independent schools selected an independent secondary school for their child. This indicates that the school that the parent attended had a significant effect on their choice of school.

Although the survey questions identified the main reasons for selecting schools, the interview questions were used to gather further information about how different families approached their school choice, and sought to identify the factors that influenced their choice. It appeared from the survey data that the parents were motivated in their school choice by their high educational aspirations for their children.

## **4.2 Findings from Parents' Interviews**

This section provides a summary of the data on the processes and experiences of eight participants' exploration of secondary school options for their children, who were currently enrolled in Year 6 public primary schools in metropolitan Adelaide. This research was designed to provide an understanding of the factors that influenced these parents' secondary school choice and the parents' experiences of the choice process. According to Merriam & Tisdell (2015), qualitative data analysis often produces themes or recurring statements from the participants, and these themes can be categorised. This qualitative analysis presents the findings and analysis, alongside the resulting themes. The qualitative findings are considered the most significant part of this study and provide a rich answer to the research questions.

During the qualitative phase, eight interviewees participated in one-on-one semi-structured interviews. The process of determining the interviewees was discussed in Chapter 3. While the qualitative results are considered the most significant part of the study, the quantitative results provide a valuable dimension to what the qualitative results reveal. The data were manually coded, which involved rereading the transcripts several times to capture the most significant ideas. Keywords were identified and colour coded (Creswell, 2014). The code words were then listed and similar codes were grouped into categories. The categories were then formed into themes. The three themes that evolved from this data analysis were:

1. perceptions of school quality
2. parents' choice experience
3. constraints in school choice.

### 4.2.1 Parents' Profile

Eight participants responded to the invitation in the survey (see Chapter 3) to participate in the follow-up interview. Of the eight participants, seven were mothers and one was a father. Table 4.6 presents the participants' background information. Pseudonyms are used to refer to the participants.

**Table 4.6: Selected Individual Characteristics**

<b>Name (pseudonym)</b>	<b>Country of birth</b>	<b>Cultural background</b>	<b>Own schooling sector</b>	<b>Highest education level</b>	<b>Occupation</b>
Godfrey	Malaysia	Asian	Catholic	University	ICT professional
Kelly	Australia	Anglo-Australian	Catholic	University	Health professional
Krystal	Australia	Anglo-Australian	Public	High school	Clerical
Catherine	Australia	Anglo-Australian	Public	Trade certificate	Clerical
Alice	Malaysia	Asian	Public	University	Administrator
Vivian	Italy	Italian	Public	High school	Homemaker
Bernie	Australia	Anglo-Australian	Public	Diploma	Administrator
Connie	UK	Anglo-Australian	Private	University	Homemaker

Of the seven mothers, four were born in Australia and three were born overseas. The only male respondent was born overseas. Of the eight participants, four had a migrant background, of whom three had migrated to Australia with a skilled migrant visa. These three participants had completed university degrees in their home country. All participants had completed their high school education to Year 12. Five had attended public schools, two had attended Catholic schools and one had attended a private school in the UK. Two of the parents worked as professionals, while four were sub-professionals whose jobs required either a university degree or sub-university qualification.

The parents were asked about the factors that influenced their school choice and how this choice was made. A major theme that emerged from the data based on school context was parental 'perception of school quality'. This theme was further categorised into four subthemes that reflected what parents sought in a school: school reputation, academic characteristics, and school learning environment and school location.

### **4.3 Theme 1: Perception of School Quality**

The participants expressed that school quality was one of the most significant factors influencing their school choice. They explained how school reputation, academic characteristics, school learning environment and location influenced their choice.

#### **4.3.1 School Reputation**

School reputation is the school's overall quality or character judged by firsthand stakeholders: students and parents. It comprises these stakeholders' opinions and attitudes towards the school. Some common elements of school reputation are academic success, physical conditions, teachers' profiles, students' and their parents' backgrounds, school history, location, governing body, culture and type (Sagir et al., 2014).

Seven of the eight participants placed a high level of importance on reputation, as this attribute played a significant role in their decision-making. This was exemplified by the following statements:

They have got a good reputation because I think the school is doing pretty well. I hope that she'll be happy there. (Kelly)

But then, once again, we sent him there, which was from reputation as well. (Catherine)

The reputation of the school. Not so much facilities because I think most schools are on par with facilities. It's probably the reputation. (Bernie)

The above parents did not elaborate on which component of reputation they were discussing; however, the comments from Alice regarding school reputation strongly related to the element of academic success, as highlighted below:

And I don't know whether you are aware in your findings—there is lots of difference between the public schools in the western and eastern side of the city. Schools like High School 2 and High School 1, they are receiving the cream of the crop from every other suburb because of their reputation and standard. (Alice)

Alice's comment signalled that she was aware of a disparity between the public schools in her (western) suburb and the schools in the eastern suburbs (See Appendix 5). She affirmed that schools in the eastern suburbs with good reputations were in high demand, and that the two public high schools that she mentioned were recruiting students with excellent academic performance from outside the school zones via their selection process. Her comments indicated that school reputation strongly influenced her perception of school quality. Although school reputation, both good and bad, can be biased because of inaccurate information, it was still viewed by the parents in this study as one of the most important factors influencing their school choice.

### **4.3.2 Academic Characteristics**

Academic characteristics were the highest priority for parents in attempting to identify 'quality' schools for their children. In this study, the parents identified the academic characteristics of schools on the following two dimensions: (i) curriculum and programs and (ii) perceived academic quality.

#### *|Curriculum and Programs*

In the interviews, the participants often referred to the curriculum and programs offered at schools as subject matters, vocational pathways,



specialised courses and programs. It was noted that most of the parents emphasised the academic curriculum offered at the various public schools. In South Australia, the Australian Curriculum (ACARA, 2020) is taught in government schools from Reception to Year 10, while students in Years 10 to 12 study for the SACE or IB Diploma. The examples below illustrate how the participants selected schools based on the curriculum and programs offered.

Alice, who arrived in Adelaide 10 years ago, had two boys who were attending public schools in the western suburbs. She believed in sending her children to government high schools and was committed to examining the curriculum and programs offered by the various government schools in Adelaide. She shared her experience:

I also look at the pathways that the schools have for when they finish. Like, in High School 1, they have an Ignite program—it's like a pathway in actually developing the child intellectually. If I look at High School 2, they have the language program—the child learns a language. If I choose High School 3, then my child would need to do music. So, those are the different diversities that the schools have. (Alice)

Alice indicated that she was examining the various programs offered by the schools. Her consideration of the specialist programs offered by schools that allowed students who lived outside the zone to enter those schools was motivated by her aspirations for her child: 'If I can get my son across to High School 1 or High School 2, I'll be really happy because I know that that would be an environment where he will thrive'.

In another interview, Kelly, who lived in the eastern suburbs and had good choices of reputable government schools near where she lived, expressed that she sought schools that offered special-interest programs that would suit her child's interests and strengths. Kelly sought schools with a strong music program that would suit both her daughters, who she considered 'fairly musical'. The special-interest music school only

accepted students who lived outside the designated zones via audition. However, when her eldest daughter failed to be selected, Kelly sought to justify why her daughter should be allowed into the school by 'putting in a fairly good letter [stating] why I thought it would be good for her to go to that school'. This strategy to justify why her daughter should be allowed into the school was like 'an application for a job'. In her opinion, her children should be given the opportunity to pursue their interest in the right milieu:

I guess you really need to think about how well the school is going to fit your child. So, if you have got special interest in a certain area, then I think it's important to give them those opportunities. Both children are fairly musical, so this has been a very good fit for Jaye and I think Ann will thrive in that environment too. (Kelly)

Some parents sought schools that offered other options, such as sports or vocational programs. Bernie, whose son loved sport, shared the same experience as Kelly and was seeking a school that offered a specialist sports program and VET courses, as this would provide her child with a pathway if he did not wish to pursue higher education. She hoped that her son would gain entry to the school by applying for the sports scholarship program, as they lived outside the school's zone:

We are choosing that because it is a sport-orientated school ... they run a lot of programs for kids. They work one day a week, do their school-based apprenticeship. What they offer to kids like Kay that aren't going to be doctors—they offer a lot to that kind of child and that would really suit Kay. (Bernie)

Both Bernie and Kelly were concerned about finding the school that best suited their child, and stressed that it was important for their child to be placed in an environment that would nurture and support them to pursue their interests, talents and passions.

Catherine added that ensuring that her child fit into the school was important; she would 'consider the child's strengths or weaknesses and whether the school fits them as well'. Her son Lam loved sports and was good at cricket. Initially, she thought of applying for entry into a reputable public high school (for which she was outside the zone) through the sports program. However, after much consideration of all other factors, she felt that the public school might not be a good fit for her son. Thus, she decided to send him to a Catholic school that provided students with multiple pathways to learning:

You want options and opportunities and balance and, you know, being able to get the academic education and, with what we've chosen, there's obviously that vocational stream on site as well, which is great ... so, then that gives him more options depending on which way he wants to go. (Catherine)

Catherine's decision to send her son to a Catholic school was based on the broad curriculum offerings that embraced vocational and academic courses. Her aversion to sending her child to a public school was explicitly grounded in her analysis of how the curriculum was delivered in the public school system. This could suggest that she believed that private schools would implement the curriculum more effectively:

The idea was that there's nothing wrong with the public education—it's all curriculum, and it's all got to be followed. I guess it's a matter of how well it's followed and that sort of thing. (Catherine)

Alice concurred with Catherine and was dissatisfied with how the curriculum was delivered in the state and country. In her opinion, although all schools followed the Australian Curriculum, she perceived differences in the academic performance of public schools in Adelaide suburbs and other states. This could imply that she believed that the location of schools could be a contributing factor to school quality, and

that schools in Adelaide vary in quality according to location and are inferior to interstate schools. For example, she stated:

There is no consistency in the system and the standard of the schools. I'm very disappointed about that. That's one of the things that I think the state government needs to improve on. Even the NAPLAN exams. Look at how the state performs against the rest of the nation. How can you say that we are all following the Australian Curriculum where there's vast discrepancy in the results? Why are the eastern states more successful and why is South Australia not performing? (Alice)

Alice was asked how she attained the information to form her opinion, and she responded that it was gained through word-of-mouth and research online. This indicates that she had either read media reports or examined comparative data on school and system performance on the Internet. Her statement indicates that, although she was informed about the NAPLAN results, she did not grasp the subtleties of the scores. This implies that, for parents to attain a better understanding of these results, they need to be better informed. Moreover, the available information should be contextualised and explained more carefully.

According to these parents, although all schools were responsible for delivering the Australian Curriculum, they were concerned about the effectiveness of the curriculum delivery between different schools. The parents strongly considered the curriculum and program provided by public and private schools when deciding where to send their child.

### *Perceived Academic Quality*

The parents considered perceived academic quality when selecting a school and believed that school academic quality played a key role in their children's academic achievement. For example, Alice, a working mother with an Indian Malaysian background who migrated to Australia, stated that it is imperative for schools to establish strong academic foundations to help students achieve academic success. She explained:

The main thing would be the academic excellence. People may fault me because I'm Asian, I'm very academic-orientated; however, I am not going to apologise for that. But how else are you going to produce quality students with a sound background with a strong foundation for them to be able to succeed? I think academic pathway generally is the way to go. (Alice)

Alice indicated that education is highly valued in her culture and was unapologetic in asserting her motivations and cultural heritage with regard to her views on academic quality. Despite having spent a relatively short time in Australia, Alice was motivated to choose a school that strongly emphasised academic performance. In her opinion, a school's ability to deliver good academic outcomes would benefit her son's academic achievement.

Similarly, Connie, who migrated from the UK, stressed the importance of academic quality: 'it's really important for them to go to somewhere really academic'. She expressed that her parents sent her to the best private music school in London and 'moved houses to be near good schools'. This experience would have influenced her perception of school quality. Another participant, Godfrey, worked as an IT manager and was an immigrant from Malaysia. He had a Chinese Malaysian background and attended a Catholic high school. He stated that it was important to provide his child with an 'all-rounded education' and provide him 'the best foundation' for his future academic achievement.

These three participants all migrated to Australia in recent years and shared similar expectations of the type of schooling they wished for their children. Their cultural background, migrant status and schooling experience in their home countries may have influenced their educational expectations of schools in Australia. It is unsurprising that most immigrants to Australia view education as greatly important in their strategy for success (Campbell et al., 2009) because they value the benefits that education had for them.

Catherine, an Anglo-Australian mother who chose a Catholic school, expressed that 'what we've chosen has got strong academic, but then it also got a vocational training on site'. She conceded that the school she selected had a strong academic focus, while the provision of vocational learning was an opportunity for her child to explore and identify his career options. Alice shared the concern in seeking a secondary school 'that has very good academic records'. She perceived that school academic performance was a good indicator of school quality. However, she was concerned with the academic quality in the public school system and recognised that the quality of public schools must be explored and 'there are so many issues surrounding these schools'.

During the interview, most parents highlighted academic quality as an important element in selecting a suitable school for their children. However, there was no evidence reported by parents on 'academic outcomes' based on Year 12 results and numbers of students who achieved university placement except for one parent who raised the issue of NAPLAN scores. Nevertheless, their general comments did reflect the importance of an academic orientation and their concern about the quality of education provided by the school. Based on the list of schools listed by the participants, I have tabulated the school achievement based on the Year 9 NAPLAN scores and SACE completion (See Appendix 5). It was also evident in the survey results (see Table 4. 3) that academic quality was the most important characteristic that parents considered when choosing schools.

### **4.3.3 School Learning Environment**

The parents recognised the importance of the school learning environment because it is linked to students' learning outcomes (Thapa, Cohen, Guffey, & Higgins-D'Alessandro, 2013). Students spend a significant amount of time at school, and the environment to which they are exposed can influence their achievements at school. The following

sections outline the elements of the school learning environment that the parents discussed.

### *Peer Influence*

Peer influence can be a powerful influence in the lives of children, affecting them in a variety of domains, including academic achievement (Thomson, 2018). The data indicated that seven participants regarded peer groups a powerful influence in the lives of their children and in their academic success. The parents recognised that it is important to choose a secondary school where peers play a prominent role in their children's lives.

Kelly recognised that it was important that her child was in an environment with peer groups that positively influenced her. She stated that peers who work hard and are committed to succeeding in school could influence others in their enthusiasm in learning:

The environment, I think that's really important—so peer group. I think we all know how much that can have an influence on your children. So, if you've got a whole lot of kids around them which are working really hard, achieving well, it's going to encourage your child to try and achieve well as well. (Kelly)

Connie agreed with Kelly about peers; however, she stressed that friendships made in high school 'can carry on for your whole life' and 'can have an influence on your children'. She was concerned about the families of the peers at her daughter's current school because she perceived that the families from the school in her area came from different socioeconomic backgrounds and had different values and priorities in life. She commented that 'parents input' at her daughter's current school 'is different to what it might be over at High School 3'. She was comparing the family backgrounds in two schools from different suburbs, and perceived that the attitudes and behaviours of peers would have an

influence on her daughter's attitude towards academic achievement. She provided an example:

Families of peers become very significant in what, how they're living their lives, what decisions they're making. An example at [her daughter's current school], it's not cool to be academic. Mary is not academic, but I think it's partly why she doesn't bother trying anymore because it's hard for the peers. I want her to be in a school where she can give it a go. (Connie)

This implies that Connie perceived that the cohort of students and their family backgrounds could influence her daughter's attitudes, values and behaviours. Her comments suggest that she wished her children to be associated with other students from similar advantaged backgrounds and be with peers with positive influence.

Similarly, Alice wished her son to be in an environment where he was intellectually challenged. She believed that, if a child is surrounded by 'a group of students who are intellectually being challenged', they are more likely to motivate and inspire each other to succeed. Krystal also stated: 'Depending who they mix with and how they dedicate themselves to their work, can just all go downhill'. This statement indicates that peer influence can be positive or negative, depending on the peer group, and negative peer pressure was viewed as detrimental to desirable learning environments.

Most parents believed that the peer groups and friendships formed in secondary school years were significant to their children's lives; thus, they sought school environments where their children were among peers who shared similar values, attitudes and behaviours.

### *Safe and Supportive*

Seven participants indicated that they wished their child to be placed in an environment where they would feel physically and emotionally safe,



happy and supported by the school community. Vivian stressed the issue of safety and explained how the school could be supportive in dealing with this issue and ensuring that the environment was safe for her child: 'Safety is first. Hoping that if any bullying appears then I'm told straight away and, if she falls behind, I expect them to help her' (Vivian). She stated that it is important for schools to support students when they encounter difficulty in learning. Connie concurred with Vivian that having 'supportive' teachers and staff at schools can help students enhance their self-esteem and confidence, as well as having teachers who 'challenge' students to attain personal goals. Connie was convinced that 'the academics will flow if they're in an environment where they feel safe and recognised', and stressed the importance of having a supportive community that supports child socio-emotional wellbeing. In her opinion, when a child is positively supported and cared for, independent of their ability level, this will influence the student's success at school.

The parents shared the view that a safe and supportive environment helps promote children's happiness. For example:

You don't want them to be in an environment where they are not happy and then they are not going to achieve. And if a child is struggling, they've got people that they can go to for help. (Kelly)

Hopefully then they see the child as an individual as well. Luke seems to enjoy the environment. (Bronwyn)

That he will be happy at school and enjoy school, definitely. Probably that's one of the main priorities—for him to be supported and clearly to learn. (Catherine)

From the views presented by the parents, it seems that the school environment is extremely important in supporting children's socio-emotional wellbeing. The support and care from staff play a significant role in students' success at school. The parents perceived that, when their

child felt safe, happy and supported in their learning, they would be more likely to participate and engage in learning.

#### **4.3.4 Location of School**

In this study, seven interviewees referenced proximity to home as a significant factor in their choice of school. For working parents, such as Krystal and her husband, choosing a school close to home was important, so that her children could 'find their own way there and home ... they can be trusted as well to catch public transport'. Similarly, Alice, who worked in the city, commented on the accessibility of 'one bus or two buses ... Kids would not have a challenge getting across'. While the proximity of school to home was helpful for working parents, Connie, a stay-at home mother with a two-year-old son, reinforced that proximity was convenient so that her daughter 'can cycle there'.

While the proximity of school to home is an important factor when choosing schools, school location also leads to another set of issues in the school choice debate. According to Campbell et al. (2009), location is not just about the convenience of children attending a school that is not too far from home, but parents also highlight the issue of the location of government high schools. In this study, the parents expressed their frustration at the location of reputable government high schools, and perceived differences in the quality of schools in different suburbs:

There is lots of difference between the public schools in the western and eastern side of the city. (Alice)

Disappointed that we live in the west. We used to live next door to High School 3 ... I don't think there's really any good option here. (Connie)

You look at the eastern suburbs and they have four or five good public schools—we don't. (Bernie)

The location of schools also raised concerns about the government school zoning system, which frustrated the parents because they were limited to selecting public schools based on their residential locations. This is discussed further in the section regarding constraints in school choice.

## **4.4 Theme 2: Parents' Choice Experience**

Parents shared their experiences in dealing with school choice and a variety of factors need to be recognised, explored and addressed. The process of choosing school and their access to information, the reasons that motivate them and their attitude in this school choice experience.

### **4.4.1 Process of School Choice**

The process of choosing a school for a child may be considered one of the most important decisions in a parent's life. Most participants indicated that they had not selected a secondary school when they sent their children to public primary schools, except for one. The parents reported that they started the process of choosing secondary schools when their children were in Year 6. However, after going through this experience, some participants felt that they should have sought a secondary school much earlier because of 'not having a lot of choice' and the difficulty in finding the school that 'is going to fit your child'.

The parents revealed that selecting a school was not easy and this process affected them emotionally. Five participants expressed negative emotions when choosing a school and used the words 'stressed', 'sleepless nights', 'worried', 'confused', 'anxiety', 'pressure' and 'upset'. This suggests that the parents were anxious when making their choice.

Alice, a migrant who identified as having an Asian cultural background, explained that the process was such 'a burden because I come from a culture where academic [success] is important for us'. She revealed that she was anxious because 'I don't know which school he's going to end up

in'. This implies that her cultural background, where education was highly valued (Aris, 2017) could have contributed to her concern on the outcome of the school choice process.

Similarly, four other mothers who identified themselves with the Anglo-Australian culture reported that school choice was a stressful experience because of the uncertainty about where their child would be placed. Kelly explained: 'the main stress was around not knowing where Jaye would be going. I had to wait for a while to know where she was going to be accepted'. Krystal was worried and stated: 'I've lost sleep over it. I would wake up at night. Where am I going to send them?' Bernie commented that she was 'stressed out when I think about it'. Catherine added that 'I've been quite stressed from time to time ... wanting to make sure I'm making the right decision for Lam'. The process was stressful because she wished to ensure that she found the 'right' school for her son.

The parents also revealed that they were concerned for their child's happiness. They wanted their child to be happy at school and believed that, if the child was happy, they would learn well, as described by Kelly: 'If they're not happy, they are not going to do well'. Bernie concurred with Kelly: 'That he will be happy at school and enjoy school, definitely. Probably that's one of the main priorities—for him to be supported and clearly to learn'.

The participants clearly signalled that the school choice process is stressful and had a negative emotional effect. They were concerned about whether they had made the best decision in choosing the appropriate school for their child, and felt uncertainty about where the child would be placed. These results imply that the parents were driven by their aspirations for their children during the school choice process.

#### **4.4.2 Sources of Information**

The participants shared how they gathered information about schools. They revealed that they used a range of sources when seeking background and contextual information about schools. They also discussed how information received by word-of-mouth from friends' recommendations of schools with good reputations influenced their choice. Five participants explained that talking to friends and other parents was the most important source of information that influenced them in their school choice. The information received by word-of-mouth from friends could be a powerful tool informing parents about the various schools, about which some parents had no prior knowledge. The parents tended to trust what their friends said about a particular school (especially regarding the attributes of different schools) and placed great value on friends' recommendations, as articulated by Vivian: 'I have heard from other friends and family friends that MHS is a really good school'.

Bernie shared that the information gleaned from friends was the most cogent source that influenced the choice of schools. The information from and experiences of friends could be used as a school shortlisting mechanism. Negative comments and experiences could serve as a warning about which schools to avoid. For example:

So, there is High School 9, which is our zoned high school. We probably haven't heard a lot of good things about it. The other schools are High School 5 and High School 6, which we just know, but we have definitely heard not good things. I talked to someone I knew and she said she has one child go to High School 7 and one child go to High School 8. And she said the one who went to High School 8 is the more grounded student, doing his work. She said her daughter is too busy going to parties every weekend. (Bernie)

However, for others, besides gathering information by word-of-mouth, they also undertook their own research online. This was exemplified by numerous statements from across the cohort, such as:

I mean, obviously amongst parents at schools, there is always talk, so you talk, you take on board the information. You might then have a bit of a look at things. I mean, the internet ... I've done a lot of internet research. (Catherine)

Well, I guess you get [a] lot from word-of-mouth, then a bit of research, websites and things like that. (Kelly)

When I first came here, it's actually when I talk to people and find out. Then the second thing, I just research them up in the website. (Alice)

Although the main source of information was word-of-mouth, online resources were another source used by parents. They conducted self-directed research by visiting school websites. The My School website provides information about every school in Australia and is accessible by the public, allowing parents to compare schools using the data provided. Reports by the media could also influence parents both positively and negatively, and could affect parents' choices.

School tours and open days were also found to be useful to some parents, as they were able to see the school grounds and gain firsthand information. Tours and open days also helped parents compare particular schools and school systems, and verify the information they had gathered from their social networks. During the school visits, the parents had the opportunity to see the school in action and talk to teachers, principals and students. The guided tour through the school gave them insight into how students engaged with the learning and their teachers:

Yes, yes, it was really good. I went to a couple. By going to those, obviously you're wowed by what they can do because they present really good things when you go there. But even just looking at the way the

kids conducted themselves when taking you around on the tours and presented themselves and that sort of things and their relationships with teachers. I mean, you get a bit of a feel from that. (Catherine)

Most parents relied on social networks to gather information about the various schools. The information by word-of-mouth from friends and other parents was found to be the most influential source in shaping parents' perceptions of schools, which was vital in their school choice.

#### **4.4.3 Parental Aspiration**

Parents revealed that they were motivated in their school choice by their aspirations for their child.

Parental aspiration can be described as the desire to identify and set goals for one's child's future. It is assumed that parental aspiration is motivated by the parents' high educational and occupational aspirations for their children (Gutman & Akerman, 2008). The eight participants involved in this study's interviews were educated parents, most of whom worked in professional or semi-professional occupations. They regarded the role of education as very important in preparing their children's future. They sought to choose the best school for their child, as they deemed this important in increasing the probability of their child obtaining a good result that would enable them to enter university. This suggests that school choice could be driven by parental aspiration for their children's academic and career success.

However, the parents' plans or goals for their children's future could differ. For some parents, the focus was on educational qualification. Kelly expressed that she wished her daughter to 'do well, achieve good results ... finish high school and on to uni'. Krystal stated: 'it's a big five years. There's that pressure there to get them to Year 12, get a good education'. In this case, the parents expressed their desire to see their child complete Year 12 and move onto university. Some participants not only aspired to

see their children complete Year 12, but also held aspiration for their children's future, as reported by Catherine:

I'd like him to go to uni just because, in this day and age, I think you nearly have to, to give yourself a chance, or not cut yourself out of a potential career perhaps.

It is assumed that the parents were concerned about their children's future. They were concerned about whether the schools could provide a quality education to help their children achieve their academic potential. From these interviews, it is clear that these educated parents had high aspirations for their children not only in academic achievement, but also in their future careers.

#### **4.4.4 Past Educational Experience**

The parents in this study contended that their past educational experience influenced them in selecting a school for their children. Most participants revealed that they attended government secondary schools either in Australia or overseas.

Catherine, who grew up in the country, mid-north of South Australia, attended the local primary school with her sister, and completed her secondary school education in another town. There was no choice for them, and they attended the school where the bus took them. Her husband was from rural NSW and attended the public high school as well. She was satisfied with her own secondary schooling and, in the past, it was the common practice for everyone to attend the school where one was sent:

From the public school system, in the country though, where, you know, you didn't have any choice as such ... That was just an automatic thing that you went to that high school [because] the bus went there.  
(Catherine)



However, Catherine believed that the current schooling situation was different, and some public secondary schools were not 'in her equation', as there were differences among the schools. Although she and her husband did consider sending their children to public secondary schools, the schools that they considered were outside their zone, and this prompted her to consider the private school system:

We did think about public, but anything we went for would've been out of the zone. And, I guess, the public high school that we're zoned for, that didn't come into my equation, unfortunately. I have started hearing some things that weren't quite so great. He's not going there, so then it meant looking elsewhere. Then it was a matter of, okay, then we better consider private. But, you know, my husband and I went to public schools—we turned out alright. (Catherine)

Bernie, who grew up on a rural farm, had a similar educational experience to Catherine. She attended the only local school (government) that catered to students from Reception to Year 12, and had a good schooling experience there. She later moved to Adelaide and completed a course at TAFE. She did not notice any difference in schools because it was common for children to attend the local school, and there were usually no other choices available, unlike in Adelaide city:

So, you know, that was the typical experience that most kids have. But it was good. I don't know any difference, but that was fine. We probably didn't have the opportunities people have over here to do different things—it was very standard. No nothing. No choice. (Bernie)

Both mothers lived in the country and, during their childhood, it was uncommon for parents to choose schools and normal for students to move into the local secondary school to complete their schooling. In their opinion, there was no difference in the quality of the government schools they attended.

According to Krystal, who grew up in Adelaide, although public and private schools were available, she was happy attending the local public high school, as this was common for the local primary school children. However, she discussed the contemporary changing demand on children, compared with her schooling experience, because of parents' expectations. She raised concerns about the wellbeing of students in the current school system, as they are constantly under pressure to perform well in Year 12 as the path to university entrance, and then to attain a job:

You know, I reflect back on my high school days and I've got fond memories. I had some good teachers, some not so good. But I had a nice group of friends. But, in those days, everyone went to the local public school. There wasn't that pressure to get through to Year 12. It was just—try and get a job whenever you leave school, whenever that may be. I think that's the difference with students now, they are under a lot more pressure. You must complete Year 12. Often there's that pressure there that they've got to go to uni to get any type of job. Just so different. (Krystal)

Kelly had an Anglo-Australian background and she stated that there was not much emphasis on education in her family. She attended a government school and was the first in her family to obtain a university degree. Her husband was born in the UK and completed Year 11 in a government school in Australia. He later gained entry to university as a mature-age student and obtained a teaching degree. Although Kelly and her husband came from families in which education was not prioritised, they were a self-made couple who were more affluent than their parents. They sought opportunities for their daughters by sending them to a 'good public school' in their vicinity to increase the likelihood of them entering university.

This discussion implies that, although these parents were satisfied with their past schooling experiences, there seemed to be a realisation of the

changing demands placed on children, compared with their own experiences. The current trend in parenting seems to play a significant role in parents exercising choice for their children. The demand for quality education and a higher level of education has caused a significant change in the current school choice pattern.

In contrast to what the above four participants discussed about their past experiences, Connie's educational experience in the UK was different. Her parents selected the best private music school for Connie and her sister, and the strong motivation for the children to enter a 'good high school' influenced her parents to move houses to be closer to the school:

They wanted somewhere that was good for music because we're a music family. So, we went to one of the best music schools in London actually ... that was the most important thing for them. (Connie)

According to Connie, in this age of overachievement, 'education is an idol for lots of people', and the pursuit of academic achievement rules their lives. This places pressure on children to perform well to meet their parents' expectations:

And I think it's like the most, almost the thing they worship for their children. And that's been a real journey for me of letting go of that. I see it in other people, and I see the pressure it puts on other children. (Connie)

Connie expressed a contrasting view to others who viewed academic pressure as desirable. Her aspirations for her children differed to what her parents expected of her because she considered it important to build a healthy relationship with her children and assure them that they were loved and valued regardless of their academic results:

What do we want for our children and actually [it] is different from the decisions my parents made. Having been to a really amazing school myself, [I] had amazing opportunities and [I am] just accepting that our

kids aren't going to have that. And saying 'it's okay'. What I want for them is actually different. Because they sent me to this amazing school, I did all these amazing things, I learnt music, I did horse riding, I went skiing, but I don't have a relationship with my parents. And I thought, actually, what I want is for my kids to know they're loved, know they're accepted, and if that means they get B's rather than A's, or D's rather than C's, I think that's good. (Connie)

Similarly, Alice and Godfrey, who attended school in Malaysia, explained that the education system there was very different. There were government schools for locals and international schools that catered to expatriates. The majority of students attended public schools, which were 'very multicultural' and 'very academically focused'. Godfrey related how his own schooling was very competitive academically, and there was strong emphasis on educational qualifications. Having experienced a different schooling environment in his home country, he wished his children to have a well-rounded education by spending time in other enriching activities:

When I grew up, the kinds of schools were very academically focused and it was all around exams and taking exams. You spend other parts of the day when you're not in school going for tuition and extra classes, which I didn't want my own children to go through that. But really have time to spend on being involved in sports, as well as other curricular activities. (Godfrey)

Connie and Godfrey attended schooling overseas and discussed their own parents' strong emphasis on academic achievement. They chose to focus less on academic performance and more on their children's happiness and the provision of a well-rounded education.

In this study, the participants shared their past schooling experiences and most revealed that the current schooling situation differed from their own experiences. Most parents viewed the demand for academic quality as

desirable in the current schooling situation, while a few parents believed that their children's happiness was more important.

### **4.5 Theme 3: Constraints in School Choice**

Choosing schools was not easy for most parents. From the data, all parents except one reported that the experience of choosing schools was stressful. They described that the main issues constraining their choice were economic factors and the school zoning policy.

#### **4.5.1 Affordability**

Affordability was a recurrent theme mentioned by six participants when describing their experience of seeking suitable schools. They indicated that financial issues were significant in their consideration of private schools. As much as they wished to enrol their child in a private school, if they could not afford it, then it was not possible. This meant they had no option except to send their children to government schools. However, in the survey results (Tables 4.4) although fee was not a factor for parents who attended private schools, it was found to be a significant factor for parents who had their schooling in government schools.

Bernie had three sons who were currently attending the local primary school. Originally, she considered sending them to private secondary schools. However, the cost of sending three children to a private school deterred her from that approach. She had since chosen to send her son to a public secondary school:

We could look at private schools and we did. We considered High School 7 down at Henley Beach. You can't get in there and also like the fees are \$10,000-ish. And we're going to be sending three kids to high school in three years' time. It's just a big cost and, when we went to High School 8, they can offer Ken everything he needs. So, I don't feel that we need to be spending that amount of money. (Bernie)

The parents in this study reported that, even in considering a private school, it should be affordable for them to choose. Krystal and Catherine decided to send their children to a modest fee-charging Catholic school. Initially, Krystal considered buying a property in a school zone; however, after weighing the cost between buying a property and paying fees in a private school, the latter was better:

I should just mention that, years ago, we did consider moving house so that we were in a zone for what's considered in Adelaide as one of the popular public high schools. And we talked about it, but, at the time, I just thought finances—by the time you sell, and you move, and you're paying stamp duty, we would be just as well off staying where we are and paying the private school fees instead. (Krystal)

Given the high cost of investing in property in suburbs with reputable high schools, both Krystal and Catherine only considered private schools that charged a modest fee because they sought a work–life balance, rather than investing all their money in education. The following statements exemplify their views:

Yeah, affordability. I don't know if I'm selfish or not, but I work part time. My husband works, but I didn't want to be working just to pay for school fees. I guess it's important to us that we have some work–life balance. (Catherine)

Yes and the private school we have picked is not one of the elite ones with the high school fees. It's middle of the range—that was another consideration as well. We wouldn't have wanted to send them to one that was going to leave us without a life. We'd still like a holiday. (Krystal)

#### **4.5.2 Zoning**

In metropolitan Adelaide, most public secondary schools are zoned and only students who live in the school zone are eligible to enrol. Students who live outside the zone can apply to attend a public secondary outside

their catchment area; however, a variety of criteria must be met, such as the availability of places and siblings at the school. The school also has some discretion regarding who they choose to accept. Schools that have specialist interests or offer special programs allow all students to apply entry via an audition, test or interview, while students who live in the catchment area can gain entry without needing to specialise in those subject areas.

Seven of the interview participants indicated that their choice of school was limited by the zoning of public schools, causing some parents to send their children to private schools, which generally have no zoning restrictions. Three parents stated that the reason they chose private schools was because they were not zoned in the public school of their choice.

The parents found that choosing a primary school was much easier because only a small number of primary schools in Adelaide have a school zone. Bernie lived in the western suburbs and felt that choosing a secondary school was much harder because of the limited number of secondary schools in her location. She also opined that the eastern suburbs have a higher number of good public schools:

With the primary school, I believe we had a lot more choice, whereas, with the high school, I feel that we are very limited. Limited with what we can actually choose. Sure, we want to go High School 8, but I can't just say we want to go there. So, High School 8 we have heard good things about, and High School 2. We've looked at them, but we are not in the zone. So that kind of rules them out. So that's where it's difficult when you talk about choosing—well, we don't have a lot of choice. You look at the eastern suburbs and they have four or five good public schools—we don't. (Bernie)

Bernie's comment about the 'four to five good public schools' in the eastern suburbs reflects her perception regarding a disparity in school

quality between suburbs. Echoing Bernie's views regarding schools in the eastern suburbs, Connie expressed disappointment with the public schools in her residential location, which prompted her to transition her child early into a Christian high school. Connie emphatically stated:

Disappointed that we live in the west. We used to live next door to High School 3. So, we would've been right there. Yeah, this side of the city [the west]—definitely, I don't think there's really any good option here. Her high school seems more significant, but I think it means we considered private high school when we wouldn't necessarily have done. (Connie)

Kelly, who lived in the eastern suburbs, reaffirmed both participants' views regarding the schools in her location: 'We are very lucky where we are because we have got a good choice of good public schools'. Catherine asserted dissatisfaction with the public secondary school that her son was designated to attend. She lived outside of the zones of other public schools; thus, she was left with no choice. As a result of being outside the other schools' zones, she decided to consider a non-government school:

The public school we're zoned for doesn't have a good reputation. So that wasn't a consideration ... So from there it was 'what do we do?'. Do you go public system and see if you can actually get into a public school? Because, you know, if you're not zoned for them, then it's not easy as just going, 'look, we'd like him to go here'. So then anything else public was going to be out of zone because they're all zoned and we're not in it. (Catherine)

The parents believed that there were limited choices for reputable public high schools in some suburbs, which caused much dissatisfaction among the parents regarding school choice. Bernie wished to send her child to her preferred public school, but she was outside the zone. As a result of the strict zoning policies for public secondary schools, she felt that she had no choice but to consider buying a house in the preferred school zone:



Like you are zoned to a school, so if you are going to public, you don't have a choice really. That's, in blank terms, crappy. My husband and I have just over the last three months started talking about, if he doesn't get into the school, he is looking at buying a house in the zone. So that's the other option. We don't want to move. We love where we live, but then we go, well, maybe we just have to buy something there as a rental and make out for moving to it. (Bernie)

School zoning has raised the issue of parents trying to secure a property in the designated school zone, which has affected the property market. There is a growing cohort of buyers seeking to purchase property in certain school catchment zones. Families who cannot afford to buy can resort to renting, which could affect the investment market. Alice shared an anecdotal story on 'buying an enrolment' in a public school with a good reputation. This is a common strategy for parents who seek to enter schools that enforce residential zones to restrict the enrolments of students:

Parents going and rent a house in the eastern suburbs to get their children to the schools because they know those schools are better academically, they're performing, their ranking. And then once the child is there, they buy a house elsewhere and they move, and yet the child still remains in that school. (Alice)

From what the participants shared, the public schools that offer specialist programs are in high demand and have better academic performance than other local secondary schools. The parents perceived that the schools in the eastern suburbs of Adelaide were better academically, and they chose to enter those popular schools by living in the school zone. This action suggests that these strategies could have arisen among middle-class parents who have fewer financial constraints and higher motivation for their children to enter a better-quality school.

The zoning of secondary schools restricted these parents in their school choice because of the strict residential boundaries. Although it is still

possible to enter zoned schools (such as through gifted and talented programs), the surest guarantee in securing a place at a school is to live within the catchment area. As a consequence of this restriction, some parents resorted to buying or renting a property in the catchment area, so that their child would be granted a place. Other parents opted to seek private schools that were affordable. However, this strategy was likely to be more common among families who could afford to do so. Regardless of whether the strategy selected is renting or purchasing a house or paying private school fees, the family must have the means to exercise choice.

## **4.6 Summary**

This chapter has analysed the data collected from the survey questionnaire and the one-on-one semi-structured interviews. The key findings are summarised below and discussed in the following chapter:

- Parental background, including parents' education level, did influence the parents' education aspirations for their children.
- The parents revealed that they were motivated in their school choice by their aspirations for their children. The survey data revealed that parents with higher levels of education had higher educational aspirations.
- The five most important school characteristics reported in the Phase 1 results were: academic quality, school reputation, teaching/teacher quality, proximity and all-round quality. Importantly, the qualitative data revealed that school characteristics (mainly school reputation, academic characteristics and school learning environment) had a strong influence on parental perception of school quality.
- The survey data indicated that the parents' past schooling have some influence over their decision-making.
- A major theme that emerged from the interview data was parental perception of school quality. Four subthemes on school quality were

identified: school reputation, academic characteristics, and school learning environment and school location. Although school location was found to be a convenient factor for most parents, it was trumped by the factor of school quality.

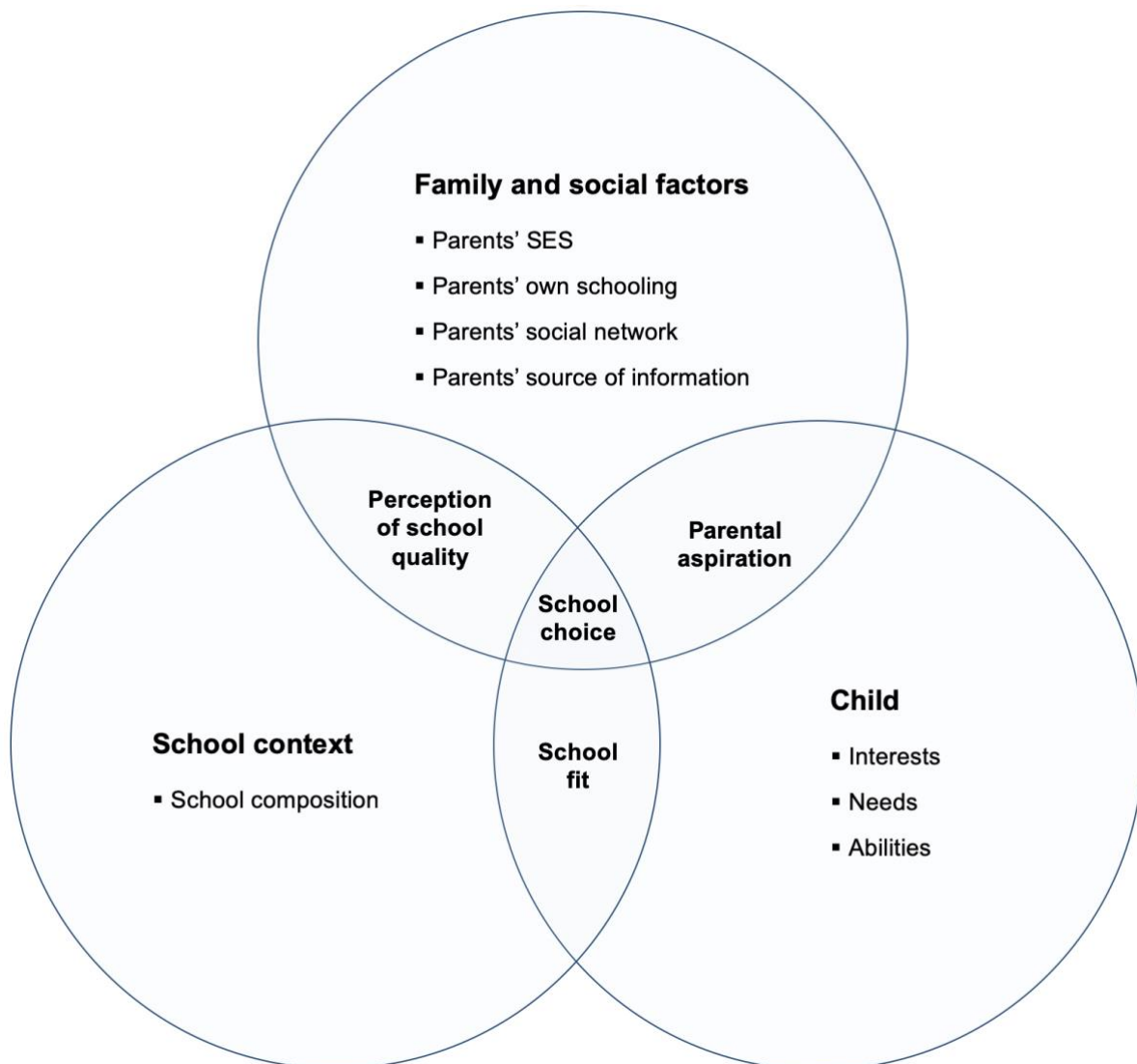
- Most parents' expressed feeling anxiety regarding school choice because they were uncertain where their child would be placed and concerned about finding a school that best suited their child. The parents' past schooling experience and the changing demand in the current schooling situation influenced the parents in their school choice.
- The parents revealed that they used a range of sources to gather information about schools, yet information by word-of-mouth from their social network was found to be the most powerful tool in informing them about various schools. This information about schools shaped their views on school reputation and perceptions of school quality.
- Economic and policy factors were the most significant barriers that the parents faced in their school choice.

## **Chapter 5: Discussion**

### **5.1 Overview**

The previous chapter presented the results of the study. This chapter discusses the findings in relation to the factors that influence parents' individual school choices. It also explores how a group of parents in SA engaged in choosing a secondary school. The two data sets addressed here—the survey data and individual interview data—are complementary, offering insights pertinent to the study's overarching research question.

To understand the phenomenon of school choice presented in this research, this chapter explores in depth the themes generated throughout the research. The discussion highlights the connection between the themes and the related school choice process, as illustrated in Figure 5.1.



**Figure 5.1: Conceptual Diagram—School Choice Process**

Figure 5.1 is a conceptual representation of the components of the school choice process. It intends to assist understanding of the school choice phenomenon as it was experienced by a group of parents in SA. This visual representation was developed from the research findings to provide an organising framework for the Chapter 5 discussion. The overarching theme that emerged from all the data is that the child is the central push factor in the decision-making process. Parents are anxious in this undertaking, as they take responsibility for being a good parent and choosing the right school for their children. Parents themselves are seen

to be putting their child's interests, needs and abilities at the centre of the process to find a 'quality' school.

It was evident from the data that these educated middle-class parents relied on word-of-mouth from their social networks about the quality of various schools, and these conversations thus shaped their perceptions of school quality. Parents defined the attributes they looked for when considering various schools in the context of school composition, which included the students enrolled and their family backgrounds. These attributes were found to be related to students' educational outcomes, which influenced parents and their perception of school quality. Although most parents viewed the convenience factors of proximity to home and work as important, their perception of school quality was the dominating factor driving them to choose schools outside their suburban area.

Several factors mediated parents' perception of schools, which was associated with their choice of school. The two main contexts are family and social factors, which are captured in the themes 'Parental aspiration' and 'Parental anxiety'. Parents were motivated in their school choice by their aspirations and anxieties for their children, and this significantly affected their role in seeking the right school that matched their child's needs. However, parents' ability to choose schools was constrained by economic and policy factors, especially school affordability and school zoning. Ultimately, the combination of parent, child and school factors contributed to parents' perception of school quality, which influenced their choice of school.

Based on the data, it was found that parents' SES, which is measured by parental education and occupational background, was associated with their choice of school. In socio-economic terms, the group in this study comprised predominantly educated middle-class parents based on their educational qualifications and occupational status (see Table 4.6). These parents were concerned with and involved in their children's schooling

and were more likely than those from a working-class background to be able to choose a secondary school. Two of the parents worked as professionals, while four were sub-professionals whose jobs required either a university degree or a sub-university qualification. This finding is consistent with those of Campbell et al. (2009), Firth and Huntley (2014) and Windle (2015), who similarly found that parents who are highly educated and have high incomes are aspirational and, in turn, are actively involved in school choice.

According to Campbell et al. (2009) and Reid (2019), the present school choice pattern is impacted by neoliberalism or the market economy. With the growth of national economic reform over the past 40 years, Australia's middle class, who are consumers, take more responsibility for their children's schooling (Butler, Ho, & Vincent, 2017). The literature reviewed as part of this research established that policy positions parents as consumers in this competitive marketplace who shop for a school that offers the best 'quality' education that they deem the most suitable fit for their child (Aitchison, 2006; Firth & Huntley, 2014; McCarthy, 2013). The marketisation of schools has created a socio-educational hierarchy whereby some schools are considered more advantaged, and those that are high up in the hierarchy are particularly sought after by parents (Bonnor & Shepherd, 2016; Firth & Huntley, 2014). Some of the terms frequently used in this context of school choice are choice, aspirations, and anxieties, quality and SES (Aitchison, 2006; Beavis, 2004; Bonnor & Shepherd, 2016; Cahill, 2009; Campbell et al., 2009; Firth & Huntley, 2014; Perry & Southwell, 2014; Rowe & Windle, 2012; Windle, 2015).

Within this context of school choice in Australia, many parents seem to be anxious about this decision because metaphorically they are buying a school for their child and do not truly know what it is like until their child is enrolled. Numerous school choice research in Australia has provided important insights into how parents handle this phenomenon, and the process of choosing schools has been found to be a common behaviour

for those with more resources, who are able to exercise the most choice compared with those who have fewer resources (Campbell et al., 2009; Firth & Huntley, 2014; Windle, 2015). A significant number of studies have explored how middle-class parents are motivated in their school choice by their aspirations and the level of anxiety this school choice process provokes (Campbell et al., 2009; Rowe & Windle, 2012).

To understand the process of school choice in Australia, it is necessary to explore how the rise of neoliberal ideology influences Australian education. However, it is not my intention to provide an extensive analysis of neoliberalism; rather, I examine how some of its features affect parents' school choice behaviour. These findings are the culmination of the discussion in this chapter.

## **5.2 School Choice**

The rise of neoliberalism changed the educational landscape in Australia, especially the increased funding given to non-government schools and the establishment of new and affordable non-government schools (Forsey et al., 2017). The construction of markets created competition within and between public and private schools, meaning that parents are now free to choose schools from across the government and non-government sectors (Donnelly, 2012; Firth & Huntley, 2014). Parents recognise that differences exist between schools across or within sectors and are concerned with finding the 'best' school for their child. Only 40 years ago, parents were more concerned about their child's ability or willingness to complete secondary education (Campbell et al., 2009). It appears that their concerns have shifted to whether a school is the best fit for their child. Parents are worried about what might happen to their child if they choose the wrong school, as they depend on schooling to secure safe futures for their children (Campbell et al., 2009). This makes choosing schools in this market both interesting and full of anxiety, as parents shop for the 'best' school that offers value for money and individual opportunity



for their child (Campbell et al., 2009; Reid, 2019). This market activity is particularly a reality for middle-class parents and even those from the most socially and financially advantaged families (Bonnor, 2019; Campbell et al., 2009; Rowe & Windle, 2012).

The data suggest that these educated middle-class parents' experiences, which feature high-stakes decision-making, leads to anxiety about school choice. This was verified during the interviews by five parents who revealed that selecting a school was not easy and affected them emotionally. They expressed negative feelings when they described choosing a school and used the words 'stressed', 'sleepless nights', 'worried', 'confused', 'anxiety', 'pressure' and 'upset'.

This finding indicates that these parents were anxious when they made this choice, as they were uncertain if they had made the right choice. For example, Catherine answered, 'I've been quite stressed from time to time ... wanting to make sure I'm making the right decision for Lam'. If the choice was not right, it would affect their child's schooling, as described by Kelly: 'If they're not happy, they are not going to do well.' This comment also highlights how these parents were bound by the concept of being a 'good parent citizen' (Campbell et al., 2009) in carrying out their responsibility to provide the best for their child (Reid, 2019). This implies that these parents were aware of their parenting role and assumed that as a 'good parent', it was their responsibility to choose the 'best' school for their child. The neoliberal trends that created a competitive school market offered parents more choice and gave those with more resources the ability to choose the 'best' school for their children (Firth & Huntley, 2014).

Seven out of eight participants indicated that they had not selected a secondary school when their children commenced public primary school. They strongly expressed having the intention to send their children to government schools; however, the uncertainty of getting their child into a

government school of their choice was a concern among this group of educated middle-class parents.

In SA, parents are free to choose government schools outside their catchment area, and enrolling their children in these schools depends on place availability. Enrolment in government specialist programs schools occurs via a merit selection process. Although parents are free to apply to government schools of their choice, the issue of uncertainty was stressful to some of the parents in this study. As Kelly explained: 'The main stress was around not knowing where Jaye would be going. I had to wait for a while to know where she was going to be accepted.'

This finding is consistent with Campbell et al.'s (2009) study, which reports that many parents from the marginal middle class were not impressed with their local secondary schools and had to wait to hear the outcome of their application to their preferred school, as they lived outside the school catchment area. This included those whose children took a selection test to gain entry into their preferred school. This process of waiting caused much frustration for these parents as they waited anxiously to hear the outcome (Campbell et al., 2009). This was also found to be a common behaviour among the parents in this study, who wanted to send their child to their preferred government school: the process of waiting and the uncertainty of where their child would be placed were stressful. This highlights the influence of neoliberal ideology in Australian education—parents who no longer trust their local school are free to choose schools outside their suburbs, which they considered 'better' schools.

Parents were aware that differences exist between government and non-government schools and within each sector. It was evident that all parents interviewed went through the school choice process by gathering information about various schools before making their decision.

### **5.2.1 Source of Information**

The My School website was set up in 2010 to provide Australian parents with important information about Australia schools, and it enables parents to make informed decisions as they go through the school choice process (Angus, 2015). The most interesting finding in this study is that most of the parents relied on their social networks instead of My School website to access information about various schools. Word-of-mouth information and recommendations about schools from friends and other parents strongly influenced parents' school choice. As Vivien stated, 'I have heard from other friends and family friends that High School 4 is a really good school'. Parents greatly valued this information from friends about a particular school's attributes. They tended to trust the information and advice from their friends and other parents who had children at a prospective school. Bernie stated:

So, there is High School 9, which is our zoned high school. We probably haven't heard a lot of good things about it ... I talked to someone I knew and she said she has one child go to High School 7 and one child go to High School 8. And she said the one who went to High School 8 is the more grounded student, doing his work. She said her daughter is too busy going parties every weekend.

A plausible inference here is that information about various schools gave the parents the impression that some schools were 'better' than others. The information gathered from their social networks shaped their perceptions of school quality, which was vital to their choice of school. This aligns with previous studies indicating that word-of-mouth information from friends and families was the most trusted information parents used to confirm, affirm and deselect schools (Campbell et al., 2009; McCarthy, 2013; Rowe & Windle, 2012).

Although word-of-mouth information could be biased and inaccurate, parents indicated that they trusted their friends more than the

information on My School. For example, Alice reported: 'When I first came here, it's actually when I talk to people and find out. Then the second thing, I just research them up in the website.' This indicates that parents gathered information from friends first before checking My School to confirm what they had heard. Recent research by Firth and Huntley (2014), Jackson (2019) and Leaver (2016) reports that this method of gathering information from friends in a social network plays a more important role in parents' choice of school compared with the hard data on My School. This implies that parents find information obtained firsthand through social networks to be more insightful and reliable.

Seven of the eight participants placed high importance on school reputation in their decision-making. There was strong evidence to suggest that sources of information about school reputation included 'inside information' received from other parents or friends, which influenced whether parents labelled schools as 'good' or 'bad'. For example, Kelly stated, 'They have a good reputation because I think the school is doing well'. The impression that a school was doing well contributed to its positive reputation, which shaped parents' perceptions of it. As Catherine remarked, 'we sent him there, which was from reputation as well'. The possible inference here is that a parent's description of a school that is doing 'well' reflects that parent's own judgement rather than a more objective measure, which is usually related to its academic performance. This was highlighted by Alice: 'Schools like High School 2 and High School 1, they are receiving the cream of the crop from every other suburb because of their reputation and standard.' This suggests that the 'cream' of the best students from other public schools contributes to the school's reputation, which is related to its positive educational outcomes; this is an important factor in a parent's choice of school (Beavis, 2004; McCarthy, 2013; Warren, 2015).

Although schools' academic success and students' educational outcomes were not featured in the data, it was evident from the interviews that

parents preferred schools with favourable reputations. The data from the list of preferred schools (see Appendix 5) show that parents' perceptions of school reputation were based on a school's academic performance. All the schools listed except for High School 7 were government secondary schools. These preferred schools were also high-SES schools with strong academic performance. This indicates that the parents looked for a school's educational advantage and its academic performance in the NAPLAN assessment. This also suggests that public and private school factors were not a major component in the decision-making process for most of the parents, who found government schools adequate and they made this rational choice based on their personal preference.

The above findings strongly imply that parents' preferred schools (such as High School 1 and 2) were high-SES schools with an ICSEA value greater than 1,000, which are considered more advantaged schools. The next section addresses how parents perceived school quality, which influenced their choice of school.

### **5.3 Parents' Perceptions of School Quality**

In this study, I argue that parental perception of school quality significantly influenced parents' choice of school. Parents revealed that they placed a high level of importance on reputation, and this was evident in the survey results reported in section 4.1.3: four of the five most important reasons in their choice of schools were academic quality, school reputation, teacher quality and proximity. In line with previous studies on school choice, the findings from this study indicate that family background accounts for some variation in parents' attitudes and beliefs in terms of how they perceived school quality (Beavis, 2004; Bonnor & Caro, 2012; Campbell et al., 2009; Firth & Huntley, 2014; Rowe & Windle, 2012; Windle, 2015). This finding emerges from both the quantitative and qualitative data collected in this study.

### **5.3.1 The Influence of School Context**

An important finding of this study is that a school's context—specifically its composition, which includes students' family backgrounds—contributes to its socio-economic profile, which is linked to student achievement.

#### *|School Composition and Student Achievement*

Numerous studies have suggested that a school's student composition, which includes parents' SES, is related to its influence on students' achievement (Bonnor, 2019; Cobbold, 2020; Rowe & Lubienski, 2017; Thompson et al., 2019).

#### *|Student Family Background*

In this study, it was evident that a student cohort and those students' family backgrounds could influence students' attitudes, values and behaviours, which in turn would affect their academic performance. This was reported by Connie, who commented that 'parents' input' at her daughter's current school 'is different to what [it] might be over at High School 3'. In her opinion, families at the two schools from different suburbs could also be from different socio-economic backgrounds and thus have different attitudes and behaviours towards schooling, which would affect students' academic achievement. Considering that High School 3 (see Appendix 5) is one of the top-performing public schools in SA and is located in an affluent suburb, Connie's statement implies that she wished her child were associated with other students from advantaged backgrounds similar to her own who shared similar values, attitudes and behaviours. This aligns with Rowe and Windle's (2012) study, which found that parents want their children to attend a school with students from similar SES backgrounds and to associate with students from the same social class. Connie added: 'Peers become much more significant and families of peers become very significant in what, how they're living their lives, what decisions they're making.'

This finding is also apparent in Campbell et al.'s (2009) study, which found that middle-class parents choose schools for the communities they represent, which are 'predominantly upwardly mobile' and 'values education', indicating that parents want their children to be in this kind of aspirational social and cultural environment

In this study, parents perceived differences in the quality of public schools between suburbs. For example, Bernie, who lived in the western suburbs, commented, 'Sure, we want to go to High School 8 ... we have heard good things about [it], and High School 2', and added that 'High School 5 and High School 6 ... we have definitely heard not good things ... we don't have a lot [of] choice ... the eastern suburbs ... they have four or five good public schools'.

Bernie's opinion that the eastern suburbs of Adelaide have a higher number of good public schools was supported by Connie, who said that she was disappointed that she lived in the western suburbs, as she 'used to live next door to High School 3 ... this side of the city (west) ... I don't think there's really any good option here'. Kelly, who lived in the eastern suburbs and had good choices between reputable government schools near her home, reaffirmed this: 'We are very lucky where we are because we have got a good choice of good public schools.' These quotations strongly suggest differences in the quality of government schools based on their location. Good government schools were located in the affluent suburbs of Adelaide, where families from advantaged backgrounds live. Therefore, students enrolled in those schools would be from similar family backgrounds, and the parents in this study perceived that as an important factor that influenced student educational outcomes. The interviewed parents consistently indicated that school location was not about convenience, but quality.

Parents indicated that their preferred government schools (such as High Schools 1, 2 and 3) would be high-SES schools with an ICSEA value

greater than 1,000—these schools were considered ‘good public schools’. They sought high-SES government secondary schools with excellent academic performance (see Appendix 5) and a ‘good reputation’. It is asserted in the literature that parents choose schools with the capacity to deliver quality education (Beavis, 2004; McCarthy, 2013; Warren, 2015) and value the high educational qualifications that are important in shaping their child’s future career in the changing labour market (Campbell et al., 2009).

Parents perceived differences in the academic performance of public schools in Adelaide suburbs, and viewed schools located in wealthier suburbs as ‘better’ than their own neighbourhood schools. Therefore, they sought ‘good’ government secondary schools outside their school catchment areas. Alice, who lived in the western suburbs, reported that ‘there is lots of difference between the schools in the public schools in the suburb and eastern side of the city’. She considered High School 1 and High School 2 as ‘receiving the cream of the crop from every other suburb’ and wanted her son ‘to get across to High School 1 or High School 2’, as these ‘would be an environment where he will thrive’. These were also top performing schools offering specialist programs and a robust curriculum to prepare students for university entrance.

Parents in this study emphasised the importance of the curriculum and programs offered by the various public schools. These educated middle-class parents were interested in the curriculum offerings provided by these schools. Catherine stated, ‘You want options and opportunities and balance’. This implies that parents seek schools that give students equal access to the Australian Curriculum. However, the parents in this study perceived inequality in this access across the government and non-government sectors and within each sector (Hetherington, 2018).

Parents viewed the eastern suburbs schools, the high-SES schools, as generally more advantaged and as having the resources to provide a



better learning environment for their children. They believed that school SES and the influence of the school community, such as peer groups, were strongly related to student achievement (Perry & McConney, 2010).

### *Peer Groups*

According to Bonnor and Caro (2012), children in their adolescent years are vulnerable to being influenced by their peers. In the school context, children's peers at school are their friends with whom they socialise. The parents in this study indicated that they wanted their children to be in an environment where they were among students or peers who shared the same values, norms and beliefs.

Seven participants regarded peer groups as a powerful influence in the lives of their children and in their academic success. For example, Kelly reported, 'If you've got a whole lot of kids around them which are working really hard, achieving well, it's going to encourage your child to try and achieve well as well'. A possible inference here is that if Kelly's child were in an environment in which their peers worked hard and were committed to succeeding in school, it would influence other students' enthusiasm for learning.

Parents revealed that peer influence can be positive or negative, depending on the peer group, and negative peer pressure was viewed as detrimental to desirable learning environments. According to Krystal, 'depending who they mix with and how they dedicate themselves to their work can just all go downhill'. This is supported by other interview data—for example, Alice spoke about her desire for her son to be in an environment where he would be intellectually challenged, saying that if a child is surrounded by 'a group of students who are intellectually being challenged, they are more likely to motivate and inspire each other to succeed'.

This indicates that parents look for a like-minded cohort of students who value education and have a positive influence on educational outcomes. This is evident in Perry et al.'s (2016) study, which found that parents want their children to be in an environment of friends who exert a positive influence and share similar educational aspirations (Marks, 2017).

Similarly, in this study, a school's student composition and students' family backgrounds (measured by parents' education level and occupation) relate to student achievement (see Appendix 5). This concurs with Bonnor's (2019) finding that the SES of a school's student body, which refers to enrolled students and their family backgrounds, contributes to differences between schools, and this difference has a significant impact on educational attainment.

## **5.4 Parental Aspiration and Choice of School**

In line with previous studies on school choice, the findings from this study indicate that family background accounts for some variation in parental aspiration and school choice (Cahill, 2009; Campbell et al., 2009; Windle, 2015). In this study, family background factors such as parents' SES and past schooling experiences were found to influence parents' aspirations for their children, which in turn affected their choice of school.

### **5.4.1 Parents' Socio-economic Status**

This study found that parents' aspirations for their children varied according to their SES. Although parental income was not measured in this study, SES was measured by parents' level of education and their occupation (see Chapter 4, Table 4.1). According to the survey data, 77% (n = 40) of the parents indicated that they aspired for their children to complete university education. Of those 40 parents, half (50%) held university qualifications, while the rest had no degree. This result shows that 95% of parents with university qualifications aspired for their children to complete a university degree. This reiterates that parents with

higher levels of education have higher aspirations for their children than those with less than a university education. Numerous studies have reported that educated middle-class parents have high aspirations for their children and greater access to resources that enable them to exercise choice (Bosetti, 2004; Campbell et al., 2009; Le & Miller, 2002; Preston, 2018).

Other family and social factors, such as parents' expectations of their child, their own schooling, and their social and cultural norms, which shaped their beliefs and values, also influenced parents' aspirations for their children. This was evident in the interviews, in which parents expressed their desire for their children to complete tertiary education and have a successful future. For instance, Kelly reported, 'do well, achieve good results ... finish high school and on to uni'. Catherine said, 'I'd like [my son] to go to uni, just because in this day and age, I think you nearly have to, to give yourself a chance, or not cut yourself out of a potential career perhaps'. They regarded education as very important in preparing for their children's future. Thus, these educated parents clearly had high aspirations for their children's educational achievements (Phillipson & Phillipson, 2017) and future careers (Beamish & Morey, 2013; Windle, 2015). Parents acknowledged that their demands and expectations of their children differed from those of previous generations. For example, Krystal said: 'I think that's the difference with students now, they are under a lot more pressure. You must complete Year 12. Often there's that pressure there that they've got to go to uni to get any type of job.'

These educated middle-class parents' expectations of their children were strongly related to their views and beliefs on the importance of successful schooling in preparing them for life beyond school and for their future careers. This is highlighted by Beamish and Morey (2013), Campbell et al. (2009) and Windle (2015), who show that parents' choice of school is motivated by their educational and career aspirations for their children.

Kelly and her husband came from families in which education was not prioritised—they were the first in their families to obtain a university degree. They were self-made middle-class parents who were more affluent than their parents and have different expectations of their children. Therefore, they were motivated to seek a 'good public school' for their children to increase their likelihood of entering university. This suggests that middle-class parents' choice of school is related to maintaining and improving their social status (Campbell et al., 2009; Rowe & Windle, 2012).

However, while these education middle-class parents' SES was a significant contributing factor that influenced their choice of school, parents' own schooling was not found to have the same influence.

#### **5.4.2 Parents' Own Schooling**

The survey data shows that the type of school the parents attended had a significant effect on their choice of school for their own children. According to the data, 59.5% of the parents who had attended a government school indicated that they had selected a government secondary school for their child. Conversely, 50% of the parents who attended independent schools selected an independent school for their child. The data also reveals that those parents who went to public school and considered sending their children to public school wanted to find a 'good public school'. This indicates that parents' knowledge of their own schooling experiences was an important factor in their school choice process. Their beliefs and values about the kind of schools they wanted for their children affected their choice of school.

An important finding from the interviews is that five parents who attended public schools (in Australia or overseas) said that they were proud of their public school education. They felt that their public school experiences claimed had been positive. For instance, Krystal reported:

You know, I reflect back on my high school days and I've got fond memories. I had some good teachers some not so good. But I had a nice group of friends. But in those days, everyone went to the local public school. There wasn't that pressure to get through to Year 12. It was just, try and get a job whenever you leave school, whenever that may be.

This suggests that times have changed, and the contemporary demands and expectations today's parents have of their children differ from those of past generations. These educated middle-class parents were concerned for their children's future in the labour market. They wanted to ensure that their children had the best opportunity for success at school so that they could achieve high educational qualifications to survive in this competitive market. This aligns with Campbell et al.'s (2009) finding that middle-class parents perceive successful schooling as related to educational credentials and a profitable labour market.

However, three parents who had recently migrated to Australia articulated that their past educational experiences were different compared to the parents who had been educated in Australia. According to Connie, who came from the UK, her parents selected the best private music schools for her, and to them 'that was the most important thing'. Similarly, Godfrey, an information technology manager who identified himself as having an Asian cultural background, revealed that the schooling in his home country was very competitive academically, with a strong emphasis on educational qualifications: 'Schools were very academically focused and it was all around exams and taking exams. You spend other parts of the day when you're not in school going for tuition and extra classes.'

This suggests that schooling in Godfrey's home country was 'very academically focused'. His parents sent him for 'tuition and extra classes', indicating that they highly valued academic achievement. Another Asian skilled migrant, Alice, who also had high educational qualifications, had the same view of academic achievement:

People may fault me because I'm Asian, I'm very academic-orientated, however I am not going to apologise for that. But how else are you going to produce quality students with a sound background with a strong foundation for them to be able to succeed. I think academic pathway generally is the way to go.

Alice indicated that education was highly valued in her culture, and was unapologetic in asserting her motivations and cultural heritage in relation to choosing a school that strongly emphasised academic performance. Migrant parents have different expectations of their children's education, and their past schooling in a different culture influence their choice of school (Campbell et al., 2009; Ho, 2020a; Windle, 2015). Indeed, most skilled migrants with university qualifications who regard themselves as middle-class parents want to retain that status, and are thus determined to seek schools that prioritise academic success to facilitate university entrance in Australia (Aris, 2017; Campbell et al., 2009; Ho, 2017; Phillipson & Phillipson, 2017; Windle, 2015). They view education and competition for good schools and jobs as extremely important (Ho, 2020; Windle, 2015).

Consistent with the findings of Campbell et al. (2009), Ho (2020a) and Windle (2015) on migrant parents' expectations, Connie and Godfrey, who went to school overseas and whose own parents strongly emphasised academic achievement, felt that their child's happiness at school and their ability to gain a well-rounded education was more important than academic achievement.

This was further affirmed by Catherine, who had an Anglo-Australian background and remarked, 'that [my son] will be happy at school and enjoy school ... Probably that's one of the main priorities—for him to be supported and clearly to learn'. It was evident that the parents wanted their child to be happy at school—they believed that when their children's emotional needs were met, learning would place. Connie articulated that

in this age of overachievement, 'education is an idol for lots of people' and the pursuit of academic achievement rules their lives:

What do we want from our children and actually [it] is different from the decisions my parents made ... what I want is for my kids to know they're loved, know they're accepted, and if that means they get B's rather than A's, or D's rather than C's, I think that's good.

Happiness is a broad concept, but my understanding of Connie's comment is that when someone is loved and accepted, they feel positive and happy and will do their best in their study. Therefore, it is important that parents seek a school that fits their child's interest, needs and abilities so that they feel they belong and are accepted.

Most parents revealed that there was a demand for academic quality in the current schooling situation. However, a child's wellbeing influences their attitude towards learning and contributes to a successful learning environment. This concept of a child's happiness could be explored further in future research. This finding on happiness offers some clarity on why a school's learning environment plays a vital role in parents' choice of school.

## **5.5 Constraints in School Choice**

This study identified two main issues that influenced school choice: the economic factor and the school zoning policy.

Although parents referenced proximity to home as a significant factor in their choice of school, they placed a higher priority on school quality. The parents who sought quality schools were happy to look for other options even if it meant having to travel further, to the extent that their children might have to take 'one bus or two buses' as commented by Alice. They did not consider the most convenient school to be the most suitable for their child.

According to Campbell et al. (2009), location is not just about convenience—rather, it highlights the issue of the location of reputable government schools and the perceived differences in the quality of schools in different suburbs. This was apparent in this study, where parents perceived such variations in the quality of schools in different suburbs. Parents revealed that they would very much like their children to access ‘good’ public high schools or those with a ‘good reputation’. However, they were constrained due to the government’s school zoning policy. This prompted much concern and anxiety and frustrated the parents because they were limited in their choice of reputable government schools based on their residential address.

In SA, most ‘good’ government schools are located in wealthier suburbs, and these highly sought-after secondary schools drive up house prices. Parents who seek to enrol their children in one of these top-performing public high schools are prepared to pay more for a home in the right catchment area. Bowden (2019) reports that demand for properties in these areas is driven by the schools’ academic performance. Property prices are driven by competition from buyers who wish to secure a property in the area to enable their children to attend their desired school (Bowden, 2019).

Similarly, Campbell et al. (2009) found that the accessibility of good local government schools and school boundaries are common features of real-estate advertising, which leads to many middle-class families seeking to buy a home in popular government school catchment areas. The relationship between popular government schools and a student’s entitlement to enrol based on their primary residence has been found to have a significant impact on families in terms of where they purchase a home (Campbell et al., 2009). In this study, some parents revealed that after weighing up buying a property in a catchment area and paying private school fees, the latter was more feasible—in view of the high cost involved in purchasing a property, some parents felt they would be better



off sending their children to an affordable private school. Krystal explained:

The private school we have picked is not one of the elite ones with the high school fees. It's middle of the range that was another consideration as well. We wouldn't have wanted to send them to one that was going to leave us without a life. We'd still like a holiday.

Bernie noted that different types of private schools charge different fees, with some more expensive than others. She gave an example of a private school she had considered: 'You can't get in there and also like the fees are \$10,000-ish. And we're going to be sending three kids to high school in three years' time. It's just a big cost.' Although she did think about sending her children to private secondary schools, the high cost of paying for all three of her children deterred her from this course of action.

However, other parents opted for a modest-fee private school that would generally allow for a good work-life balance. Catherine, who worked part time, said 'I didn't want to be working just to pay for school fees. I guess it's important to us that we have some work-life balance'.

Parents who cannot afford the high cost of private education are left with the option of sending their children to local secondary schools. They still want to give their children the best schooling opportunities, so they seek a quality public high school. However, due to strict high school zoning, some parents consider strategies for how to gain their children admission to those schools if they do not live in the catchment area. This has led to the issue of 'buying an enrolment', whereby parents buy or rent a property within the school catchment area (Campbell et al., 2009). Alice revealed that some parents who cannot afford to buy a property in the eastern suburbs have resorted to renting there to enter their children in the local school and 'once the child is there, they buy a house elsewhere and they move, and yet the child still remains in that school'. This strategy is possibly common for families with the necessary financial

resources—irrespective of whether they rent or buy a house or pay private school fees, they must have the financial means to exercise school choice.

## **5.6 The Phenomenon of School Choice and Its Effects**

Choosing a school is considered an important decision for most middle-class families in Australia, and allows parents to choose the schools that best fit their children. This freedom to choose is not limited to government or non-government schools, which encourages competition among schools to raise the quality of education. However, the choice of government high schools is subject to zoning constraints, and this loomed large in the interview data. The high-performing government schools that are highly sought after by parents are usually oversubscribed, and this frustrates parents, as they seek quality government secondary schools.

According to the *Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration* (Education Council, 2019), which is based on the 2008 *Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians*, Australian schooling is meant to promote equity and excellence. However, there is a great divide among schools in terms of educational quality, and the extent of this inequity is reflected in education results across all school sectors (Firth & Huntley, 2014). According to Bonnor and Shepherd (2016), the divide is not between government and non-government schools, but between high-SES and low-SES schools.

This study's group of educated middle-class parents sought high-performing public schools—these are high-SES schools, which is borne out in the data (See Appendix 5). This clearly shows that there is a relationship between the SES backgrounds of a school's students and that school's results (Firth & Huntley, 2014). Bonnor and Shepherd (2016) identify a trend of parents increasingly enrolling their children in high-SES schools. When these high-SES schools enrol high-performing students

from advantaged backgrounds, it enhances school performance. My data feeds into Bonnor and Shepherd's (2016) analysis of how parents choose schools. With the high demand for high-SES schools, lower SES schools are losing students, which will affect school performance. If the disadvantaged students at disadvantaged schools are not supported with appropriate resources, educational inequity will deepen and educational performance at low-SES schools will continue to decline (Bonnor & Shepherd, 2016).

According to Davies (2019), what drives parents to choose schools outside their catchment area is the issue of quality and equal opportunity. Parents have no confidence in their local school, but will place their confidence a school in the next suburb. This issue of educational inequality manifests in various ways, including funding, access to teaching and learning resources and the curriculum, and the major determinants of inequality are parental education levels and SES (Hetherington, 2018).

This was evident in my study, where parents sought reputable, high-SES schools in other suburbs that were oversubscribed. Ultimately, this means that disadvantaged local schools will be underpopulated. If this equity problem is not resolved, the gap between the achievements of high- and low-SES schools will continue to widen (Bonnor & Shepherd, 2016). Thus, to prevent school choice from increasing this segregation, we must address the hierarchy of advantaged and disadvantaged schools.

School segregation is not limited to SES status alone, but is increasingly reflected in a concentration of culturally and racially similar students (Firth & Huntley, 2014). According to Ho (2020), the division between Anglo and Asian students in NSW selective schools has been encouraged by neoliberal education policies that foster segregation. Parents from migrant backgrounds have different attitudes towards education, and their past experiences influence how they value education. It appears that this social preoccupation with individualism on the part of migrant and

non-migrant parents wanting to providing the 'best' for their children is not just about culture and race, but the Australian education system, which has become more competitive and hierarchical (Ho, 2020a).

Although school segregation in terms of concentrations of culturally and racially similar students was not evident in this research, the findings reveal that the top-performing high school in SA has a high number of students from a NESB. This is not explored in this study due to the poor response of participants from NESBs. Further research could be conducted on how social and cultural factors influence parents in their choice of school.

## **5.7 Summary**

The focus of this research is to explore how parents choose secondary schools for their children. The main research question focuses on the process involved in choosing a school, the perception of school quality in relation to this decision, and the implications of this choice on individual schools and the whole school system.

The findings of this research reveal how parents choose schools. Evidence was gathered on their school choice process and experiences and the factors that influenced their choice. Chapter 6 addresses how the research questions have been answered and states several important implications from this study for the schools, the school system and policy-makers.

## Chapter 6: Conclusion

Choosing the 'right' secondary school is now a key aspect of being an Australian parent in neoliberal times. My research reveals that choosing a secondary school is a high priority for many families, especially middle-class parents. Middle-class parents are particularly motivated during this decision-making process by their aspirations for their children's futures and their expectations of whether a school can deliver on these aspirations. Although this thesis has not dealt deeply with Bourdieu's concepts, Bourdieu's ideas on economic, social, and cultural capital have been useful in this study to better understand why and how parents choose schools. Within the vagaries of the education marketplace, this thesis also highlights the anxiety parents experience during their school decision-making process.

This chapter argues that the school marketplace has contributed to parents' anxiety about enrolling their children into their preferred school and has changed parents' school choice behaviour. It indicates that the side effects of the neoliberal-inspired school choice mantra have given rise to parents' concerns about where to find the best school for the best value. That is, parents have become individual consumers, thinking only in terms of their own children's future life opportunities, and dividing schools that they feel can no longer be trusted to deliver a quality and comprehensive education from those they believe can be trusted—a school ranking system created by individual parents.

This chapter discusses how parents' behaviour regarding school choice has turned towards consumerism and how this shift has taken place. The difference between this research and other, similar studies undertaken in Australia is that most of these other studies have tended to focus on selective public schools, while my research considers public schools. Unlike other states in Australia, all government schools in SA are

comprehensive schools, with some offering specialist programs, and Year 8 is the first year of secondary school. By 2022, all SA Year 7 students will be in their first year of secondary school in the public school system. However, in 2019, some Catholic and independent schools in SA began secondary school with Year 7.

The main purpose of this research is to understand how parents in SA experience choosing a secondary school and their associated behaviours and attitudes in making this decision in the school marketplace. The manner in which parents participate in school choice has been shaped by neoliberal policy imperatives in Australia's current education system, which has led to the formation of an educational market that emphasises school choice and competition. This research makes it clear that parents seek a quality school that can offer their child the right educational credentials for higher education and future employment in the labour market. Just as the My School website ranks schools according to NAPLAN results and resourcing, parents now formulate an individually and subjectively framed My Child's School website, where they rank schools according to the best opportunities they provide for their children's futures. This is because parents perceive differences in school quality and observe that certain schools bring different levels of social capital, opportunities and peer motivation, which together increase or constrain academic performance and hence future prospects for their children. These educational inequalities are indicative of what takes place when education is driven by market logic, a subject to which I now turn.

## **6.1 Our Educational Goals**

According to the *Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration* (Education Council, 2019), schooling in Australia is meant to promote equity and excellence and enable all young Australians to become successful lifelong learners, confident and creative individuals, and active and informed citizens. The vision for education in Australia is 'for a world

class education system that encourages and supports every student to be the very best they can be, no matter where they live or what kind of learning challenges they may face' (Education Council, 2019,p.2).

To achieve this goal, public schools in Australia should provide equal opportunity by accepting students regardless of their abilities or location. According to Reid (2019), public education is not only for individual benefit, but also for the common good, which is to enrich and advance our society as a whole. It is not a commodity with which to promote economic growth, but should instead equip young people from a wide range of backgrounds and cultures and with a wide range of experiences with the knowledge and skills they need in life to participate effectively as active citizens in society (Reid, 2019). Public education should be free and compulsory for every child between ages of six and 16. All schools need to provide learning and teaching to all students in an inclusive environment that caters for diverse needs and interests.

However, the advent of neoliberalism in policy design and resourcing has amplified markets, choice and competition, which work against the stated purposes of education, taking schools further away from the intent and aspirations highlighted in the *Alice Springs Declaration*.

To better understand how schooling has been repositioned in neoliberal times, it is necessary to consider the history of schooling in Australia.

## **6.2 History of Schooling in Australia**

Australia's schooling system has historically been community-based, means it has focused the effects of individual and social action on the wider community rather than on the advancement of individual interest. The essential purpose of education is to provide teaching and learning to all young people; by contrast, neoliberalism, which emphasises individualism, competition, materialism, consumerism and self-advancement, has moved Australia further away from this purpose.

In the early 19th century, fee-free Australian government schools were established to complement church-run schools and private tuition. In the mid-19th century, corporate schools, which are modelled on English boys' public schools but with Australian character, were founded (Campbell et al., 2009) and were considered elite private schools. They still exist today and are viewed as high-status schools by the wealthy families. Back in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, those corporate schools did not receive public funds and offered limited places to high-status and wealthy families (Cahill, 2009; Campbell et al., 2009).

In 1901, the Australian Federation established government schools, and in 1906, the director of education from each state across Australia decided that all education should be free, secular and compulsory (Cahill, 2009; Campbell et al., 2009). These public secondary schools incorporated elements of corporate school culture into their education systems, which was well received by the new middle-class parents who were more dependent on high levels of education to gain jobs in white-collar professions (Campbell et al., 2009; Campbell, 2014). Private schools continued to operate, but their enrolments decreased as parents became satisfied with fee-free government secondary schools (Campbell et al., 2009; Forsey et al., 2017).

By the mid-1970s, the shifts in government funding to non-government schools gave rise to the idea of school marketplace, and private schooling became more affordable for families (Cahill & Gray, 2010). The increase in the number of non-government school places made possible by government funding led to a noticeable rise in enrolment of these schools (Campbell et al., 2009; Reid, 2019).

However, the main driver of school choice policies was the Howard Government (1996–2007) funding model, under which funding for non-government schools tripled, significantly growing their resources (Forsey et al., 2017; Ho, 2020a; Reid, 2019). This dramatic growth in public



funding for non-government schools created a school market that not only increased new low-fee private schools, but also gave parents an opt-out alternative to government schools (Reid, 2019). Enrolment in public schools fell between 1977 and 2014 while increased public funding for non-government schools encouraged school choice and private schools (Campbell et al., 2009; Connors & McMorrow, 2015; Reid, 2019). The new faith-based schools and other medium-fee independent schools attracted middle-class parents, and public schools became increasingly residualised, with high concentration of disadvantaged students in some public schools (Reid, 2019).

These changes mean that education has become a private commodity, and parents respond to this new school market by exercising their choice to access the 'best' private schools or 'high-performing' public schools (Angus, 2015; Campbell et al., 2009; Firth & Huntley, 2014).

### **6.3 School Choice**

In this section, I argue that the increased funding of non-government schools since the Howard Government has brought many private schools within enrolment 'reach' for many Australian families. Parents are free to choose schools from the tripartite system to educate their children (Firth & Huntley, 2014). However, this increased government funding of non-government schools has significantly contributed to the resource disparity between school sectors (Cobbold, 2020).

#### *School Choice under Howard*

In the 1990s, the Howard Government's education policies were responsible for introducing a school market by increasing federal funding for non-government schools and establishing new, affordable non-government schools (Connors & McMorrow, 2015; English, 2005; Forsey et al., 2017). The outcome of this rising market economy not only created choice, but also promoted competition among schools. Prior to this, public

schooling was a common good provided for everyone and choosing elite private schools was limited to wealthy families who could afford it, as private schools were not funded by the government. By contrast, according to Reid (2019), education in an education marketplace is constructed as a positional good for the benefit of the individual rather than as a common good. This prompts considerations of how parents respond as consumers incentivised by policy that creates self-interest rather than focusing on the common good.

The intention of the policy change was to give parents more opportunities to choose quality schools via a logic that encouraged competition between schools to improve educational outcomes. Parents and students are considered consumers and education has become a commodity in the school market—therefore, parents are free to choose between competing products to maximise their self-interest (Campbell, et al., 2009; Reid, 2019).

The increase in public funding was not a mechanism designed to enhance market forces, but to provide opportunity and equity (Cahill & Gray, 2010). Some wealthy private schools that are already well resourced and yet continue to receive full government funding use these additional funds to improve their market position by making themselves more attractive than public schools, while public schools continue to experience prolonged underinvestment (Ting, Palmer, & Scott, 2019). Although private schools continue to receive full public funding, the bulk of educationally disadvantaged students remain in the public school system (Reid, 2019). However, this does not mean that the increase in public funding expands the school choices available to parents—these choices are unevenly distributed among different SES groups, and parents with limited means have limited choices (Cahill & Gray, 2010; Campbell et al., 2009; Rowe & Lubienski, 2017). This means that parents' ability to choose is restricted by their capacity to pay.

Further, the neoliberal policies that focus on market, choice and competition emphasise that competition and school performance accountability will improve school quality (Reid, 2019). This accountability takes various forms. For instance, NAPLAN was introduced in 2008 by the then-Commonwealth Minister for Education Julia Gillard for the specific purpose of improving educational outcomes by increasing public accountability. Standardised NAPLAN testing is an annual assessment for students in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9, and school results are published on the My School website. This site gives parents information about schools and a tool for comparing schools' NAPLAN test performance; it also provides information about enrolment, funding and overall school performance (Ho, 2020a; Reid, 2019).

Although the intention of the My School website was to improve school quality through competition and choice to meet market demands, it has not only brought anxiety to parents, but has also affected the school system. The publication of the NAPLAN results on My School does cause undesirable consequences for schools by naming and shaming those that have underperformed, which will inadvertently have an impact on students, principals and teachers. It would also affect a school's curriculum offerings and enable the high performing schools to select the best students via selective admissions criteria that strongly emphasise NAPLAN testing outcomes. Thus, the NAPLAN results, which people tend to place too much emphasis on, have had much negative impact on Australian children and education (Reid, 2019). Sadly, attempting to improve the quality of Australian schools by providing choice and competition, as per the neoliberal ideology, is much less effective at improving outcomes across the education system. Instead, it amplifies the inequality in that system.

## 6.4 Parents Go Shopping

This study suggests that growing anxiety among middle-class parents when they 'shop' for schools for their children is fuelled by neoliberal education policies (Ho, 2020a; Reid, 2019) and by other factors, such as parents taking responsibility to be 'good parent citizens' (Campbell et al., 2009) and their awareness that differences exist between schools across and within sectors.

Parents in this study were aware of their parenting role and took responsibility for school 'shopping'. They actively engaged in the market by seeking information about various schools. While My School was designed to enable parents to make informed choices regarding where to send their children to school (Ho, 2020a), parents in this study sought information about schools through their social networks. They relied heavily on informal sources of information and were able to apply a different perspective to their school decision based on the experiences and opinions of their family and friends.

As in any competitive marketplace, reputation or image affected these parents' choice of school. In a school context, reputation is based on parents' and students' overall attitudes and opinions about a school, and is thus significant to the school choice process.

Although My School provides important information about various schools, it was of marginal use to the parents in this study, as their primary source of information was their social networks. This is reflected in the data: parents placed a great deal of emphasis on school reputation, which was socially constructed through interactions among members of parents' social networks, who were largely from the same or higher SES individuals and shared the same value and beliefs about school quality. Hence, as in any competitive marketplace, parents responded to the school market by choosing the schools they trusted would benefit their

children. Therefore, policy-makers might want to reconsider their investment in the My School website as a tool for information about various schools in Australia, as it seems to be underused by parents.

Parents' behaviour in their approach to their child's schooling has changed in recent decades. Most parents in this study found the process of school choice to be emotionally challenging, and some recognised that their anxiety in this process was fuelled by limited choices due to a combination of economic and policy constraints. In the past, parents were happy to send their children to local public schools, and this was virtually an automatic choice; private schools were mainly for families who could afford the fees or for religious reason (Campbell et al., 2009).

The neoliberal ideology that promotes choice and competition encourages parents to choose schools, and the notion of local school being the school of choice is no longer the case. Ultimately, today's middle-class parents who are well educated and hold a professional or sub-professional job have developed different patterns in their approach to schooling. This shift in their behaviour and attitudes in turn enables them to shop for the 'best' school that offers value for money and individual opportunity for their child (Campbell et al., 2009; Reid, 2019).

According to Ho (2020a), in the last 20 years, Australia's immigration policy, which has encouraged highly skilled and professional migrants from a variety of national and ethnic backgrounds, has radically changed the Australian middle-class approach to schooling. Highly educated and ambitious, these parents arrived in Australia with cultural capital that values educational success and high-status employment, and they have different expectations of their children's education. They see education and competition for good schools and jobs as vital to retaining their SES (Ho, 2020a; Windle, 2015).

Parents in this study were highly aspirational, and the results show that educated middle-class parents with higher levels of education have higher

aspirations for their children than those without a university education. They have high aspirations for and expectations of their children and seek successful schools that can offer their children the educational credentials for higher education and future employment opportunities in the labour market (Beamish & Morey, 2013; Campbell et al., 2009; Windle, 2015). They see themselves as consumers in this competitive educational market, and unwittingly respond to this market by seeking schools that will help their child excel and access opportunities. Clearly, these consumer parents no longer choose schools for the public good, but for their self-interest.

## **6.5 What Parents Look For in a School**

The central finding of this study is that parents 'shop' for the best value-for-money school in the marketplace. They respond to this by choosing a public school that they believe will offer their children the same opportunities and advantages as elite private schools. For most parents, their preferred public high schools are high social-capital schools located in wealthy suburbs. These highly sought-after schools are zoned in locations that in turn become highly sought-after 'wealthier' suburbs. These public schools are government-funded, but charge for some extracurricular activities. If parents can obtain the maximum benefits with the least money from elite public schools, why should they pay high fees to enrol their children in the private sector? The social characteristics of these schools are similar to those of private schools, and middle-class parents are drawn to these public schools, which align with their social status.

With the notion of being a responsible parent increasingly entwined with the notion of being a good consumer in the educational market, parents now take responsibility for making the right school choice for their child to reduce risk and ensure positive outcomes (Cucchiara, 2013). They perceive choosing a high social-capital school as leading to high academic

achievement, entrance to university and then to highly sought-after employment opportunities and upward mobility in terms of social status. Parents seek a school community where their children's peers share the same expectations, norms and values based on social capital and come from similar backgrounds and social classes. Clearly, the parents in this study chose schools with higher ICSEA values (see Appendix 5). Unsurprisingly, middle-class parents favour these advantaged schools and make choices on the basis of student cohort, which reflects a school's social and cultural capital. It is obvious that parents 'shop' more for peers than for schools, and pay less attention to a school's quality than to its social demographic (Rowe & Lubienski, 2017).

Most parents in this study considered the environment in these advantaged schools as the main driver of school quality. They sought high social-capital schools and believed that social relationships between people was an important resource with which they could achieve their goals for their children. As articulated by Alice, if a child is surrounded by 'a group of students who are intellectually being challenged, they are more likely to motivate and inspire each other to succeed'. Ultimately, parents look for schools that foster a strong sense of belonging to a like-minded community. This suggests that parents value school environment and reputation above academic achievement (Jensen et al., 2013).

In sum, a parent's school choice decision is not about type of school or what a school offers; rather, the primary factors are the school environment within an advantaged school. The association with 'people like us' clearly indicates that parents want their children to be associated with people of the same social and cultural background who share the same beliefs, values and aspirations (Campbell et al., 2009; Ho, 2020a; McCarthy, 2013) rather than by people from disadvantaged backgrounds. Their choices are motivated by self-interest: upward mobility, social climbing and a sense of 'belonging'. That is, parents no longer choose

schools for the good of the community, but for the individual benefits their children will receive.

Obviously, less advantaged schools, which are seen as not offering such opportunities, are residualised. This two-tier system (advantaged and disadvantaged schools) creates winners and losers among schools, and ultimately, parents will select the winners (Bonnor & Shepherd, 2017).

### *|Choice and Self-Interest*

Parents are aware of the developing hierarchy of schools, whereby some schools are considered more advantaged; those high up in this hierarchy are highly sought after by parents (Bonnor & Shepherd, 2016; Firth & Huntley, 2014). Therefore, parents exercise their choice by selecting schools that will provide the greatest opportunities for upward mobility, and evidently these are the advantaged schools with good reputations.

This behaviour reinforces the assertion that parents are driven by their self-interest in seeking schools that will offer the best possible outcome for their child and augment their positional advantage (Campbell et al., 2009; McCarthy, 2013). Schools that are seen as not offering more opportunities than others are 'left behind'.

This research makes clear that as long as there is a choice, parents will not choose those schools that are 'left behind'. Middle-income educated parents are increasingly able and willing to buy 'advantage' to ensure their children either maintain or improve their SES. The neoliberal-inspired school choice mantra, which was brought about by the Howard Government, has prompted parents to think that their local school is no longer their default school. This market-based approach to school choice creates an 'uneven playing field that benefits a portion of the community more than it does the remainder', and the education system is moving further away from providing high-quality and accessible education for everyone in the community (Ashenden, 2016; Bonnor & Shepherd, 2017).



## *Choice as a Furphy*

Thus, education has become a private commodity—parents and students are consumers ‘shopping’ for the ‘best’ school to maximise their self-interest (Reid, 2019). While the aim of school choice—to give parents the opportunity to choose the school that best suits their child’s needs or interests— is logical the concern is that disadvantaged families are less able to exercise this choice. Obviously, parents with resources can access the school of their choice and can opt out from enrolling their children in neighbourhood schools in favour of their preferred schools outside their suburbs. However, low-income families may be unable to send their child to the best schools if those schools are private, as they cannot afford the tuition fees. To some, their choice of school is constrained or non-existent; the notion of school choice is thus a furphy.

Although neoliberal ideology promotes choice and freedom, it appears to have benefitted some at the cost of others. It has in fact meant choice and freedom for those who have the resources and hold the power. It also follows that the school choice policy is influenced and arguably made by those in power—the outcome of this is contrary to the principles of democracy, as it only benefits those with the ability to choose.

### **6.6 Is School Choice Policy Hurting Our Democracy?**

This school choice mantra assumes that empowering parents with choice will improve educational quality by holding schools accountable and re-energising democratic participation in public education. On the contrary, it has disempowered parents as participatory citizens in the democratic process, as market-based reform positions them as consumers and thus redefines education as a private rather than a public good.

School choice no longer lies in the hands of the community; instead, the market decides what constitutes a good school. Schools respond to market forces by competing to improve their educational outcomes and

thus meet the demands of the market and their 'consumers' (Riddle & Cleaver, 2017). Parents buy into advantaged schools, which they trust will provide quality education that will benefit their children—the effect of this is the increasing segregation of Australian schooling. Advantaged schools continue to flourish while low-performing schools are residualised, and this growing divide is not only between government and non-government schools, but is more so between high-SES and low-SES schools (Bonnor & Shepherd, 2016). Families from disadvantaged backgrounds simply do not have the capacity to choose, and rely on the democratic process to influence the policies affecting their communities and their children's education. Therefore, the logic of school choice is broken, because some parents are unable to choose certain schools.

Our schools no longer reflect the culture of our community, and the shift to private schools has generated the privatisation of public education, with public schools beginning to be run more like private schools (Rowe & Perry, 2020). This diminishes the fundamental characteristics of the public education system, which is committed to providing quality public education. Public schools do not need to be autonomous like private schools, which are so concerned with marketing, branding and advertising (Reid, 2019). Rather, we must ensure that all public schools are properly funded and have enough resources to do the job expected of them and to continue to produce equal or better results than the non government schools (Mulheron, 2015).

According to Reid (2019), schools' inequitable educational outcomes are characteristic of Australia's current educational practice. Education is now a commodity largely benefitting individuals, and schools compete for parents' attention by maintaining their reputations, which precludes the development of community among students.

Schools are forced to follow the mandated curriculum and its standardised tests and assessments that claim to impart useful knowledge (Riddle &

Cleaver, 2017). Schools compete with one another by narrowing their curriculum offering, spending more time and resources preparing their students for high-stakes tests, and selecting the best students who will perform well in standardised tests so that the schools can top league tables. Teachers are being forced to focus on preparing students for tests instead of giving students the knowledge and skills that will allow them to participate effectively in society as active citizens. Schools are results-driven, and this defeats the purpose of public education, which was configured around the idea of community benefit.

## **6.7 Summary**

The vision outlined by SA's Department for Education is to build a world-class education system that encourages and supports every student to be the very best they can be, regardless of where they live or the kinds of challenges they may face. To achieve this, we must ensure that every child has the opportunity to benefit from the schooling system in SA. Schools must prepare students to thrive in this time of rapid social and technological change.

The impact of changing funding policy and the reorganisation of SA's public schooling policy over the last 10 to 15 years seems to have created a sense of anxiety among middle-class parents. While parents would like to choose the school they want their child to attend, there is no guarantee they can do this, as they are constrained by school zoning and merit-based selection criteria. Thus, those who can afford it obtain access to advantaged schools by 'buying into the zone' or choosing an affordable private school. Therefore, education is now a commodity that largely benefits individuals. Schools use resources to compete for parents' attention and, in turn, parents choose schools to advance their individual self-interest. The challenge presented by this research is how policy-makers can ensure that schools are able to provide equal opportunities to parents who are disenfranchised from school choice.

The funding policy for private schools was intended to expand school choice and enhance opportunity and equity, not to enhance market forces (Cahill & Gray, 2010). However, private schools, which are already advantaged through private equity, continue to receive government funding, and public schools without private equity are thus not on equal footing. According to Cobbold (2020), special deals made by the Morrison Government that favour private schools will accelerate the resource disparity between private and public schools over the next decade. Although more is being spent now on education than was being spent in the 1970s, this does not appear to correlate with increased school performance or equal distribution of overall student achievement (Ashenden, 2016).

The role of public schools is to provide free education for all children, regardless of their abilities or location, to further a fundamental goal of our democratic system: for each member of society to become an active and engaged citizen. According to Sahlberg (2015), a successful education system is not exclusively about high academic test scores, but should also provide better education for children to nurture them and give them the skills to prepare for a challenging future. However, the privatisation of public education neglects the fundamental purpose of schooling by increasing social segregation (Bonnor & Shepherd, 2016; Reid, 2019). Australia's schooling system continues to become more segregated—the issue of inequality will keep widening the gap between the advantaged and disadvantaged, and disadvantaged schools will keep experiencing declining performance (Bonnor & Shepherd, 2016; Bonnor, 2017; Perry, 2018). To improve our education system, we must narrow the gap between low- and high-achieving students and use resources wisely (Sahlberg, 2015).

Thus, to prevent school choice from increasing segregation, we need to address the hierarchy of advantaged and disadvantaged schools by ensuring that everyone has access to a high-quality education, regardless

of background (Ho, 2020a). We as a community can demand for change to those policies so as to bridge this growing hierarchies and inequalities in our education system (Ho, 2020b). If we fail to improve our education system by bridging this widening gap, then how can we offer a world-class education?

Policy-makers should aim to reduce segregation in the school system and investigate the factors that cause these educational inequalities by ensuring that the voices of the marginalised are heard. The current top-down policy, which aims to improve our schooling system by promoting transparency and accountability through a fixation on data, has instead caused significant damage. This must be fixed by implementing a bottom-up approach, whereby policy-makers evaluate how we can achieve our educational goals by providing knowledge and skills for our young people in the 21st century.

The current neoliberal policy of school choice has had many negative consequences for our schooling system, and this must be addressed to meet the challenges of our contemporary approach to education. We need a new educational narrative to ensure that our public education retains the quality and characteristics necessary to building a world-class education system.

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# Appendices

## Appendix 1: Information Sheet for Questionnaire



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### Research Project: Participant information sheet for Year 6 parents or primary caregivers

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**Title:** Secondary School Choice

**Researcher:**

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Flinders University  
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**Supervisor(s):**

Dr David Curtis  
School of Education  
Flinders University  
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**Description of the study**

This study is part of the project entitled Secondary School Choice. This project will investigate how parental aspirations in choosing secondary schools are influenced by socio-economic status and cultural heritage. Flinders University Education department supports this project.

**Purpose of the study:**

This project aims to find out if family background

- Influences parents on school choice
- Influences parents on their aspirations and anxiety in making school choice.

**What will I be asked to do?**

An important part of the project is a survey questionnaire to be completed by parents or caregivers of year 6 students in government primary schools in metropolitan Adelaide. If you agree to complete questionnaire, your involvement will entail about 15 minutes of answering short questions.

You may elect to tick a box on the survey form to indicate your willingness to participate in a one to one interview, which entails 1 hour of your time, at a later date.

inspiring  
achievement

**What benefit will I gain from being involved in this study?**

The sharing of your experiences will fill a gap in our knowledge on how families from different socio economic and cultural background make choices for their children's secondary schooling.

**Will I be identifiable by being involved in this study?**

We do not need your name and you will be anonymous. Your answers to survey questions will remain confidential and only the researcher will have access to identifying information about individual participants.

If you participate in the interview, a pseudonym will be used to ensure you cannot be identified.

**Are there any risks or discomforts if I am involved?**

No. If you have any concerns regarding anticipated or actual risks or discomforts, please raise them with the researcher's supervisor Dr. David Curtis. In the event that you experience any emotional discomfort, you may ring Lifeline 131114 for free support service

**How do I agree to participate?**

Participation is voluntary and you need to be proficient in English. When you receive the questionnaire, simply complete it and return it in the pre-paid envelope provided. If you agree to participate in an interview, Ms. Yu will contact you to arrange a mutually agreed time and location for the interview.

**How will I receive feedback?**

Outcomes from the project will be summarised and given to you by the researcher if you would like to see them. Kindly indicate them in the questionnaire response and leave an email address where the results will be sent.

If you would like to know more at any stage, please feel free to contact Dr.Curtis whose details are provided at the top of this sheet.

**Thank you for taking the time to read this information sheet and we hope that you will accept our invitation to be involved.**

*This research project has been approved by the Flinders University Social and Behavioural Research Ethics Committee (Project number 7070). For more information regarding ethical approval of the project the Executive Officer of the Committee can be contacted by telephone on 8201 3116, by fax on 8201 2035 or by email [human.researchethics@flinders.edu.au](mailto:human.researchethics@flinders.edu.au)*

## Appendix 2: Questionnaire

### QUESTIONNAIRE FOR PARENTS OR PRIMARY CAREGIVERS OF YEAR 6 STUDENTS



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A. Name of school currently attended by your Year 6 child

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B. Background Information

Please complete the following table that seeks information about either one or two parents/caregivers as applicable.

	Parent/Carer 1	Parent/Carer 2
1. Relationship to Year 6 child (e.g. mother)	_____	_____
2. Country of birth	_____	_____
3. Which cultural group do you most identify with? (e.g. Chinese, Middle East, Anglo Australian)	_____	_____
4. Main language spoken at home	_____	_____
5. Highest level of education	_____	_____
6. (a) Occupation (e.g. Nurse - Aged care, Manager - Bank)	_____	_____
(b) Casual / Part-time or Full-time	_____	_____
7. What kind of secondary school did you attend? (If you attended more than one, please note the kind you spent the most time at)	<input type="checkbox"/> Government <input type="checkbox"/> Catholic <input type="checkbox"/> Other non-government	<input type="checkbox"/> Government <input type="checkbox"/> Catholic <input type="checkbox"/> Other non-government

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## QUESTIONNAIRE FOR PARENTS OR PRIMARY CAREGIVERS OF YEAR 6 STUDENTS



### C. Aspiration

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8. What is the highest level of education that you would like to see your child complete?
- Year 12
  - Trade Certificate
  - Diploma
  - University Degree
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9. If your child did not actually go that far in their education, would you be
- very disappointed
  - somewhat disappointed
  - not concerned about it
- 
10. What kind of job or career would you expect your child to aim for?
- Manager/Administrator (Bank/ Subway manager)
  - Professional (Doctor, Engineer, Lawyer, Pharmacist, Accountant, Teacher)
  - Associate professional (Technician, Teacher aide)
  - Clerical, Sales
  - Trades and production
-

## QUESTIONNAIRE FOR PARENTS OR PRIMARY CAREGIVERS OF YEAR 6 STUDENTS



### D. School Choice

11. Pick five main reasons in choosing a secondary school (List from 1 to 5 with 1 being the MOST important)

	School reputation		Private school
	Proximity to home		Specialist school (Music, language specialist)
	Low cost of fees		Values/school ethos
	Academic quality		Curriculum choice
	All round quality		Welfare/support/care
	Siblings attend		Family tradition
	Single-sex school		Extracurricular activities
	Discipline		Facilities and resources of school
	Public school		Teaching/teacher quality

Please list any other reasons that you think are important in choosing a secondary school

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12. Have you selected a secondary school for your child? If so, what type of school have you selected?
- Government
  - Catholic
  - Independent
  - I have not selected a secondary school

## QUESTIONNAIRE FOR PARENTS OR PRIMARY CAREGIVERS OF YEAR 6 STUDENTS



13. (a) Thinking about the different secondary school choices available to you for your year 6 child, how satisfied are you with the range of choices available?

Very satisfied	Somewhat satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Somewhat dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

- (b) Please expand on your answer to 13(a). For example, were there other schools you might have been happy to choose? (e.g. Religious school, friends attending same school)

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14. To what extent are you concerned that your child would have lower educational achievement if he/she is in the following type of secondary school? (Tick one box for each school category)

	Not concerned at all	A little concerned	Somewhat concerned	Very concerned
Government	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Catholic	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Independent	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

## QUESTIONNAIRE FOR PARENTS OR PRIMARY CAREGIVERS OF YEAR 6 STUDENTS



15. When choosing school for your child, how do you rate your anxiety about the following?

	No anxiety	A little anxiety	Moderate anxiety	High anxiety
Fees affordability	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Academic performance	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Discipline	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
School ethos/value	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

### E. Family

16. Sex of child in Year 6  Male  
 Female

17. (a) Number of siblings

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(b) Child's birth order (e.g. 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>)

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18. How much say does your child have in the decision about which secondary school he or she will attend?

None	A little	A lot
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

## QUESTIONNAIRE FOR PARENTS OR PRIMARY CAREGIVERS OF YEAR 6 STUDENTS



### Next Steps

We would like to interview a number of parents or carers from the different schools in which we have distributed questionnaires. Through the interviews, we are seeking in-depth information about the secondary school choices parents make and the factors that influence those choices.

If you are willing to participate in an interview, it would entail about one hour of your time in which we would ask you about the school choices you are making for your children, and about your own family history of schooling. The interview will be arranged at a time and place convenient to you.

*Please tick the box and fill out your contact details if you would be willing to participate in an interview about choosing a secondary school for your child*

I am willing to be contacted by the researcher to arrange an interview

Name

Telephone (home, work and/or mobile)

E-mail address

If you would like to know the result of the survey and to receive a copy of the summary results, kindly leave an email address to which this can be sent to. This email address will not be used for any other purposes and will be deleted from our records when we have sent the results.

Thank you very much for assisting us with our research by filling out this questionnaire.

*End of questionnaire*

**PLEASE POST TO ME USING THE REPLY-PAID ENVELOPE PROVIDED AS SOON AS POSSIBLE**

Ms Esther Yu

Faculty of Education, Flinders University, South Australia



## **Appendix 3: Interview Protocol**

Date:.....

Place:.....

Start time:.....

Finish time:.....

Interviewee:.....

### ***Introduction***

Thank you very much for participating in this interview. This is a part of the research 'Secondary School Choice' that aims to investigate how parents choose secondary school for their child.

I would like to remind you that our conversation would be audio recorded and then transcribed in verbatim. I will also take notes during the interview. All information provided by you will remain in the strictest confidence and your identity will remain anonymous during the research process or after the research process. Feel free to stop me anytime if you do not wish to continue further with the interview.

### ***Background questions:***

Could you tell me briefly something about your family background, yourself as in your ethnicity, employment and your own educational background?

### ***About choosing schools***

1. Next year, your child will be in his final year in primary school. How do you feel about that?

2. When you think about choosing secondary school for your child, how do you feel?
3. What are some of the things that you will be thinking about as you consider choosing a school?
4. When choosing secondary school, what kind of things do you consider being important in making your choice? (E.g. academic achievement, school proximity to home, sporting facilities?)
5. How do you find out about the various schools that you are considering?
6. Have you attended any of the information nights run by the secondary school? Are they useful?
7. What do you want out of the school for your child?
8. How do you rate the secondary school choice making when compared with other educational decisions that you have made for your child?
9. How and why is this decision-making so different? If it is?
10. Have you decided where your child is going to for his secondary school?
- 11 . What school are you sending him/her?
- 12 . What are the factors that cause you to make such decision?
- 13 . What kind of emotional impact has this process of making school choices has on you?

### ***Ending the interview***

Is there any other point that you would like to add?

Thank you for your time. Once the interview is transcribed, I will send it to you for your review. Thank you.

## Appendix 4: Consent Form

### CONSENT FORM FOR PARTICIPATION IN RESEARCH (by interview)

Secondary School Choice

I .....

being over the age of 18 years hereby consent to participate as requested in the Letter of Introduction and Information Sheet for the research project on "Secondary School Choice".

1. I have read the information provided.
2. Details of procedures and any risks have been explained to my satisfaction.
3. I agree to audio recording of my information and participation.
4. I am aware that I should retain a copy of the Information Sheet and Consent Form for future reference.
5. I understand that:
  - I may not directly benefit from taking part in this research.
  - I am free to withdraw from the project at any time and am free to decline to answer particular questions.
  - While the information gained in this study will be published as explained, I will not be identified, and individual information will remain confidential.
  - I may ask that the recording/observation be stopped at any time, and that I may withdraw at any time from the session or the research without disadvantage.
6. I agree/do not agree\* to the transcript being made available to other researchers who are not members of this research team, but who are judged by the research team to be doing related research, on condition that my identity is not revealed.
7. I have had the opportunity to discuss taking part in this research with a family member or friend.

**Participant's signature**.....**Date**.....

I certify that I have explained the study to the volunteer and consider that she/he understands what is involved and freely consents to participation.

**Researcher's name**.....

**Researcher's signature**.....**Date**.....

*NB: Two signed copies should be obtained. The copy retained by the researcher may then be used for authorisation of Items 8 and 9, as appropriate.*

8. I, the participant whose signature appears below, have read a transcript of my participation and agree to its use by the researcher as explained.

**Participant's signature.....Date.....**

9. I, the participant whose signature appears below, have read the researcher's report and agree to the publication of my information as reported.

**Participant's signature.....Date.....**

## **Appendix 5: List of Schools Gathered and Tabulated from the Interview Data**

The table below shows a list of schools that support parents' perceptions of school quality. Parents were comparing these schools in relation to what constitutes a 'good' school. In the table, the schools are ranked based on the NAPLAN Year 9 scores. All schools are government secondary schools with the exception of High School 7, which is a non-government school.

*School achievement based on the average NAPLAN Year 9 Scores and Year 12 SACE achievement, ordered by NAPLAN rank*

School	ICSEA	NESB	Location	Average NAPLAN	NAPLAN rank	SACE certificate awarded
High School 1	1,125	55%	East	632.8	1	95.9%
High School 2	1,083	51%	City	609.0	2	94.2%
High School 3	1,108	39%	East	606.4	3	94.8%
High School 7	1,068	20%	West	586.4	4	99.5%
High School 8	1,029	22%	West	577.6	5	92.2%
High School 9	969	52%	West	563.2	6	90.9%
High School 4	999	16%	North East	562.8	7	100%
High School 5	990	21%	West	558.2	8	87.7%
High School 6	974	51%	West	545.4	9	67.9%

Table 1 shows that there is a very strong positive correlation ( $r = 0.96$ ) between ICSEA and average NAPLAN scores in the sample of schools listed by parents. This indicates that schools with students from families

with a greater socio-educational advantage tend to fare better at NAPLAN tests and shows that SES has a huge effect on achievement.

The average NAPLAN scores recorded have a moderate to strong correlation ( $r = 0.52$ ) with SACE completion rates. While higher NAPLAN scores generally point to higher SACE completion rates (High School 6 had the lowest average NAPLAN score and recorded a SACE completion rate 2.44 standard deviations lower than the mean SACE completion rate), some schools appear to be successfully adding value to their students in the years between NAPLAN and SACE. High School 4 enrolled students from average SES backgrounds (ICSEA 999) but with relatively poor academic performance in Year 9 NAPLAN. Despite that, it achieved an enviable 100% SACE completion rate.

Data on NAPLAN Year 9 2018 and SACE 2018 Year 12 were obtained from the My School website.

Caveats for 2018 Year 12 results for South Australia:

### **Senior secondary certificate awarded**

This measure includes those students who were enrolled in 2018. These students may or may not have returned to study in the following year.

### **Completed senior secondary school**

This measure includes those students who were enrolled in 2018, but not in 2019. These students did not undertake any further SACE study in 2019.

Senior secondary caveats:

Retrieved from [https://myschool.edu.au/media/1683/2018\\_year\\_12\\_results\\_caveats.pdf](https://myschool.edu.au/media/1683/2018_year_12_results_caveats.pdf)