An exploration into the factors that influence parents when choosing a faith-based school for their children: An Australian faith-based school system case study.

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8 November 2022

STATEMENT OF ORIGINAL AUTHORSHIP

I declare that the work contained in this thesis has not been submitted previously for a degree or diploma at this institution, an Australian or overseas university or any other institution of higher education. To the best of my knowledge and belief, this thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made.

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ABSTRACT

This research was borne out of curiosity concerning the reasons why more and more parents are choosing to send their children to faith-based schools in Australia's secular society. This research aimed to shed light on this question by examining the reasons for parental school choice in four Seventh-day Adventist faith-based schools, two of which were urban, and two rural. It also sought to identify school choice differences between urban and rural, and also school choices by parents with faith affiliations and those without any faith affiliation. The literature revealed that although there is national research into school choice, there is limited research into factors that influence parents to choose faith-based schools in Australia and certainly a dearth of research that specifically relates to reasons for choosing Seventh-day Adventist faith-based schools.

This study used a mixed methods approach in its exploration of the research question. The convergent parallel design was adopted that incorporated concurrent yet separate phases of quantitative and qualitative data collection. Firstly, a survey was sent to all parents of the four schools asking them to rate the importance of items relating to school choice. Secondly, semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted with twenty-one parent volunteers from the four schools. The social identity theory and secular good theory were two lenses that provided a useful theoretical framework for the research.

Drawing on survey data, the study identified that factors relating to the nurture and care of students, the behaviour and behaviour management of students, the appearance of students and the wearing of uniform had the greatest influence on parental school choice. Interview data revealed that parents also placed great importance on factors that included a school which supported and taught family values, provided for their child's well-being and provided an opportunity for their child to reach their educational potential. Importantly, the data revealed that there is no single reason or factor for school choice but that parents chose a faith-based school due to a complexity of reasons. These factors were also not considered in isolation, but as a dynamic, interacting and synergetic process. These findings are particularly pertinent because the majority of students that are enrolled in these schools are from non-Seventh-day Adventist families and further, many parents identify as having no faith affiliation at all.

An important implication of this research is a clearer understanding of why parents choose faith-based schools. The research also suggests that parents consider a range of aspects of a school important in their decision-making process and this should drive marketing and future planning to include a broad view of the school, not just one or two features. Although this research is based on one faith-based school system, the findings may be utilised by other faith-based school systems in Australia to also enhance enrolments or retain current students.

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ABBREVIATIONS

List of abbreviations incorporated within this research, in alphabetical order.

ABS	Australian Bureau of Statistics
ADD/ADHD	Attention-Deficit Disorder/ Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder
ASA	Adventist Schools Australia
ASD	Autism Spectrum Disorder
ISA	Independent Schools Australia, formerly ISCA
ISCA	Independent Schools Council of Australia
ISQ	Independent Schools Queensland
NNSW	North New South Wales
SDA	Seventh-day Adventist
Non-SDA	non-Seventh-day Adventist

LIST OF PUBLICATIONS AND SCHOLARLY ACTIVITIES

- Henley, V. (2021). Research from the inside: One teacher's research journey within a school setting. *TEACH Journal of Christian Education, 15*(3), 8-13.

- Book chapter accepted in the forthcoming book: *Revealing Jesus in the Learning Environment: In Celebration of Teaching.*

- Henley, V. (2021). *Faith-based School Choice Research* [Conference presentation], Christian Education Research Centre Symposium, 15th April, Avondale University, Australia

- Henley, V. (2021). *Faith-based School Choice – Qualitative Findings* [Conference presentation], Christian Education Research Centre Seminar, 18th May, Avondale University, Australia

CHAPTER 1: RESEARCH ORIENTATION

1.1 Introduction to the Research

The researcher's interest in parental reasons for school choice stemmed from her many years of teaching in the Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) faith-based school system. The researcher was interested in discovering why parents would choose to send their children to fee-paying schools when there are free government schools available for all children, and why, in Australia's secular society, they would choose faith-based schools to educate their children. During this period of time the researcher heard many and varied reasons that parents gave for sending their children to the SDA school with which the researcher was affiliated. Sentiments such as desiring a caring environment, the explicit teaching of family values, academic rigour and value for money were commonly expressed by parents. Interestingly, these anecdotal responses were forthcoming from both SDA parents as well as non-SDA parents.

The schools which were the focus of this study of faith-based school choice are embedded within a faith-based education system that is administered by the Australian Seventh-day Adventist faith tradition, Adventist Schools Australia (ASA).

1.2 Background to the Research

According to the United Nations the right of a parent to choose a school for their child is a fundamental human right. Article 26 (3) of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations, 1948) stipulates that "parents have a prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children". Further to this, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights Article 13 (3) (United Nations, 1966) charges its state adherents to ensure the "liberty of parents… to choose for their children schools… to ensure the religious and moral education of their children in conformity with their own convictions". The Australian government ratified this covenant in 1972 (Hogan, 1984) and guaranteed this right to all Australian parents. This school choice research is embedded within the context of the freedom of choice afforded to Australian parents to choose where their children are educated.

This choice has been a part of Australia's white settlement history and has created a dilemma of choice for parents. Australian parents have numerous schools from which to

choose; these fit into two broad categories: government and non-government schools. Government schools are funded by state or territory governments with some funds allocated by the federal government (Australian Council for Educational Research, 2018). They are also known as public schools and state schools. These schools are fee-free schools and are open to all children in Australia. However, in recent years, government-run selective schools have emerged that often select their students based on their academic ability (Campbell et al., 2009). Selective schools have become highly sought after due to the perceived potential of children to achieve comparable results to non-government schools without the associated costs (Tsolidis, 2016). The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) identifies non-government schools as Catholic schools and independent schools (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2019b). Catholic schools can be divided into systemic schools and Catholic independent schools. Systemic Catholic schools are administered by the diocese in which it is located and generally charge low fees; Catholic independent schools are operated by religious orders of the church and can attract very high fees (Catholic Schools NSW, 2019). Non-government schools are also known as private schools or independent schools. These schools can be a part of a faith-based system or espouse a particular educational philosophy and are answerable to their boards or trusts (Independent Schools Council of Australia, 2017). The fee structure for these schools varies widely.

A longitudinal view of student enrolments indicates that over the past 20 years an increasing number of Australian parents have chosen to educate their children in non-government schools. The ABS (2021) reported that there has been an increase in student enrolments in non-government schools, from 31% of all school enrolments in 2001 to 34.9% in 2021. The 2019 National Report on Schooling in Australia (Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2019) revealed that 29.6% of primary students and 40.7% of secondary school students were enrolled in non-government schools. This shows an 11.1% difference between the number of primary students and the number of secondary students in non-government schools, suggesting more parents choose to send their children to non-government schools for their secondary years.

Pertinent to this research, according to Independent Schools Australia (ISA), 84% of all non-government schools have a religious affiliation in 2020 (Independent Schools Australia, 2021). In 2020 there were 1,169 Independent schools in Australia with 647,371 full-time students, a significant increase from 1,086 non-government schools in 2011 with a total of almost 552,800 full-time students (Independent Schools Council of Australia, 2012).

In 2011 SDA schools in Australia had 2% of all non-government school enrolments (Independent Schools Council of Australia, 2012); in 2021 this percentage had increased to 2.3% of all non-government school enrolments (Independent Schools Australia, 2021).

The rise in popularity of faith-based schools seems counter-intuitive given that Western culture, and Australian culture in particular, is largely secular with a secular state enshrined in the Constitution since Federation. Section 116 of the Australia Constitution states that:

> The Commonwealth shall not make any law for establishing any religion, or for imposing any religious observance, or for prohibiting the free exercise of any religion, and no religious test shall be required as a qualification for any office or public trust under the Commonwealth. (Commonwealth of Australia Constitution Act 1900, s 116)

However, Habermas (2008) discusses the phenomenon of post-secular society in Western nations, including Australia, and identified a resurgence in society's religious consciousness that challenges the traditional concept of secularism. Building on Habermas' argument, Moberg and Granholm (2012) assert that within post-secular society there is a "resurgence and growing public visibility and awareness of religion" (p. 98). They further claim that religion permeates a wide area of modern western living:

> Above all, the pervasiveness of religious subject matter in popular culture should draw our attention to how the present-day apparent resurgence and growing public visibility of religion can be observed not only in relation to issues relating more directly to politics and public civil debate, but also throughout a number of different areas of contemporary social and cultural life. (p. 107)

Stark (2015) adds that there is a global religious awakening claiming that society "is much *more* intensely religious than ever before" (p.9). Natsis (2016) contributes to the understanding of these concepts in an educational setting and postulates that in post-secular Australian society, secondary school students have an "intrinsic spiritual awareness" (p. 66).

It is plausible, then, that a resurgence of religious awareness is contributing to the rise in the number of faith-based schools and the increasing enrolments in faith-based schools in the context of a post-secular Australian society. As such, this is a relevant study as it delves into the phenomenon of school choice within the context of one faith-based school system in the emerging post-secular society of Australia.

The first SDA school opened in Melbourne in the early 1890s. Today, ASA supports 48 school campuses across Australia offering Christian education to almost 17,000 students (Adventist Schools Australia, 2022). The SDA school system is recognised by the Australian government and is part of the global education network of the SDA church, currently educating over 2 million students (Adventist Schools Australia, 2022). A principle focus of these schools is to provide quality Christian education within the Seventh-day Adventist context. ASA states that "Adventist Education strives to be transformative. It seeks to impart more than academic knowledge through the balanced development of the whole person: spiritually, mentally, socially, and physically" (Adventist Schools Australia, 2022).

The Australian SDA schools' education system functions within the overall world-wide SDA Church corporate structure. In broad terms this structure consists of global region-based levels with each level being a sub-group of the level above: General Conference, Division, Union Conference and Conference. The Australian Union Conference is responsible for overseeing church entities and organisations based in Australia. The Australian Union Conference is divided into nine Conferences (geographical regions). The North New South Wales (NNSW) Conference is one of the regions within the Australia Union Conference and administers ten ASA schools. This case study explores school choice in a sample of four schools within the NNSW Conference region. These are two urban schools (denoted as Urban School 1 and Urban School 2) and two rural schools (denoted as Rural School 1 and Rural School 2). Within the NNSW Conference region there is a school company, SDA Schools (NNSW) Limited, that has its own legal entity which operates the schools within the Conference region. A brief overview of each school is included to provide an appreciation of the development of school enrolments and show that there has been an increase in overall enrolments over an eleven-year period in all schools except for Rural School 1. Furthermore, and pertinent to this study, the statistics show that all schools experienced a decline in the overall percentage of SDA students and therefore an increase in non-SDA students.

1.2.1 Urban School 1

Urban School 1 has maintained steady or growing enrolments in recent years. Total enrolment numbers have increased from 845 students in 2010 to 1023 in 2021, an increase of 21%, from pre-Kindy to Year 12. According to the school's August census numbers 2021, the school is made up of approximately 85% non-SDA students. This has increased from

2010 where 75% were non-SDA students. According to The Good Schools Guide (2020) there are forty-eight schools within a ten kilometre radius of Urban School 1. Thirteen of these are non-government schools, including Urban School 1.

The aim of this research is to understand why Urban School 1 is the choice of an ever-growing number of parents, particularly non-SDA parents, especially when there are numerous government and non-government schools in this urban region of NSW from which to choose.

1.2.2 Urban School 2

Urban School 2 has maintained steady or growing enrolments in recent years. Total enrolment numbers have increased from 715 students in 2010 to 877 in 2021, an increase of almost 23% from pre-Kindy to Year 12. According to the school's August census numbers 2021, the school is made up of approximately 79% non-SDA students. This has decreased from 2010 when 85% were non-SDA students. There are ninety-eight schools within ten kilometres of Urban School 2, of which twenty-nine are non-government schools, including Urban School 2 (The Good Schools Guide, 2020).

This research aims to discover why Urban School 2, in a large urban area, is the choice of an increasing number of SDA and non-SDA parents, especially when there are numerous government and non-government schools in the urban region from which to choose.

1.2.3 Rural School 1

Rural School 1 has experienced fluctuating enrolments in recent years. Total enrolment numbers have decreased in pre-Kindy to Year 12 from 238 students in 2010 to 210 in 2021, a decrease of almost 12%. According to the school's August census numbers 2021, the school is made up of approximately 90% non-SDA students. This has increased from 2010 where 70% were non-SDA students. Indigenous student numbers in 2020 are approximately 9%. The rural region has nine government schools and six non-government schools, including Rural School 1 (The Good Schools Guide, 2020).

This school is an outlier in this research due to the decrease in enrolments over a ten-year period. However, the percentage of non-SDA students has increased. This research aims to discover why Rural School 1 is the choice of parents, particularly non-SDA parents,

especially when there are other government and non-government schools in the region from which to choose.

1.2.4 Rural School 2

Rural School 2 has experienced overall growth in its enrolments in recent years, but with a decline in enrolments from 2016 – 2018, with a steady increase since 2019. Total enrolment numbers have increased from 323 students in 2010 to 562 in 2021, an increase of almost 74% from pre-Kindy to Year 12. According to the school's August census numbers 2020, the school body is made up of approximately 91% non-SDA students, the highest of all four schools. This has increased from 2010 where approximately 84% were non-SDA students. This school is unique from the other SDA schools under investigation in that it has a large body of Indigenous students, 23% in 2020, compared to 16% in 2010. Parents of this region have nine government schools, one Catholic primary school and one Catholic high school from which to choose (The Good Schools Guide, 2020).

This research aims to discover why Rural School 2 is the choice of an ever-growing number of parents, particularly non-SDA parents and indigenous parents, in this rural region of NSW.

Figure 1.1 provides a comparison of total enrolments of all four schools. It can be seen that since 2010 school enrolments have generally increased over time, following non-government school growth trends indicated by the ABS.

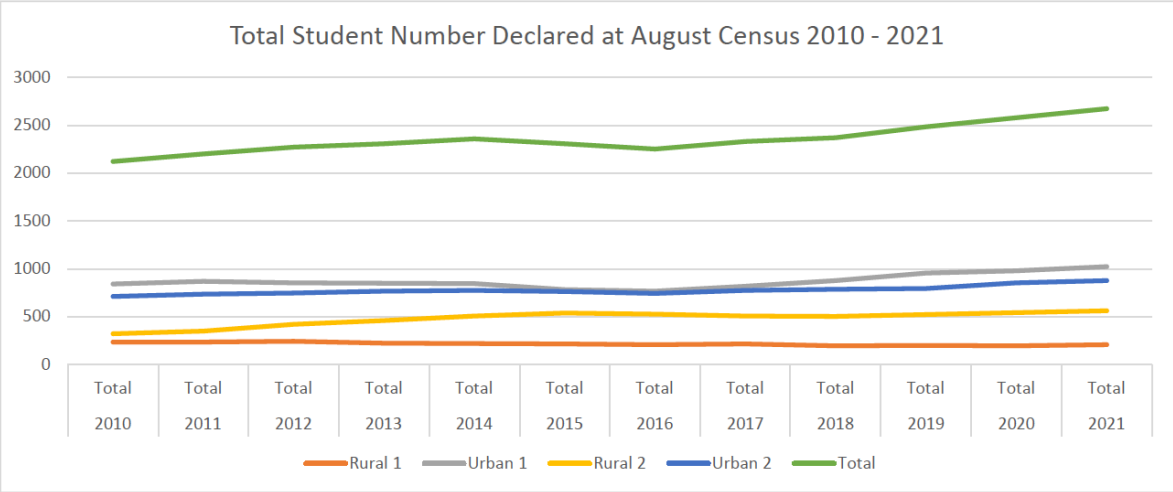


Figure 1. 1

Total student numbers, August census 2010 – 2021

1.3 Rationale for the Research

It is apparent that in the Australian educational context, there is limited research into parental school choice of faith-based schools. One of the few is the study by Kennedy et al. (2011) who report on the most important factors affecting choice of school for Catholic families in Queensland. Wood's (2013) research into Catholic school selection in three low socio-economic, metropolitan parishes explored the socio-cultural influences that shaped parents' decisions. Another study by English (2004) investigates why parents chose a Christian school in Queensland. Of particular importance to this research, there are minimal studies investigating why parents choose Australian SDA schools. There has been only one such study, conducted by Beamish and Morey (2012, 2013), who enquired into the factors that influenced parents to choose a particular Western Australian SDA school for their children. Finally, no studies were identified that explored the factors of school choice comparing specific SDA schools. This study aims to provide information and data to understand school choice in this specific context.

1.4 Research Questions

The research question chosen is intimately related to the researcher's work as a secondary teacher within the SDA faith-based school system. Flick (2009) purports that research questions

> do not come from nowhere. In many cases, their origin lies in the researchers' personal biographies and their social context. The decision about a specific question mostly depends on the researchers' practical interests and their involvement in certain social and historical contexts. (p. 98)

The research question is a critical element that guides the entire research, from the literature review to the decisions about the research design to the decisions about data collection (Bryman, 2012). This study was directed by the following research question and the associated sub-questions.

1.4.1 Research Question

The overarching question guiding this research was:

> What are the factors that influence parents when choosing a faith-based school for their children?

1.4.2 Sub-questions

To adequately explore the overarching question four sub-questions were identified:

- Are there differences between parents' ideal school choice and their reasons for school choice of their current school?
- Are there differences in the reasons for school choice between parents with different faith affiliations: SDA faith affiliation, other faith affiliation, and parents with no faith affiliation?
- Are there differences in the reasons for school choice for parents whose children attend urban and rural schools?
- What sources of information were important in helping parents make their school choice?

1.5 Significance of the Research

The significance of this research is to help understand why an increasing number of parents are choosing SDA schools in Australia, despite having government and other non-government school options within their local area. A review of the literature revealed that there has been no comprehensive Australian research into why parents are choosing schools of the SDA faith tradition. The researcher's original contribution to knowledge will include a greater understanding of the factors of parental school choice within a faith-based school system. This is particularly pertinent because most students enrolled in the SDA schools within this research come from non-SDA families. This research will provide quantitative and qualitative data that may help explain this trend.

This research could help develop more relevant educational directions for SDA schools and direct more appropriate marketing strategies within SDA schools based on data rather than anecdotal evidence. The scope and findings of this research could help SDA and other faith-based schools develop strategies to maintain or enhance their enrolment numbers. Furthermore, appreciating why parents with any faith affiliation as well as parents with no faith affiliation choose SDA schools may aid educators and administrators in providing quality educational choices in a faith-based school environment.

1.6 Terminology

It is important to provide an understanding of the Australian school sectors. The literature uses a variety of terminology interchangeably in relation to the public and private

school sectors. The terms ‘public school’, ‘government school’ and ‘state school’ are all used in the literature. These schools are under the control of a state-run Education Department. For this study, the term ‘government school’ will be used, unless a direct quote is provided.

The terms ‘private school’, ‘non-government school’ and ‘independent school’ are also evident in the literature. These schools are not under the direct control of a state-run Education Department. They are often affiliated with a religious organisation, such as the Anglican schools, Islamic schools or SDA schools. Other schools can be operated by boards and trusts espousing particular philosophies, such as Steiner schools or Montessori schools (Independent Schools Australia, 2021). To complicate definitions further, the ABS classifies schools as government and non-government with the non-government sector subcategorised as Catholic schools or independent schools (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2019a). For the purposes of this study, the term ‘non-government school’ will be used for all schools not under the direct administration of the respective state-run Education Department, unless a direct quote is provided.

A particular focus of this research is whether there are differences in the reasons for school choice between parents whose children attend urban versus rural schools. In Australia these terms are not used consistently and there is a wide variety of usage for both terms. It is useful to provide a working definition of urban and rural as it relates to this research. The Department of Primary Industries and Energy and Department of Human Services and Health (1994) provide helpful definitions of these terms. According to this publication the term ‘urban’ can relate to large metropolitan regions that consist of a population of 100,000 or more in size; it can also relate to areas that are smaller in population size that have other specific characteristics:

> All capital city statistical subdivisions are predominantly ‘urban’. Statistical sub-divisions which are outside the capital city SDs [sic: subdivisions] but which have urban centres with populations greater that 24 999, are also designated ‘urban’ if they consist of more than one LGA [sic: local government area]. (p. 9)

Urban School 1 resides in what is identified as a capital city (Sydney) statistical subdivision. Urban School 2 is categorised as an ‘other metropolitan centre’ within the Newcastle region. Hence, these two schools are deemed urban schools.

The term ‘rural’ relates to regions outside of the major metropolitan regions that are typically less populated. The Department of Primary Industries and Energy and Department of Human Services and Health (1994) states:

> The term ‘rural’ is variously used in industry, occupational, locational and settlement contexts. It can be synonymous with agriculture or farming. It can also be synonymous with the ‘country’. Or it can be any area which is not a town or city. It is often used to include towns and cities. (p. 8)

According to this government classification Rural School 1 is a ‘large rural centre’ and Rural School 2 is categorised as ‘other rural area’. For the purposes of this research, these two schools are deemed rural schools.

1.7 Outline of the Thesis

This thesis consists of six chapters as follows:

Chapter 1: Research Orientation advances the concept of school choice as a fundamental human right of parents. It then provides background information that contextualises school choice within the research. Next, there is an overview of the context of the study, including the four schools: Urban School 1, Urban School 2, Rural School 1 and Rural School 2. The rationale for the research is provided, the research question and its associated sub-questions are presented and the significance of the research is introduced. Finally, a clarification of terminology used within the thesis is provided.

Chapter 2: Literature Review critically evaluates and synthesises the current research in identifying factors that affect parental school choice in Australia and identifies common themes.

Chapter 3: Methodology explains the methodology of this research. This chapter outlines the study’s worldview and philosophical position, and presents the theoretical lenses adopted for the study. It then outlines the research design and its rationale, followed by the respective elements of this design, such as participants, data collection and data analysis.

Chapter 4: Quantitative Data, Results and Analysis presents research findings from the quantitative phase of the study, specifically the survey, that was distributed to the parents of the four schools involved. A detailed analysis using descriptive statistics is provided.

Chapter 5: Qualitative Data, Results and Analysis presents research findings from the qualitative phase of the study, specifically semi-structured interviews, conducted with parents from the four schools involved. An explanation of the sample and data analysis is provided. Then, an in-depth discussion of the findings as it relates to the school choice decision-making process of parents is then presented. This is followed by reporting on the sources of information that help parents in their school choice decisions.

Chapter 6: Synthesis and Discussion presents the findings and implications of this study for key stakeholders including Urban School 1, Urban School 2, Rural School 1, Rural School 2, Adventist Schools Australia and other faith-based schools. It also provides an acknowledgement of research limitations and a discussion of the research recommendations.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

This literature review provides an overview of the Australia school choice context. In order to appreciate how Australia has developed its dual education system, a short historical overview of the development of government and non-government schools is provided. This is followed by a review of the key factors of school choice in the Australian school choice context. Then the literature review discusses parental motivational factors affecting school choice, followed by a discussion of literature relating to where parents source information about schools. The chapter concludes with themes and factors from the literature arranged into four domains, to provide a basis for the structure of the survey questionnaire; school, curriculum, student and services.

2.2 The Australian Context

Australian parents have a plethora of government and non-government schools to choose from, both of which receive federal and state government funding. It is important to appreciate the history of how the dual education system in Australia developed and how funding has provided choice to Australian parents.

2.2.1 A Brief History of the Dual School System in Australia

From early colonial days Australian parents have had school choice in Australia. Between 1872 and 1895 all Australian colonies passed Education Acts allowing free, compulsory and secular primary education whereby financial assistance to existing church schools ceased (Bonnor & Caro, 2007; Buckingham, 2001). Catholic schools survived this lack of funding by utilising the religious orders as teaching staff and Protestant schools by charging high fees (McCarthy, 2006).

From Federation to the mid-20th century non-government schools relied mainly on tuition fees for income (Caldwell, 2010). It is important to note that at this time in Australia's history education was essentially limited to primary schooling although some secondary schools did appear in the early 20th century (Caldwell, 2010). It was not till near the end of the Second World War that schooling became compulsory up to the age of 15 (Bonnor & Caro, 2007).

Hogan (1984) explains that during the height of the Cold War, the Menzies government provided some funding to both the government and non-government school sector in an effort to develop and promote the teaching of science. In 1972, the ALP and its leader, Gough Whitlam, championed further government funding to non-government schools to attract Catholic voters (Bonnor & Caro, 2007; Buckingham, 2001; Morsy et al., 2013; Potts, 1999). Furthermore, the Whitlam Government established the Interim Committee for the Australian Schools Commission, headed by Professor Peter Karmel (Harrington, 2013). The Karmel Report 1973 recommended an increase of funding to all school sectors (Thompson et al., 2019). Cahill and Gray (2010) explain that a core feature of the report was "that it did not distinguish between government and non-government schools, but rather, between rich and poor schools" (p. 122). This funding structure was continued by both Labor and Liberal governments for the next two decades and followed by the Howard government which, in 1996, provided increased funding for non-government schools (Bonnor & Caro, 2007; Potts, 1999).

Government and non-government schools continued to receive both state and federal government funding, and in 2001 non-government schools received funding based on the socioeconomic status (SES) of their school community (Caldwell, 2010). The specific amount of government funding was determined by the "estimated capacity of a school's community to support its school; that is, its SES. This measure was calculated by linking student residential addresses…" (Harrington, 2013, p. 8).

In 2010 a review of school funding, the Gonski Review, was instigated and the final report was released in 2012. Harrington (2013) claims it became the "blueprint for a major overhaul of funding for school education, including the proposal for a fundamental realignment of the historic funding roles of the Australian and state and territory governments…" (p. 35). The Review recommended that the level of recurrent funding for all schools should be determined by a Schooling Resource Standard (SRS). Consequently, the Commonwealth government introduced the SRS as a new model of funding in 2014 and, for non-government schools, provided base funding per student and a complex formula for loadings for different areas of disadvantage such as SES background, disability, English language proficiency, Indigenous students, school size and location (Harrington, 2013).

From 2020 the Direct Measure of income (DMI) replaced the previous SES model to determine parental capacity to contribute (CTC) to the costs of running a school (Australian Government Department of Education, 2021). The DMI is based on the median income of

parents at a non-government school. A school's CTC impacts the amount of funding a school receives from the Commonwealth government. As a result of this continued funding of all school sectors, Australian parents continue to have school options for their children.

2.3 Key Factors Relating to School Choice in Australian Literature

The Australian literature reviewed showed that there is no single reason or factor for school choice but rather the choice of school was based on a synergy of factors (Beamish & Morey, 2012, 2013; Goh & Dolnicar, 2006; Independent Schools Council of Australia, 2017; Independent Schools Queensland, 2019; Kennedy et al., 2011; Warren, 2016). A synthesis of the literature identified a number of commonly cited factors influencing parental school choice. Even though the following list is not exhaustive, the commonly mentioned key factors are as follows: academic excellence, affordability, location, quality facilities and resources, quality teaching, smaller class sizes, a supportive and caring environment, and values. These factors are presented in alphabetical order.

Further, the above-listed factors are couched in broad terms and may include a range of descriptor phrases to identify a respective parental choice factor. For example, some researchers used the term 'quality teachers' whereas others used the term 'quality teaching' or 'teaching quality' to identify the same key factor, as determined by the researcher. Also, some of the literature used the term 'religious affiliation' and others used 'Christian school' to identify the nature of the school. It is noted that these variations, though highlighting a particular aspect of a factor, have considerable overlap in their respective constructs.

2.3.1 Academic Excellence

The literature suggested that a school's academic excellence is a factor influencing parental school choice. However, it appears that there are a number of different ways in which the term 'academic excellence' has been perceived and interpreted. For example, terms similar to academic excellence are used including: academic orientation, academic potential, academic performance, academic quality, performs well, successful completion of Year 12, academic reputation, academic reasons, top examination results, educational excellence and strong academic performance. This reveals that there are some perceived differences in what academic excellence actually means. The range of terms used within this broad key construct implies different nuances, and the attached meanings may differ for individuals and researchers.

Some of these terms identify perceptions of researchers that may be different to the respondents' perceptions. This identifies inherent limitations that have come from the researcher or driven by the language that researcher has used. However, the ensuant constraints placed on respondents in surveys or questionnaires can be explored with the use of qualitative methods such as interviews. Some studies have indeed utilised qualitative methods such as interviews that have enabled the respondents to articulate what academic excellence means to them (Beamish & Morey, 2013; Jamal Al-deen, 2018; Windle, 2015).

One could expect that a school's reputation for academic excellence would rate high as a reason or factor contributing to the choice of school. Indeed, many studies concluded that academic excellence is a major factor for school selection by Australian parents (Beamish & Morey, 2013; Goh & Dolnicar, 2006; Independent Schools Council of Australia, 2008; Warren, 2016). However, other studies revealed that academic excellence is rated lower by parents than other factors of school choice (Independent Schools Queensland, 2015, 2019; O'Neill, 2014).

Goh and Dolnicar (2006) collected data relating to research conducted into factors affecting parental choice of primary schools. They discovered that a school's good academic reputation was the second highest of 21 factors, indicating a high priority of parents. In a similar vein Warren (2016), also assessing parents' choices of primary school, discovered that academic excellence was one of the main factors for many parents choosing a non-government school. Furthermore, she purported that a higher percentage of children moved schools for "better academic opportunities" (p. 170) than they did for moving house.

Beamish and Morey (2013), in their research into the school choice of parents whose children attend a Christian school stated definitively that "parents were looking for schools that have strong academic orientation" (p. 32). Additionally, they discovered that approximately half of the parents that participated in interviews articulated the desire for a school that had "high academic quality and performed well, particularly with respect to year 12 grades" (p. 28). Interestingly, Le and Miller (2003) discovered that the successful completion rate of Year 12 is higher at non-government schools than at government schools, suggesting "that the private schools are offering value-added and this might explain the trend away from government schools since the late 1970s" (p.71), implying academic excellence is fostered more at non-government schools.

This is also supported by the 2017 Independent Schools Council of Australia's (ISCA) research exploring factors that affected school choice among parents of children attending non-government schools (Independent Schools Council of Australia, 2017). The research employed a quantitative research methodology with the data identifying and ranking factors that affect parental school choice. Indeed, the report identified academic excellence as the top reason parents chose a non-government school. Of the 1,322 parents who responded to the online survey 33% identified academic excellence as one of the top three reasons they chose a non-government school. More recently, Independent Schools Australia (2021), previously ISCA, cited educational excellence as the most common reason 44% of 1,968 parents choose an independent school through an online survey. However, 44% does not represent the majority of parents and ISA temper these findings stating that academic excellence is not the only factor in parental school choice, "…most parents want more from education than just academic results. They are looking for schools to play a part in their child's personal development and provide skills that will be used throughout life" (p. 1).

McCarthy (2016), in his research into school choice of rural and remote parents, identified that the school choice process of these parents considers academic excellence as a significant factor: "the current Australian educational landscape implies that academic results are the predetermining factor of school choice…" (p. 41). Windle's (2015) Melbourne survey of 666 respondents revealed that 60% of parents considered "top examination results" (p.48) as very important in their choice of secondary school for their child.

In contrast to the above findings, other research has unearthed that a school's academic excellence is not always a high priority of parental school choice. In particular, the most recent surveys conducted by Independent Schools Queensland (2015, 2019) purport that a school's academic results are not always the primary driving factor for school selection. The 2015 findings were gleaned from surveying over 1000 parents from 67 non-government schools in Queensland. The survey ranked 'strong academic performance' ninth in the fourteen factors that received a Likert scale score of at least 4 out of 5 (Independent Schools Queensland, 2015). Their 2019 findings mirror those of 2015 where survey results of 3,638 parents from 115 non-government schools in Queensland identified academic excellence as ranking 11th of 42 factors. It is clear from these surveys that academic excellent was not the highest priority in parental school choice.

Furthermore, O'Neill's research (2014) of high-performing West Australian Catholic schools highlighted "the extent to which parents downplayed academic results" (p. 249). This

implies that a number of parents are looking for schools that offer more than just academics, even avoiding unnecessary pressure that this may put on their children.

Jamal Al-deen (2018), in her study of Iraqi-born Muslim women looking for a secondary school for their daughters, discovered a unique complexity in school choice of migrant families. The interviews highlighted that educational quality was an important consideration when choosing a school for Muslim girls, but there was also a struggle to balance this with cultural traditions. Often the academic excellence of the school was a secondary consideration if the school was unable to accommodate religious and cultural traditions of modesty, especially regarding uniform.

2.3.2 Affordability

Factors that influence parents in their choice of school are many and varied and even if a school 'feels' right in all aspects, the factor of fees and affordability may be the most decisive factor that affects final choice. Fees can vary widely between non-government schools and between year levels which need to be considered by parents.

> …there is a range of other considerations that underpin whether what people say about the school and what information provided by the school resonates with parents. More practical factors will also influence parents – fees may preclude attendance at a school… (Independent Schools Queensland, 2015, p. 6)

Beamish and Morey (2013) reported in their findings that the fee structure of a school was very important as a determinant of choice and that if school fees were above a certain threshold then the school was eliminated from further consideration by parents. Independent Schools Council of Australia (2008) reported that school fees were the most significant disadvantage of non-government schools and the main reason why parents would not recommend a non-government school. Despite this concern, ISCA believes that "parents continue to choose to send their children to an independent school, which suggests that they see their decision as an investment in the future success and happiness of their children" (p. 6). The study conducted by English (2004) supports these findings stating that parents of the non-government Shelbyville College felt that the education provided was worth the expense:

> For many parents involved in this study, the value-added offerings, the creation of extraordinary children and the outcomes promised by the College provided justification for the fees. Parents indicated that, while the fees were considerable, the money outlaid for education at the college was comparable to the purchase of other consumer items such as a car or a boat… Parents felt that, because the school was offering value-adding through curricular and co-curricular activities such as music

> and speech and drama, if the fees were to rise markedly they would sacrifice further in order to maintain their children's enrolment because the College provided great value for money. (p.75)

In contrast, Kennedy et al. (2011) discovered that in the context of their research of Catholic families, affordability was listed well below other factors such as teacher quality and level of care. Not surprisingly though, the lower the family income the more of an issue it became (Kennedy et al., 2011). Fahey (2019) agrees and points out in his study of 1010 surveyed parents that Catholic schools "appear to be the most out of reach for parents that are concerned about cost, as well as those in single-parent households and those with a parent out of work" (p. 8). Furthermore, Fahey (2019) contended that some families have no choice in selecting a non-government school because of the "financial constraints to meet the expense of fees" (p. 8). The challenge of fees in Catholic schools is also reflected in Wood's (2013) research, where a number of families found the fees a challenge, but others that were interviewed expressed that the fees were reasonable. Goh and Dolnicar (2006) acknowledged that the cost of non-government education was influential in parents' school choice decisions. According to Cahill (2009) schools with high fees were not considered by low-income families and furthermore, in her study they did "not give any indication of feeling aggrieved by not being able to send their children to high-fee schools. Those schools did not appear on their 'shopping list'" (p. 199).

It has also been noted that Independent Schools Queensland (2019) found that in their survey of 'What Parents Want' the level of school fees ranked 20 out of 43 factors. The respondents' scoring suggests that "no particular demographic is more influenced by fee considerations than another…" (p.61). The report also claimed that those least concerned about school fees are those parents with students attending single-sex schools and those parents in the highest income bracket. In their study of middle-class parents Campbell et al. (2009) found that the consideration of fees and affordability varied between parents. They discovered that for some parents, fees were a factor that added to their anxiety when choosing a school; for other parents, fees were worth paying if they felt it was the right school for their child and, not surprisingly, affordability was less of an issue for those in higher income brackets.

2.3.3 Location

The location of a school is often identified as a factor that influences school choice, but with varying importance (Beamish & Morey, 2013; Cahill, 2009; Goh & Dolnicar, 2006;

Kennedy et al., 2011; McCarthy, 2006). Goh and Dolnicar (2006) reported that close proximity of school to home was the most frequently cited reason for primary school choice. In their research Kennedy et al. (2011) found that the importance of the school's location varied between different income groups. For those in the higher income bracket, the school location was ranked 19 of 29 factors; interestingly, those in the lower income bracket ranked this factor 23 of 29. A similar account was also reported in the findings of Independent Schools Queensland (2019) which placed 'closeness to home' as factor 22 of 43. In the study conducted by Cahill (2009) the school's proximity to home ranked 11th of 30th, where approximately half of parents indicated that daily travel or distance to and from school was not a limitation in their choice of secondary school.

Interviews conducted by Beamish and Morey (2013) revealed that proximity to school was an important determinant of school choice. Even though this factor was ranked seventh lowest of 29 school choice characteristics, they found that proximity to home was still a consideration of parents in influencing their school choice:

> …Close proximity to home…was still seen as important by parents…The interviews supported the idea that school proximity to the home is a major factor in influencing school choice. Over half of the families interviewed indicated that proximity played a large role in school selection. (p. 31)

Furthermore, they discovered that if travel times were above a certain threshold the school was not seen as a viable option, "for many of the respondents this threshold time is 30 minutes for the primary aged student, and 60 minutes for the secondary aged student" (p. 31). The importance of close proximity of school to home for working-class families was highlighted by a number of parents in Wood (2013):

> …the less well-resourced participants spoke of not owning a car and of their struggles around bus timetables and travel times as well as fears about emergency pick-up situations. For some families having one car meant juggling multiple demands… For some it was a matter of convenience, of being within easy walking distance and not having to consider distances in travelling backwards and forwards.

Interestingly, McCarthy (2006) found that some parents would consider moving house to be closer to their choice of school, which is consistent with Beamish and Morey (2013) who found that families committed to their faith actually do move house to be closer to the Christian school of their choice. Campbell et al. (2009) suggest that middle-class families "are more likely to have the conjunction of the wealth, energy and skills" (p. 127) to be able to choose a house located close to their school of choice.

2.3.4 Quality Facilities and Resources

It is interesting and important to note the variations of wording and the associated meaning of 'quality facilities and resources'. Some studies asked respondents to rate general and subjective terms such as good facilities, quality of school facilities or appearance and facilities (Goh & Dolnicar, 2006; ISCA, 2008). Other studies, (ISQ, 2011, 2019) articulated very specific areas of facilities and resources such as facilities for technology and science and programs and resources for science, technology, engineering and maths (STEM). This reveals that there are some perceived differences in what 'quality facilities and resources' may mean to researchers and respondents alike.

It would appear that when parents choose to pay for their children's schooling, certain "value-adds" are expected, such as quality facilities and resources, than what may be available at the local free government school. Regarding the question: *Why did you choose to send your children/child to an independent school?*, ISCA (2008) identified good facilities as one of three significant factors in the parental decision to choose a non-government school. Cahill (2009) concurs with ISCA's findings and discovered that school facilities was the highest-ranked factor that parents considered as indicating a good school:

> This high ranking may reflect the fact that the quality of school facilities is one of the few tangible factors that parents can judge with relative confidence when looking for a 'good' school for their children… This implies that the importance attributed to school facilities reflects a belief among parents that high quality facilities enhance their children's learning opportunities at school. (Cahill, 2009, p. 120)

Similarly, Independent Schools Queensland (2011) found that facilities were a factor that influenced many parents to some degree: "6.5% of parents indicated they were influenced totally by the appearance and facilities, 29.8% of parents acknowledged it influenced them to some degree and another 46.1% of parents indicated they were influenced a lot by the facilities…" (p.7). These results imply that most parents, almost three-quarters, consider quality facilities as an important factor when choosing a school for their children. These results are mimicked in the subsequent surveys of Independent Schools Queensland (2015) and Independent Schools Queensland (2019). In the 2015 survey 'facilities for technology and science' was one of fourteen factors that received a Likert scale of 4 out of 5 and "identified by over half of all parents as *very important*" (p. 15). In 2019 the survey discovered that 69% of parents deemed "programs and resources for science, technology, engineering and maths (STEM)" as highly and totally important in their responses and was

the second-highest factor in the Curriculum/Programs section of the survey. In Windle's 2015 study, 52.5% of parents identified the quality of school facilities as very important, ninth in the list of considerations for secondary school choice. In a recent survey of 1010 parents, the Centre for Independent Studies (2019) revealed that 48% of respondents identified school facilities as a top priority in choosing a school. However, this was the second of reasons selected by parents when asked to rank up to three factors, with the highest priority (61%) stating that location was a high priority in choosing a school. It is important to note that 65% of respondents of this survey were parents with children at a government school; therefore, the results will reflect this demographic.

A counter-view to the above studies, good facilities was found to be the least important of twenty-one factors affecting the choice of primary school in the research of Goh and Dolnicar (2006). Beamish and Morey (2013) also noted a difference of opinion in some of the parents interviewed who did not rate facilities and resources of the school as being very important to them, some parents stating that the "resources of the school were not an influence on our choice" (p. 30). Independent Schools Australia (2021) stated that only 40% of parents consider good facilities as a reason for choosing an independent school, concurring with the notion that the quality of school facilities is not always an important factor of choice in these parents.

2.3.5 Quality Teaching

It is noted that within the literature there were differences between words and phrases relating to 'quality teaching'. Many studies used terms such as teacher quality, high quality of teachers, teaching quality and good teachers and these broad concepts are deemed as contributing to the overall understanding of the professionalism of the teachers and their high level of expertise in teaching.

High quality teaching was cited as a factor impacting student performance by the Rudd/Gillard government in 2008, claiming that "teacher quality is the single greatest in-school influence on student engagement and result" (Rudd & Gillard, 2008, p. 21). Thus, it is not surprising that parents view quality teaching as an important aspect of school choice. Beavis (2004) attested that better teachers are one reason why parents choose non-government schools over government schools. In a study of Catholic families Kennedy et al. (2011) discovered that teaching quality ranked highest of school choice factors with the endorsement of parents being 96.4%. This is mirrored in Beamish and Morey (2013) who

clearly identify that teaching quality was a high priority of parents in the consideration of school:

> Every family interviewed had a very strong position on the impact of teachers on their children's education… Others commented how the teachers at the school were an important consideration when it came to school choice, and the reputation of a teacher or teachers was enough to influence them to select that school. (p. 27)

Similarly, in the most recent survey conducted by Independent Schools Queensland (2019) the 'high quality of teachers' was ranked second of forty-three most important factors cited by parents for choosing a non-government school. The ranking of high quality teachers has risen to second from fourth and third respectively over the two previous surveys conducted by Independent Schools Queensland (2011, 2015). The high ranking reveals that quality teaching is a theme perpetually in the minds of parents as they consider the most appropriate school for their children. 'Good teachers' was also a significant factor of school choice identified in the research conducted by Independent Schools Council of Australia (2008). The study reported that one of the most significantly reported advantages of non-government schools, as well as a factor in considering a non-government school, is the quality of teachers:

> *Good teachers* is the resoundingly important factor influencing parents' decision making, given that it ranks in the most significant category across all four survey sections. This is not surprising considering that many of the educational outcomes identified by parents are delivered by the front line staff at schools. (p.6)

Similarly, Kennedy et al. (2011) highlighted that for Catholic families "the most highly valued factor in school choice is teacher quality" (p. 17). In his Australian survey of culturally diverse parents in Melbourne, Windle (2015) found that in their search for a secondary school the quality of teachers was very important for 82.7%. Independent Schools Australia (2021) stated that 42% of parents consider good teachers an important reason for choosing an independent school. Wilkinson et al. (2004), in their appraisal of government policy as it relates to the creation of new schools, concur with this research stating that teacher quality is one of the deciding factors for parents in their school choice decisions.

2.3.6 Smaller Class Sizes

Alongside academic excellence, quality facilities and resources, parents widely value smaller class sizes as important determinants of parental school choice. The research conducted by Independent Schools Council of Australia (2008) revealed that smaller class

sizes were frequently cited in the category of factors for choosing a non-government school. This sentiment is supported by Wilkinson et al. (2004). In 2007 Independent Schools Queensland's research into factors of school choice discovered that 49.7% of parents claimed that small class size was a very important factor in their decisions. Similarly, in the subsequent report prepared by Independent Schools Queensland (2011) parents ranked small class size as thirteenth out of forty factors of choice. Their 2015 research showed that small class sizes was one of fourteen factors that received a Likert scale of at least four out of five. In more recent research, Independent Schools Queensland (2019) found that small class size was the third most important factor in their 'type of school factors' list for parents in choosing a non-government school. Small class size was ranked twelfth out of forty-three factors with 45% of parents responding that this was highly important and 27% stating that small class sizes were totally important in their decision-making choices. In line with these studies, Beavis (2004) reported that one of the "most common reasons given for changing from a Government school included… the view that there are smaller classes…" (p.4) in non-government schools.

The issue of class size arose in a parent interview in Windle's research (2015) which related class size "to a school's capacity to offer individual attention" (p.80). Wood's qualitative study found that some parents reflected on the positives of small class sizes in relation to special needs and providing individual attention. This seems to indicate that parents align small class sizes with more individualised attention for their children.

However, in their mixed methods research of choosing a primary school, Goh and Dolnicar (2006) found that only four respondents from eighty identified small class size as a positive factor affecting their school choice. It is also interesting to note that some studies do not include the option of small class size in their research or the response may have been too negligible to include (Beamish & Morey, 2013; Beavis, 2004; Cahill, 2009; Kennedy et al., 2011).

2.3.7 Supportive and Caring Environment

Several studies revealed that a supportive and caring environment for their children was a key factor in many parents' school choice (Beamish & Morey, 2013; Campbell et al., 2009; English, 2004; Goh & Dolnicar, 2006; Independent Schools Council of Australia, 2008; Independent Schools Queensland, 2019; Kennedy et al., 2011; McCarthy, 2016; Wood, 2013). Beamish and Morey (2013) noted in their survey of parents in a faith-based school

that student support and pastoral care was the second most important factor in school choice, with “approximately half of the families interviewed said they were looking for a school to nurture and support their children” (p. 28). The importance of care and concern was found to rank slightly lower among Catholic parents in Queensland in one study, being fourth of twenty-nine factors (Kennedy et al., 2011). However, in another study of Catholic primary school choice, Wood (2013) claimed that concerns about bullying, providing for special needs and supporting their child's emotional needs were the main foci for parents when selecting a school. Some parents interviewed for this study also reported avoiding sending their child to the local government school, which were not seen to provide the same level of support and care that the local Catholic schools could (Wood, 2013). Windle’s 2015 study reported that 75.4% of parents surveyed felt that a caring environment was a very important consideration of secondary school choice, which is in keeping with the other studies mentioned.

The importance that parents place on the supportive and caring environment of schools is also reflected in the findings reported by ISCA (2008). When asked ‘Why would you recommend independent schools to your family and friends?’ a frequently cited response by parents was the desire for a supportive and caring environment. And, when parents were asked more specifically ‘Why did you choose to send your child/children to an independent school?’, supportive and caring environment appeared as the most significant factor. ISCA noted:

> Parents see teachers fulfilling the dual role of educator and mentor…This is reflected by parental views that independent schools provide a safe, protective environment for academic and personal development. The importance of a positive school environment is a recurring theme with the factors *supportive caring environment, good balance between education and fun, safe environment…* being consistently ranked in the most significant or frequently cited category across the survey. (Independent Schools Council of Australia, 2008, p. 6)

Adding to these findings English (2004) investigated the reasons parents chose to send their children to a newly established Christian school in Queensland and found that all parents interviewed believed their children needed to be in a safe environment, protecting them “from the perceived danger they would face in the government sector” (p.56).

Campbell et al. (2009) reported on parent interviews where some parents chose schools that were perceived to have less bullying and therefore were safer for their children. Interestingly, safety was a consideration of parents choosing a regional primary school but

was not the highest priority of parents (Goh & Dolnicar, 2006). The study into school choice by rural and remote parents conducted by McCarthy (2016) mirrored the safety concerns identified by Campbell et al and Goh and Dolnicar. He articulated that parent "participants expressed the idea of safety such that the term was defined as physical, psychological and emotional safety" (p. 35).

Independent Schools Queensland (2019) research uses slightly different terminology in their survey, pastoral care and wellbeing programs. The focus of care and wellbeing was ranked sixteenth of forty-three factors and was cited as highly important by 42% of parents and a further 20% citing that it was totally important to their school choice decisions.

The literature review identified that the key factor of a 'supportive and caring environment' is an important consideration for parents but was not articulated consistently across the studies cited. The intended meaning of the researcher and interpretation of respondents may differ. For example, various words and phrases incorporated in the research such as student support and pastoral care, nurture and support, level of care and concern, supportive and caring environment, safe, protective environment, safe environment, less bullying, safety, pastoral care and wellbeing are all broadly related to a supportive and caring environment.

2.3.8 Teaching of Values

Numerous studies have identified that the philosophical, traditional or faith-based values of a school are important factors that attract parents to particularly choose non-government schools (Beamish & Morey, 2013; Beavis, 2004; Independent Schools Council of Australia, 2008; Warren, 2016). However, it is important to note that these studies did not identify what is meant by 'values' and what characterises the concept of 'values' to parents. The literature revealed various terminology around the idea of 'values' such as common values, religious values, appropriate values, traditional values, Christian values and familial values. The interpretation the researcher or parent respondent placed on these terms is difficult to quantify, but it can be assumed that they are related to building one's character.

Indeed, in 2002 the Commonwealth government recognised the need for values education in schools as a vital element of holistic learning and commissioned a national Values Education Study to develop a framework for incorporating values education in Australian schools (Zbar et al., 2003). This educational report identified common values already introduced into some Australian schools: tolerance and understanding, respect,

responsibility, social justice, excellence, care, inclusion and trust, honesty, freedom and being ethical (Zbar et al., 2003). This report further proposed the following recommendation to highlight the government's serious intent regarding values education:

> That the Commonwealth, in collaboration with education jurisdictions and schools cooperate in providing teachers with resources (including professional development, teaching resources and evaluation materials) to support their efficacy as teachers of values within all areas of the curriculum and total school life and to monitor this efficacy on an ongoing basis. (p. 20)

Another useful insight into the definition of values that parents look for is provided by the 2004 Federal Education Minister, Brendan Nelson, who committed $35 million in 2004 to promote values education in schools (Guerrera, 2004, May 12). Nelson believed that parents expect schools to foster values including tolerance, trust, mutual respect, compassion, honesty and courtesy (Guerrera, 2004, May 12). It can be assumed that these values, and those identified by Zbar et al. (2003), are some of the values that parents and schools refer to when discussing values.

McCarthy (2006) suggested these values include social justice, equality and respect. Wilkinson et al. (2004) quote Nelson asserting that Australian parents expect schools to foster values "such as tolerance, trust, mutual respect, courage, compassion, honesty, courtesy and doing one's best". These identified values are most likely the ones that are implied as important to parents when choosing a school. McCarthy (2016) stated that values education is an important aspect of the choice process for parents. His study revealed that instilling particular values was "something unique", in respect to Catholic schools, and that

> the school experience allowed their children to receive opportunities for education in values, understood by parents as a "good grounding" … Indeed, when parent participants were asked what the hopeful outcome of the children's Catholic educations was, most emphasised "greater empathy", "greater understanding of what Christian values are… and "Christian values". (p. 37)

McCarthy (2016) unequivocally stated that the inculcation of values in education is an integral part in the choice process for parents. Etherington (2008) claimed that all schools, government and non-government, "aim to inculcate values and norms which are shared by the great majority of their students" (p. 118). The teaching or reinforcing of moral values was a frequently cited factor for choosing a non-government school according to the ISCA research report (2008), denoting the importance of this factor.

Beamish and Morey found that parents wanted a school "that had a value system that paralleled their own" (p. 29) and that the school should play a supporting role in reinforcing these values. A similar account was found by Warren (2016) where almost half of Catholic mothers chose a Catholic school for religious reasons. Furthermore, Warren's research identified that many parents who chose a Catholic school for their children did so for its religious values and "the percentage of parents who said that their main reason for choosing a Catholic school was because of the religious values of the school increased substantially with the mother's education level" (2016, p. 170). Similar reasons are found in Wood (2013) where some parents viewed Catholic education and the inculcation of values as a positive outcome. Others parents, in the same study, didn't or couldn't articulate whether there was a difference between Catholic values, Christian values or values in general. Beavis (2004) adds weight to these studies by reporting that "the strongest effect on the selection of a private school was the importance parents attached to the perception of the school having traditional values" (p. 4). Wilkinson et al. (2004) reinforce this by claiming that parents believe that non-government schools provide better values. They further discussed several factors of school choice and conclude:

> The perception of better values in private schools is one of these reasons, but the belief that the private sector offers a better quality of education in relation to, amongst other things, teacher quality and facilities appears to be the deciding factor. (p. 11)

Giving further emphasis to the consideration of values in the school choice process, Campbell et al. (2009) dedicated an entire chapter titled 'Religious and Secular Values' in their book on school choice. They comment on the interviewees' perceptions of religious and secular values and the relationship between values, religion and school choice. The authors attempted to decrypt what parents understand values to mean, but there was no clear agreement; it seemed that every parent interviewed discussed values differently.

According to English (2004) all parents that were interviewed in her study stated that it was important that their children be "exposed to appropriate values" (p. 55) and the teaching of these values was an important factor in their school choice decision-making process:

> The values sought by members of the parental community at The Shelbyville College were important in not only choosing the College initially, but in keeping their children enrolled. Many of the parents identified that, while religion had not played an initial role in the school choice process, the values the College espoused were central to their

> decision. The parents were seeking the generic 'Christian' values of love of neighbour, respect for others and to treat others as they wished to be treated. (p. 59)

Warren (2016) discovered that a high proportion of parents who chose a Catholic or other non-government primary school did so for the school's religious values and claimed this was an important consideration for these parents. Rowe and Windle (2012) postulated that middle-class families make school choice decisions "that reflect their familial value system" (p. 149).

2.4 Parental Motivations as Factors in School Choice

The literature identified the aspirations of parents and the need to minimise parental anxiety for their children as motivating factors of school choice (Beamish & Morey, 2012; Campbell et al., 2009). Exhaustive research by Campbell et al. (2009) of middle-class parents and school choice reveals that aspirations and anxieties are closely connected for middle-class families. This is supported by the research of Beamish and Morey (2012) into faith-based schools, finding that "most parents choose a school with whom they felt they could form a partnership to best *enhance the aspirations they have for their children* and *reduce the anxieties that they have about their children's future*" (p. 37).

Campbell et al. (2009) note that the aspirations of many middle-class families are tied to providing the best opportunities and facilities in education that they can and the result of this is "the trend towards non-government schools" (p. 186). The authors also contend that for some parents, the desire to attain or retain middle-class status prompted their choice of non-government school. Beamish and Morey (2013) in their research noted that the parents they interviewed were keen for their children to reach their personal potential and find a satisfying career path. They also found that for Christian parents, aspirations for their children were tied to their faith and that the choice of school would facilitate the development of faith in their children. Research conducted by McCarthy (2006) also identifies parental aspirations as a driver of school choice:

> Regardless of the eventual destination, the common feature is the driving desire by the parents to ensure that their child is able to access a school environment that best matches the family's imperatives and the parents' aspirations for their child and family. (p. 222)

Rowe and Windle (2012) discovered in their research that aspirations of parents were not always related to their children. In one parent interview it was discovered that aspirations were distinctively parent-focused: "Aspirations to improve her position through her

children's educational attainment are conveyed throughout the interview" (p. 142). The parent engaged specialist tutoring so that her children could receive a scholarship into a high-fee, non-government girls' school.

Campbell et al. (2009) highlighted two main types of anxieties of middle-class parents: the first is related to their children's future recognising a "labour market and world economy that demands ever higher credentials" (p. 182) and the second is related to "the quality of schools and the education that their children will get" (p. 183). The authors' research identified that these "anxieties are strongest in the middle-class groups that are new users of non-government schools" (p. 184). One of the main anxieties that Beamish and Morey (2013) discovered of Christian parents when choosing a school were centred around their desire that their children retain the family's faith tradition.

Warren (2016), recognising that there is less research into primary school choice than there is into high school choice, investigated the main factors associated with parental decisions regarding primary school choice. Her analysis showed that the reasons for choosing a primary school varied but were closely connected to parents' religion, socio-economic status and parental expectations of education. For a large proportion of parents in this study, academic consideration was a major factor, especially if parents expected their child to attain higher education. The religious values of a school were also important for parents who chose a Catholic or other non-government primary school. A high percentage of parents from a higher socio-economic background stated that the school was chosen for academic reasons while conversely, a high percentage of parents from a lower socio-economic background stated that they chose the school because of convenience. Goh (2007) identified factors that parents used in choosing a government primary school but in a regional city using the theory of reasoned action and the theory of planned behaviour. His study revealed that parents chose a government school due to its low cost, its close proximity to home and providing support for special needs. Furthermore, Goh recognised that most parents in his study "perceive Government schools as a school responsible for the academic aspect of their children's education and teach values and virtues governed in general society (e.g. courtesy and respect)" (p. 106-107).

A few studies delved into the sphere of parents from rural regions and how they navigate school choice in their unique environment. McCarthy (2016) explored the reasons parents from rural and remote areas in north-west Queensland selected a secondary boarding school rather than home schooling or distance education. He claimed that the "challenges of

school choice faced by parents living in these areas are very different from those faced by parents living in large regional and metropolitan centres" (McCarthy, 2016, p. 29). This case study research gleaned its findings from the use of focus group and semi-structured interviews. McCarthy (2016) discovered that it was not only academic opportunities that were important to parents but also extra-curricular experiences, the school must be a place of safety, the inculcation of Christian values and the racial composition of the school, which were reasons why they chose the school. In their research into school choice of very remote families, Guenther and Osborne (2020) discussed the "choice-less choice" of senior secondary school options for children in these regions. They discovered that parents generally have three choices: firstly, move house to be closer to a quality school; secondly, attend a boarding school; and thirdly, not continue into the senior years of schooling. Their research conclusions are supported by Echazarra and Radinger (2019) who recognise the limited choice of secondary schooling for rural parents:

> Where parents can choose their children's school, rural families often have very limited choices. Many rural families have only one primary school to choose from in the community, and many secondary students need to commute on a daily basis, or may need to attend a boarding school. (p. 32)

Pertinent to this study, they highlight the smaller percentage of 15-year-olds in rural schools that attend a private school compared to 15-year-olds in urban schools and cite Australia as one of the countries where this is evident. Recent research on school choice conducted in rural and remote areas of Tasmania by Abbott-Chapman et al. (2017) discovered that the majority (83%) of rural and remote children attend the local primary school but this proportion almost halves (47%) for secondary students. For these rural parents choices for senior secondary school were for their children to travel long distances daily or to attend boarding school. Some parents included in this study also chose schools that provided greater curricular and extra-curricular activities than local schools could offer.

Tsolidis (2016) adds to the complexity of reasons for school choice with ethnographic research in regional Victoria. She discovered that parents tended to discuss the politics of school choice in their community, commenting on aspects such as the expense of non-government school education, the selection methods of high-performing government schools and the status of schools within the community. Morgan and Blackmore (2013) contribute to the research into school choice of rural parents through two school case studies in south-western Victoria. This research focused on one government school and a non-government

school and how government policy and funding in rural areas "creates new opportunities and constraints as to how choice is exercised" (Morgan & Blackmore, 2013, p. 85). The study revealed that parents who had moved from the government school to non-government schools cited "push factors" referencing values, achievement, teacher quality, teaching methods, limited subject choices and lack of homework.

Australia's multiculturalism has influenced a few researchers to investigate school choice within the context of the immigrant experience. Mavisakalyan (2012) examined the influx of immigrants into government schools and the subsequent response of 'native' parents to move their children from government schools to non-government schools. She noted that this drift is suggestive of 'white flight' and using 2001 census data finds that "private school attendance among native-born Australians is higher in localities with a higher share of immigrant population" (p. 44). The study found that one reason for this 'white flight' is the "preference for a familiar cultural environment at school" (p.30). Mavisakalyan (2012) does, however, concede that other factors may motivate parents to choose non-government schools and move their children from the rich multicultural compositions of government schools.

Ho (2011, 2015, 2019) investigated the impact of multiculturalism on school choice in Sydney and supports Mavisakalyan's findings with respect to 'white flight' stating

> Schools are becoming more segregated in terms of both class and ethnicity. More and more students are going to schools that do not represent the range of people in their neighbourhood, but rather a select group. Their families have chosen to enrol them in schools where there are more 'people like us.' (Ho, 2015, para. 4)

Ho (2015) contends that school choice has resulted in ethnic segregation of high schools in Sydney and even labels some elite non-government schools as "mono-cultural bastions of whiteness" (para. 6). Ho's analysis using My School data of secondary schools in Metropolitan Sydney found that in 2016 55% of students at government schools were from non-English speaking backgrounds while only 31% of non-government school students were from a non-English speaking background and 'schools are less likely to reflect the demographic makeup of their local neighbourhoods' (Ho, 2019, p. 15).

A recent qualitative study of Iraqi-born Muslim mothers in Australia explored how they chose secondary schools for their daughters (Jamal Al-deen, 2018). The small-scale study's qualitative approach allowed Jamal Al-deen (2018) to explore the participants' "experiences, perceptions and beliefs, as well as the cultural and social resources mothers employ in engaging with their children's educational activities" (p. 405). The study revealed

gendered concerns around daughters rather than sons, particularly concerning interactions between the sexes and cultural concepts of honour and shame. The researcher found that single-sex schools or Islamic schools were sought after solutions. Another study, focused on Muslim parents' school choices, concluded that school choice is a complex process for these parents (Iner, 2021). This study found that parents who participated in the qualitative research looked for schools that supported their children's need to feel safe at school, particularly in the current Islamophobic climate, "all parents expressed their children's similar needs… such as feeling "safe", "comfortable", "belonged" and feeling "like the rest of the school" (p. 20).

However, a study conducted by Rowe (2016) of school choice in the inner-city suburbs of Melbourne, discovered that there was a reversal of 'white flight' to non-government schools amongst the inner-city middle-class. She noted that parents "are turning their back on private providers and articulating a commitment to public education. Indeed… there is a growing trend of middle-class parents repopulating the inner-city public secondary school" (p. 21). Rowe claims that political, moral and economic reasons are the drivers of this trend.

Some studies of school choice focus on a specific location, such as the following studies that are set against the backdrop of Western Australia. McCarthy (2006), for example, investigated how parents experienced the process of making school choice decisions in the Western Australian context. This grounded theory study discovered that parents were "*being challenged to choose*" (p. 10) because of government policy within the non-government school sector as well as within the government sector. McCarthy (2006) also documented that choice was driven *"*towards *realising family potential"* (p. 13), the choice process whereby parents match the school with the child. Her study identifies three causal concerns experienced by parents: specific needs of their child, availability of schooling and family imperatives.

Cahill (2009) conducted case-study research into eight schools in metropolitan Perth, the schools being a mix of government, Catholic and other non-government schools. A comprehensive survey was used to collect data on factors that influence parental school choice. The survey also hoped to understand these choices "particularly with respect to what constitutes a good school (what parents look for, are attracted to and/or avoid) and the extent to which their responses indicate a strong sense of agency" (p. 93). The study noticed that the 322 parents who completed the survey (28.3%) were generally in agreement of what constitutes a 'good' school: has quality facilities, caters to a variety of student needs,

promotes a culture of achievement, self-respect and respect for others, has a record of academic excellence and encourages students to develop individual talent and interests. From the findings of this study Cahill made specific recommendations for government schools to "arrest the drift of students away from government secondary schools" (p. 220). Forsey (2008) interviewed fifty teachers, parents and their children in Perth, Western Australia. The interviewees had all changed schools, either from government to non-government or the reverse. A number of parents who had chosen non-government schools mentioned reasons such as: higher academic standards, greater sport options, extracurricular programmes and caring environment. The authors also commented on reasons given by parents whose children have changed from non-government schools to government schools: few friends at the current school, too strict in relation to uniform and homework, academic concerns and elitism.

This literature review noticed limited studies relating to gender and school choice. One study by Marais (2006) focused on understanding the social construction of gender in a non-government Christian girls' school over time (1945 – 1997), also in Perth, Western Australia. Aitchison (2006) conducted gender-specific, qualitative research into how mothers went about secondary school choice in the inner western suburbs of Sydney. This research unearthed that choice was not merely a rational endeavour but a complex, emotionally rich and subjective experience.

School choice and its impact on the final years of high school has also been researched in Australia. Le and Miller (2003) explored the completion rates of Year 12 according to the type of school students attend. Exploring students who finished high school during the years 1961 – 1970 they discovered that those attending non-government schools were more likely to complete Year 12 than those attending government schools. The research noted that the differences in high school completion existed

> despite the fact that ability scores of the student sin the different categories of schools do not differ appreciably… This suggests that the private schools are offering value added, and this might explain the trend away from government schools since the late 1970s. (Le & Miller, 2003, p. 71)

Another study researching the impact of variables into Year 12 achievement was conducted by Ryan and Watson (2009, September and October). They noted that some students are forced to choose a new secondary school for Years 11 and 12 as some high schools end at Year 10. Families are then forced to choose between a government school, a

Catholic school or a non-government school. They found that “transferring to the Independent sector for the final two years of high school produces a positive effect within those two years” (p. 22). Furthermore, they conjecture that the reason for better educational outcomes may be due to these schools being better resourced and the influence of the motivation and aspiration of peers that tend to come from higher socio-economic backgrounds. Interestingly, research conducted by Chesters (2018) into post-school outcomes revealed that attending a non-government school did lead to “an increased likelihood of being employed on a full-time basis, being employed as a manager or professional, or with higher earnings at age 24” (p. 153).

2.5 Sources of Information

This literature review identified a number of studies which sought to identify where parents gained information about schools to aid their decision-making process in the Australian context. A synthesis of these studies has found that there are numerous sources of information that parents utilise and these have been placed, by the researcher, into three broad categories: school-based sources, parents’ own social networks and the internet to glean information to help make informed school choices. Understanding what sources of information parents utilise and which are most influential in their decision-making process could aid schools in more apt marketing and promotion.

2.5.1 School-based sources

School-based sources such as the school’s prospectus, website, open days and shopping centre displays often aided a parent’s exposure to a school and what it has to offer. English (2004), when investigating school choice in the context of a Christian school, noted that the school’s prospectus, website, open days and shopping centre displays were all influential in the parental choice process. Independent Schools Queensland (2007, 2011, 2015, 2019) included in their comprehensive research, questions relating to the process of school choice. In 2018 ISQ discovered that the school open day was the third most influential source of fourteen options and a school’s website and social media was identified as the fourth most influential source. These findings were very similar to their 2014 survey but with the third and fourth findings reversed. Fahey (2019) affirms these findings with data from the surveys of 1,010 parents. Parents were asked whether they had used any of the sources provided to help with their school choice decision. It was found that 52% identified school

visits, 39% identified school websites and 32% identified school staff as helping their decision-making process.

2.5.2 Social networks

Rowe and Windle (2012) were able to glean valuable insights into how parents choose a school with their "qualitative, in-depth, semi-structured, face-to-face interviews" (p. 140). Several parents interviewed identified that their friends were a source of notable influence and recognised that word-of-mouth was an important resource. Akin to Rowe and Windle (2012), the parents of Wood's 2013 study noted that friends and word-of-mouth was an important influence when choosing a school.

In the 2006 ISQ research, parents identified other parents with children at the school as the most influential source of information about a school; in the 2010, 2014, 2018 surveys parents identified family, friends and colleagues as the most influential source of information. In both 2014 and 2018 the surveys identified other parents at the school as the second most influential source of information. In the most recent Independent Schools Queensland survey, 2018, parents rated family members already at the school as the fifth most influential source of information.

2.5.3 Internet

The *My School* website helps parents make informed decisions about their child's education by providing data on every school in Australia. The website claims that it

> …provides information that supports national transparency and accountability of Australia's school education system through publication of nationally consistent school-level data. It complements other reporting measures aimed at ensuring schools and school systems are accountable to parents and to the broader community. (Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2021)

Rowe and Windle (2012) noted that in their research, while all participating parents used the *My School* website, it did not make a significant contribution to the parents' choice process. Wood's (2013) research on parents' decision-making in relation to choosing Catholic schools found varied reliance on internet information relating to the Catholic schools within this study. The *My School* website, was rated sixth in 2018 and rated seventh in 2014, which resounds with the research of Rowe and Windle (2012) mentioned previously, who found the *My School* website less important as an influential factor when choosing a

school. Fahey (2019) concurs with the low importance of the *My School* website with only 24% of parents identifying this website as helpful in their school choice process.

Parents utilised, to varying degrees, school-based sources such as the school's prospectus, website, open days and shopping centre displays, their own social networks including friends and family, and internet websites like *My School* to glean information to help make informed school choices. These observations from the literature prompted the inclusion of questions about sources of information on the survey questionnaire.

2.6 Overview of Themes of School Choice

This literature review revealed a variety of fields of research that have appeared in Australia in recent years. Table 2.1, below, presents the recurrent themes of school choice and their associated research components as identified in the literature. It also provides the justification of including these in the subsequent survey that was used in this research, and organising the survey questionnaire to correspond to current themes.

Table 2. 1

Themes and Factors Related to School Choice (alphabetical order within domains)

School Domain	**Literature References**
Christian school/religious reasons/religious affiliation	Beamish and Morey (2013); Cahill (2009); Campbell et al. (2009); English (2004); Fahey (2019); Goh and Dolnicar (2006); Independent Schools Queensland (2019); Jamal Al-deen (2018); Kennedy et al. (2011); Warren (2016); Wood (2013)
Facilities & resources	Beamish and Morey (2013); Cahill (2009); Campbell et al. (2009); Fahey (2019); Goh and Dolnicar (2006); Ho (2019); Independent Schools Queensland (2019); Independent Schools Council of Australia (2008); Kennedy et al. (2011); Wilkinson et al. (2004); Windle (2015)
Inclusion of ICT	Independent Schools Queensland (2019)
K-12 school	Independent Schools Queensland (2019); Kennedy et al. (2011); Wood (2013)
Principal has vision; reputation of principal	Beamish and Morey (2013); Cahill (2009);Independent Schools Council of Australia (2008)
Reputation of school	Campbell et al. (2009); Cahill (2009); Independent Schools Queensland (2019); Jamal Al-deen (2018); Kennedy et al. (2011); Windle (2015); Wood (2013)

Single-sex school	Cahill (2009); Campbell et al. (2009); Independent Schools Queensland (2019); Fahey (2019); Forsey (2008); Windle (2015); Wood (2013)
Size of school	Cahill (2009); English (2004); Independent Schools Queensland (2019)
Small class sizes	Beavis (2004); Goh and Dolnicar (2006); Independent Schools Queensland (2007, 2011, 2015, 2019); Independent Schools Council of Australia (2008); Wilkinson et al. (2004); Windle (2015); Wood (2013)
Curriculum Domain	
Academic quality or excellence/academic reputation	Beamish and Morey (2013); Cahill (2009); Campbell et al. (2009); Fahey (2019); Forsey (2008); Goh and Dolnicar (2006); Ho (2019); Independent Schools Queensland (2019); Independent Schools Council of Australia (2008); Jamal Al-deen (2018); Kennedy et al. (2011); McCarthy (2016); Warren (2016); Wilkinson et al. (2004); Windle (2015)
Extra-curricular activities	Beamish and Morey (2013); Cahill (2009); Campbell et al. (2009); English (2004); Forsey (2008); Goh and Dolnicar (2006); Independent Schools Council of Australia (2008); Kennedy et al. (2011); McCarthy (2016); Wilkinson et al. (2004); Windle (2015)
Fulfilling student potential	English (2004); Independent Schools Queensland (2019)
Individual attention	Beavis (2004); Cahill (2009); Independent Schools Queensland (2019); Independent Schools Council of Australia (2008); McCarthy (2006)
Quality Teachers	Beamish and Morey (2013); Beavis (2004); Cahill (2009); Campbell et al. (2009); English (2004); Independent Schools Queensland (2019); Independent Schools Council of Australia (2008); Kennedy et al. (2011); Rudd and Gillard (2008); Wilkinson et al. (2004); Windle (2015);
Sporting opportunities	Cahill (2009); Forsey (2008); Independent Schools Queensland (2019); Kennedy et al. (2011)
Wide curriculum/subject choice	Beamish and Morey (2013); Cahill (2009); Campbell et al. (2009); Forsey (2008); Independent Schools Queensland (2019); Independent Schools Council of Australia (2008); Kennedy et al. (2011)
Student Domain	
Appearance/behaviour of students	Cahill (2009); Independent Schools Queensland (2019); Kennedy et al. (2011); Windle (2015)
Child's own choice	Cahill (2009); Independent Schools Queensland (2019); Kennedy et al. (2011)

Friends at the school	Cahill (2009); Campbell et al. (2009); Goh and Dolnicar (2006); Independent Schools Queensland (2019); Kennedy et al. (2011); Warren (2016)
Good discipline	Beamish and Morey (2013); Cahill (2009); Campbell et al. (2009); Ho (2019); Independent Schools Queensland (2019); Independent Schools Council of Australia (2008); Jamal Al-deen (2018); Windle (2015); Wood (2013)
Other family members at the school or have been at the school	Cahill (2009); Campbell et al. (2009); Goh and Dolnicar (2006); Independent Schools Queensland (2019); Warren (2016)
Students come from diverse backgrounds	Cahill (2009); Campbell et al. (2009); Windle (2015)
Students come from similar social backgrounds/racial or ethnic reasons	Campbell et al. (2009); Ho (2011, 2015); Goh and Dolnicar (2006); Independent Schools Queensland (2019); Jamal Al-deen (2018); Ho (2019); Kennedy et al. (2011); Mavisakalyan (2012); McCarthy (2016); Rowe and Lubienski (2017); Rowe and Windle (2012)
Supportive and Caring Environment/safety/pastoral care/well-being programs	Beamish and Morey (2013); Campbell et al. (2009); English (2004); Goh and Dolnicar (2006); Independent Schools Queensland (2019); Independent Schools Council of Australia (2008); Kennedy et al. (2011); McCarthy (2016); Windle (2015); Wood (2013)
Values: Family/religious/traditional	Beamish and Morey (2013); Beavis (2004); Cahill (2009); Campbell et al. (2009); English (2004); Ho (2019); Independent Schools Council of Australia (2008); Kennedy et al. (2011); McCarthy (2006); McCarthy (2016); Rowe and Windle (2012); Warren (2016); Wilkinson et al. (2004); Windle (2015); Wood (2013)
Wearing of school uniform	Beavis (2004); English (2004); Windle (2015); Wood (2013)
Services Domain	
Affordability/School Fees	Beamish and Morey (2013); Cahill (2009); Campbell et al. (2009); English (2004); Fahey (2019); Goh and Dolnicar (2006); Independent Schools Queensland (2019); Independent Schools Council of Australia (2008); Kennedy et al. (2011); Windle (2015); Wood (2013)
Availability of before and after school care	Independent Schools Queensland (2019); Kennedy et al. (2011)
Proximity to Home/location	Beamish and Morey (2013); Cahill (2009); Campbell et al. (2009); Fahey (2019); Goh and Dolnicar (2006); Independent Schools Queensland (2019); Kennedy et al. (2011); McCarthy (2006); Windle (2015); Wood (2013)

2.7 Summary

Chapter 2: Literature Review provided context to school choice in Australia by providing a brief history of the dual school system in Australia. Recurrent and consistent themes were then identified, then parental motivations as they pertain to school choice was discussed. A review of literature concerned with where parents get their information about schools was then provided. Finally, an overview of themes and factors involved in parental school choice from the literature was tabulated, organised into school, curriculum, student and services domains to facilitate construction of the survey questionnaire.

The following chapter, Chapter 3: Methodology, discusses the methodology employed in the current research of parental factors of school choice, specifically of parents sending their children to Urban School 1, Urban School 2, Rural School 1 and Rural School 2.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

Chapter 3 discusses the methodology used in this research delving into school choice and factors that have influenced parents (Seventh-day Adventist and non-Seventh-day Adventist) to choose SDA faith-based schools for their children's education. In particular, this chapter introduces the study's worldview and philosophical position and presents the theoretical lenses adopted for the study. It then outlines the research design, the rationale for this design, and the respective elements of this design: choice of participants, data collection procedures and data analysis.

3.2 Worldview

The methodological orientation of this research is based on Creswell's (2009) notion that there should be a direct linkage and intersection between the researcher's worldview or paradigm, the focus question of the research and the methodology. The research question is a crucial element that guides the entire research, from the literature review to the decisions about the kind of research design to the decisions about data collection (Bryman, 2012).

The researcher's worldview can be defined as a "general orientation about the world and the nature of research that a researcher holds" (Creswell, 2009, p. 6) or "a set of assumptions about the world, and about what constitute proper techniques and topics for inquiring into that world" (Punch & Oancea, 2014, pp. 16, 17). Furthermore, Creswell and Plano Clark (2011) purport that the worldview guides the research inquiry. Therefore, as a researcher, it is important to identify with a philosophical worldview to choose an appropriate methodology to answer the research question.

Traditionally, quantitative researchers aligned their philosophical worldview with positivism while qualitative researchers with interpretivism. However, numerous writers suggest that pragmatism is a useful philosophy or foundation that allows for multiple approaches to collecting data and that pragmatism does not depend on one approach to gain information (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011; Denscombe, 2017; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2010). Shannon-Baker (2016) notes the practical advantages of pragmatism to a researcher:

> Pragmatism is based on the belief that theories can be both contextual and generalizable by analysing them for "transferability" to another situation. The

> pragmatic researcher is similarly able to maintain both subjectivity in their own reflections on research and objectivity in data collection and analysis. (p. 322)

Pragmatism, as a worldview, is adopted in this research because it has relevant implications to the research question. Shannon-Baker (2016, p. 331) emphasises pragmatism's "emphasis on research question, communication and shared meaning" and its "balance between subjectivity and objectivity throughout the inquiry". Ontologically, pragmatism reflects on the nature of reality and what there is that can be known; epistemologically, pragmatism focuses on how we gain knowledge of what we know and explains the relationship between the researcher and the researched (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011; Punch & Oancea, 2014). Hence, pragmatism is important because it focuses on

> …the consequences of research, on the primary importance of the question asked rather than the methods, and on the use of multiple methods of data collection to inform the problems under study. Thus, it is pluralistic and oriented toward "what works" and practice. (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011, p. 41)

The pragmatic worldview allows the exploration into the views of the parents that take part in this study and to give voice to their reasons for choosing a Seventh-day Adventist school. Starting from an emic position, revolving around the researcher, the data will allow a paradigm shift to an etic position, outside the researcher (Cohen et al., 2007; Halilovich, 2014). Creswell (2009) explains the emic position of the researcher:

> Researchers recognize that their own backgrounds shape their interpretation, and they position themselves in the research to acknowledge how their interpretation flows from their personal, cultural, and historical experiences. The researcher's intent is to make sense of (or interpret) the meanings others have about the world. Rather than starting with a theory… inquirers generate or inductively develop a theory or pattern of meaning. (p. 8)

The etic, or outside, position is the data that will be collected in this research. The research will allow the unfolding of the researcher's emic position, as a teacher within the Seventh-day Adventist school system, toward an etic and negotiated understanding of the reasons Seventh-day Adventist and non-Seventh-day Adventist parents choose Seventh-day Adventists schools for their children. Hoare et al. (2012) allow for this negotiated progression by suggesting that emic and etic perspectives are not opposites but rather sit along a philosophical continuum and "their position on this continuum depends on the role and relationship of the researcher(s) in the social and cultural context of the area of inquiry" (p.720).

Some researchers suggest that pragmatism is a useful philosophy or foundation that allows for multiple approaches to collecting data and does not depend on one approach to gain information (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2010). The pragmatic worldview is the accepted rationale behind a mixed methods approach and the mixed method approach is the methodology adopted for this research. The mixed method approach will be discussed later in this chapter. The research methods chosen include a case study orientation, survey and interviews. These will also be discussed later in this chapter.

3.3 Theoretical Framework

A theoretical lens or framework is needed by a researcher to "provide a lens through which the entire study might be viewed" (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011, p. 10). The theoretical lens is different from the philosophical worldview previously discussed; it is a concept that is relevant to the research question and will help understand the research question. Tashakkori and Teddlie (2010) claim that a theoretical lens provides "a framework for asking questions and gathering data" (p.55). Indeed, Lederman and Lederman (2015) emphasise that all research "should have a valid theoretical framework to justify the importance and significance of the work" (p.597). Grant and Osanloo (2014) assert that the researcher must choose the lens to "build an argument, establish the context of the problem, and explain findings" (p. 24). To highlight the necessity of the use of a theoretical lens in sound research the same authors insist that

> The researcher must keep the theoretical framework front and center [sic] in justifying the research questions, the problem, the significance of the study, and as a way to help determine the research design and the analysis plan. (p. 24)

Rational choice theory is extensively discussed in school choice literature to explore parental school selection patterns (Bosetti, 2004; Bosetti & Pyryt, 2007; Gorard, 1999; Green, 2018; Krull, 2016; Valentine, 2016; Wilson, 2016). Krull (2016) explains rational choice theory as a market-based theory that helps explain how individuals make choices. Rational choice theory is based on obtaining the best service available from the choice-makers self-interest perspective (Herrnstein, 1990). Herrnstein (1990) defines this theory as an attempt by people to "maximise total utility" (p. 356). Applying rational choice theory to the school choice setting implies that parents look for the best school, in their opinion, for their children, given the options available (Krull, 2016).

However, parents do not always choose in an objective and rational manner but rather their choices can be influenced by emotional, social and religious considerations. Herrnstein (1990) acknowledges significant limitations with the rational choice theory stating that some choices violate "the consistency implicit in rationality" (p. 358) and cites many examples of human behaviour that defy the constrained definition of rational choice. Gorard (1999) identifies further limitations on rational choice theory in that it may be a useful model for urban schools but limited in rural environments, where choice may be limited. Since this study is researching two urban and two rural faith-based schools, other theoretical frameworks will be investigated.

This study explores school choice in the context of faith-based schools, which suggests that parent motivations for choosing schools go beyond the traditional rational choice framework for selecting private schools. It is evident that school choice is a multi-faceted process that ventures beyond traditional rational choice, beyond a simple attempt to maximise gains. According to Bell (2008) rational choice theory does not consider important elements such as the religious, social, cultural and historical contexts to which parents will invariably be exposed. Green (2018) adds that rational choice theory assumes that religion is a "secondary motivation or option in realizing material benefits" (p. 528). Pelz and den Dulk (2018) also note, but do not expand, that studies "often assume that religion is secondary to other explanations of demand" (p. 81). As a result of the limitations of rational choice theory, it is necessary to find alternative theoretical lenses to give clarity to the complexity of school choice particularly as it relates to a faith-based system. These alternate lenses will certainly add to understanding parental reasons for faith-based school choice.

The first theoretical lens this study will use to explore the theme of school choice is social identity theory. Social identity theory suggests that an individual chooses a community that perpetuates their belief system or identity (Leaper, 2011; Tajfel & Turner, 1979, 2004). Social identity theory provides a conceptual lens with which to understand the relationship between the person and their associated social system (Deaux, 2000), connecting the individual with the social (Brown & Capozza, 2000). Pelz and den Dulk (2018) proffer social identity to help explain why parents choose faith-based schools. They purport that social identity theory provides the "link between religion and the decision to enrol in a private school is cultural transmission, a mechanism for parents to preserve their own distinctive religious culture through their offspring" (Pelz & den Dulk, 2018, p. 85). Green (2018) concurs and explains social identity theory "as a vehicle for parents to pursue religious

distinctiveness by selecting private schools that transmit their belief system" (p.529). As such, social identity theory suggests a feasible explanation as to why parents choose faith-based schools over other non-government schools or government schools for their children. Social identity theory proposes that choosing a faith-based school enables parents to pass on their religious identity more easily to their children (Pelz & den Dulk, 2018). Furthermore, this theoretical lens provides a research framework for exploring why parents choose faith-based schools to educate their children.

The second theoretical lens, secular good theory, is also useful for explaining parental choices in the faith school choice environment. Posited by Pelz and den Dulk (2018), secular good theory helps explain school choice and argues that parents, with varied or no religious affiliation, may choose a faith-based school because of the perceived benefits that are not necessarily related to religion per se (Green, 2018; Pelz & den Dulk, 2018). In this sense, parents are not choosing faith-based schools for the school's religious affiliation; religion is secondary to other reasons of choice and perceived benefits of private school education provided by these schools. Pelz and den Dulk (2018) clarify that according to this theory parents "value the nonreligious benefits … of a religion-based education" (p. 80). As noted in Chapter 2: Literature Review these include perceived benefits such as academic excellence, a nurturing and supportive environment, quality teaching, values driven environment and positive discipline. Secular good theory provides another lens for exploring parental school choice and provides a valid explanation for the large number of parents enrolling their children in faith-based schools that have no ties to the religious tradition of the school.

Even though rational choice theory is a dominant theory in school choice literature, it is acknowledged that it has limitations, particularly in the faith-based school choice context. The two lenses, social identity theory and secular good theory, can operate simultaneously and potentially provide further understandings relating to parental school choice. Although these theoretical frameworks may not be the only lenses with which to understand school choice, they do provide alternative and comprehensive perspectives on the issue of school choice in relation to faith-based schools.

3.4 Research Design – Mixed Methods

A research design is essentially an overall plan to conduct research but research design and its function goes beyond this simplistic definition. Creswell (2009) claims research design is "based on the nature of the research problem or issue being addressed, the

researchers' personal experiences, and the audiences for the study" (p. 3). Punch and Oancea (2014) discuss research design in the context of the research question:

> Design sits between the research questions and the data, showing how the research questions will be connected to the data, and what tools and procedures to use in answering them. Therefore, design needs to follow from the questions, and fit in with the data. (p. 144)

Creswell (2009) identifies three types of research designs: quantitative, qualitative and mixed methods. He purports that quantitative and qualitative designs are not opposite ends. Furthermore, citing Newman and Benz (1998), Creswell (2009) sees quantitative and qualitative approaches as "different ends on a continuum" (p. 3). He then advances the notion that "mixed methods research resides in the middle of this continuum because it incorporates elements of both qualitative and quantitative approaches" (p. 3).

The research question and the researcher's philosophical worldview drive research design (Figure 3.1). There are a number of advantages to taking a pragmatic approach to this research: Firstly, pragmatism considers the research question as paramount to the research study approach; secondly, it is effective in gaining understanding of and solutions to 'real life' problems; and finally, pragmatism supports the use of both quantitative and qualitative research (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2010).

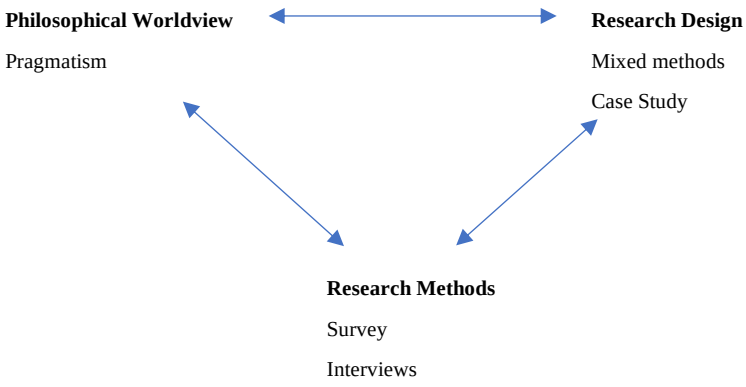


Figure 3. 1

Worldview and Research Design Links, adapted from Creswell, 2009, p. 5

This research also incorporated a case study approach that helped contribute to an holistic understanding of parental school choice (Kumar, 2011). Ary et al. (2010, p. 29) describe case study as a type of research that "focuses on a single unit, such as one individual, one group, one organization, or one program." Case study research lies under the

umbrella of qualitative research, and attempts to gain intimate knowledge of a particular group (Ary et al., 2010; Lodico et al., 2006; Starman, 2013) and, according to Remenyi (2012), a case study may be used to develop a theory within the qualitative research paradigm. It is particularly important that the researcher allows the events and situations "to speak for themselves, rather than to be largely interpreted, evaluated or judged by the researcher" (Cohen et al., 2007, p. 254). Day Ashley (2017) suggests that

> The strength of case study research lies in its ability to enable the researcher to intensively investigate the case in depth, to probe, drill down and get at its complexity, often through immersion in, repeated visits to, or encounters with, the case. (p. 114)

The case study design is "of immense relevance when the focus of the study is on extensively exploring and understanding rather than confirming and quantifying" (Kumar, 2011, p. 127) the reasons for choice. Typically, case study research focuses on a bounded system (Lodico et al., 2006) which has finite parameters such as the number of people that can be interviewed. Cohen et al. (2007) state that case studies also have geographical parameters, and according to Creswell (2009)

> Case studies are a strategy of inquiry in which the researcher explores in depth a program, event, activity, process, or one or more individuals. Cases are bounded by time and activity, and researchers collect detailed information using a variety of data collection procedures over a sustained period of time (p. 13).

Using the definitions above, the case study in this research was bound by the physical environment of the four schools under study and by the finite numbers parents of students currently attending these schools. Day Ashley (2017, p. 116) explains that case study research allows for "methodological eclecticism", including mixed methods, further enabling a deeper understanding of cases due to triangulation of methods.

The motivation behind this research was to explore the reasons parents choose Seventh-day Adventist schools for their children. In order to adequately answer the research question, it was decided that a mixed methods approach would be used in this research incorporating the elements of both quantitative and qualitative methods. Since the research question drives the research design, the mixed methods process will enable the researcher to glean a more comprehensive understanding than using one method only (Biesta, 2017; Coe et al., 2017). For clarity, this research will adopt the labels 'Phase One' and 'Phase Two' to delineate between data collection. Phase One will focus on the quantitative phase of data collection and Phase Two will focus on the qualitative phase of data collection.

Over the past few decades mixed methods research has emerged as a viable and valid research tool. Punch and Oancea (2014) discuss the prominence of quantitative methods in educational research prior to the 1970s which was followed by the burgeoning use of qualitative methods as an accepted methodology. Johnson and Gray (2010) and Punch and Oancea (2014) discuss the history of the paradigm wars that ensued in the context of methodological and epistemological developments of understanding and research. Muijs (2004) discusses, in a balanced fashion, the debate "in which quantitative and qualitative research are seen as belligerent and incompatible factions" (p. 2) by proponents of either method. As a result of the paradigm wars, mixed methods emerged in the 1990s (Punch & Oancea, 2014) as a "third research paradigm" (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004, p. 15) blending both quantitative and qualitative tools of research (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011).

Creswell and Plano Clark (2011) delve deeply into the history of mixed methods research, dedicating an entire book chapter to the analysis of the foundations of this design. They clearly outline the historical and philosophical discussions surrounding mixed methods and tabulate writers and their contributions to developmental time periods (pp. 23-25). According to these authors mixed methods predates the late twentieth century paradigm wars. They cite scholarly studies and articles dating from the 1970s that advocate the use of both quantitative and qualitative experiments by Sieber, 1973, Campbell, 1974, Cronbach, 1975, and Denzin, 1978 (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011, p. 21). To add to the debate on these theoretical concepts, Teddlie and Tashakkori (2012) have more recently contended that "more than one paradigm can underlie mixed methods" (p. 774).

Several academics contend that the incorporation of both quantitative and qualitative phases provides greater insight into a phenomenon than either could do separately (Biesta, 2017; Bryman, 2012; Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). Specifically, Denscombe (2017) identifies the advantages of the mixed methods approach as providing a better understanding of what is under study, utilising a practical, problem-driven approach to the research and establishing clearer links between methodological approaches. A particularly poignant benefit of mixed methods is that it can compensate both strengths and weaknesses for the researcher, as writes Denscombe (2017):

> Research strategies and methods each have their own strengths and their own weaknesses and a shrewd combination of strategies and methods allows the researcher to exploit the strengths of a particular method without leaving himself/herself vulnerable to criticism in connection with that method's weaknesses. (p. 176)

Creswell and Plano Clark (2011) classify the major mixed methods designs into six useful categories: the convergent parallel design, the explanatory sequential design, the exploratory design, the embedded design, the transformative design and the multiphase design (pp. 69-70). Each of these methods prioritises and emphasises the qualitative and quantitative elements differently. According to Creswell and Plano Clark (2011) the convergent parallel design, also known as the convergent design (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Denscombe, 2017) and concurrent design (Biesta, 2017), is the most well-known and most commonly used method in research. Semantics aside, a useful working definition of convergent parallel design for this research is that provided by Creswell and Plano Clark (2011):

> The convergent parallel design… occurs when the researcher uses concurrent timing to implement the quantitative and qualitative strands during the same phase of the research process, prioritizes the methods equally, and keeps the strands independent during analysis and then mixes the results during the overall interpretation… (pp. 70-71)

It is acknowledged that the sequencing and dominance of methods is dependent on numerous features of the study at hand, answering the research question notwithstanding. Because the aim of this research was to comprehensively delve into parental reasons for school choice, this researcher believes that equal status should be given to both the quantitative and qualitative phases. Hence, for the purposes of this research it was deemed appropriate to utilise the convergent parallel design.

The convergent parallel design incorporates a quantitative and qualitative phase of data collection that are both concurrent and separate (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2011). The convergent parallel design enables the researcher to collect and analyse quantitative and qualitative data without either dominating or driving the research. In the literature convergent parallel design is most commonly denoted as QUAN + QUAL or QUAL + QUAN (Bryman, 2012; Coe et al., 2017; Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011; Denscombe, 2017; Pluye et al., 2018). The uppercase letters denote the equal status given to each design and the plus signs indicate that both designs are conducted simultaneously or concurrently. This identifying notation helps researchers distinguish the process from other designs such as the explanatory design, QUAN + qual, where the quantitative methods are given greater emphasis than the qualitative methods, which are identified in lowercase. After the data is collected in concurrent parallel design, it is analysed separately and the results are

then merged. In this analysis, it is merged to provide a better understanding of the research question: parental reasons for school choice.

As has been outlined, the benefit of mixed methods research lies in combining the strengths of both quantitative and qualitative research and "the presentation of results can be convincing and powerful when both summary numbers and in-depth portraits of a setting are included" (Lodico et al., 2006, p. 282). However, there are a number of disadvantages that have been taken into consideration in this research. Lodico et al. (2006) identify these as relating to the amount of knowledge and skill a researcher needs to have in both approaches and the time it takes to collect data and analyse data from both methods. These concerns are also echoed by other authors such as Denscombe (2017) and Creswell and Creswell (2018). This researcher has invested much time in ensuring each of these disadvantages is minimised.

3.4.1 Phase One – Quantitative Phase

Phase One involved collecting numerical data. According to several writers, quantitative research emphasises numerical measurement and analysis of data and generalises it across a specific population to explain a particular phenomenon (Babbie, 2010; Muijs, 2004). Ary et al. (2010) point out that quantitative research "deals with questions of relationship, cause and effect, or current status that researchers can answer by gathering and statistically analysing numeric data" (p. 39). Babbie articulates some important benefits of quantitative research claiming it can "make it easier to aggregate, compare, and summarize data. Further, quantitative research opens up the possibility of statistical analyses, ranging from simple averages to complex formulas and mathematical models" (p. 24). However, he also points out that a significant disadvantage of quantitative research is the "potential loss in richness of meaning" (p. 24).

Phase One of this research involved the use of a survey. Surveys are a very useful tool of quantitative inquiry. Creswell (2009) claims that surveys allow for inferences about a group's attitudes or behaviour, and in this research, inferences will relate to parental school choice. Self-administered surveys, such as those completed online, can reach a large number of people in a short amount of time (Babbie, 2010). The use of a survey is very appropriate for the type of questions this research is interested in answering and Babbie (2010) asserts that survey research is "especially appropriate for making descriptive studies of large populations; survey data may be used for explanatory purposes as well" (p. 292). One advantage of delivering a survey online is that it can reach many people quickly (Tymms,

2017). Another advantage of surveys is "the economy of design and the rapid turnaround in data collection" (Creswell, 2009, p. 146). However, the response rate of surveys varies, depending on the purpose of the study, the relationship between the participants and the researcher and the subject of the survey (Lodico et al., 2006). Lodico et al. (2006) reflects on the potential issue that people with extreme views about an issue may complete the survey whilst those who may be ambivalent may be less likely to complete it which can have implications for generalisation of the results.

3.4.2 Phase Two – Qualitative Phase

A qualitative phase was chosen to complement the quantitative phase to seek a deeper understanding of the phenomenon of school choice. One reason for this choice, as outlined by Maykut and Morehouse (2005), is that the quantitative research method could strip the experience of its meaning and the empirical model of quantitative research cannot account for the complexity of meaning behind parental choices. King and Horrocks (2010) state that qualitative research is "interested in how people differ in relation to a particular phenomenon, as much as it is in what they have in common" (p. 27). As such, the addition of a qualitative research design allowed for the exploration *and* synthesis of the differences and similarities of parental school choice. The essence of this research is to illuminate the factors that have contributed to these choices and to gain a richer and more in-depth understanding of what it means for parents to choose a particular Seventh-day Adventist school. Howell Major and Savin-Baden (2010) argue the value of qualitative research is that it "helps to identify gaps and omissions in a given body of research" (p. 13). Furthermore, they state, that "qualitative research synthesis can add depth dimension to qualitative studies" (Howell Major & Savin-Baden, 2010, p. 15). As has been expressed earlier, there is a lacuna of research into the reasons why parents choose Seventh-day Adventist schools.

According to O'Reilly and Kiyimba (2015) "the focus of qualitative research is on exploring, examining and describing people" (p. 57) leading to a grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006) and in this instance, a deeper understanding of parental choice. In addition, qualitative research is "iterative and unfolding" (O'Reilly & Kiyimba, 2015, p. 57) in nature and through emic construction and through the process of emergent design the research will grow to evolve to a negotiated etic construction.

Mears (2017, p. 187) claims that the validity of the interview process is connected to its "appropriateness for studying what it claims to inform and its veracity in reporting."

Mears (2017) also observes that the reliability, or trustworthiness, of interviews can be seen "by how accurately the study reflects the participants' meaning and their authority to comment on the matters being studies" (p. 188).

3.5 Participants

According to Lodico et al. (2006) quantitative research is interested in "generalizing from their group of participants, the *sample,* to the larger **population** from which the sample was drawn" (p. 140). This research is focused on the reasons that parents choose Seventh-day Adventist schools (the population). The results may be useful to ASA which operates 48 schools in Australia (Adventist Schools Australia, 2022). However, it would not be feasible to conduct research at all schools in Australia. Therefore, the participant sample is limited to the North New South Wales Conference ASA region and the participant sample for this case study is further reduced to four specific schools within this region. To provide for a more representative population sample two schools are from an urban environment and two are rural schools. This helps mitigate "the generalisability of results to those areas that are similar" geographically (Muijs, 2004, p. 41). It is also important to note that the results presented in this research do not necessarily reflect the school choice experience of all parents at all Seventh-day Adventist schools around Australia. It is acknowledged that each school is unique in its demographic composition and that responses could be different if this research were conducted at other schools in other regions of Australia.

3.5.1 Phase One – Quantitative Phase

The quantitative data were collected using an online survey provider (surveymonkey.com). One advantage of using this website to create the survey instrument lies in the ease of creating an appealing and user-friendly design. A second benefit is that it easily generated a link to access the survey and did not involve any login or authentication. In this way the respondents were assured of anonymity. Another benefit is that responses can be automatically downloaded in graph or table form. Bryman (2012) advocates using and adapting questions from surveys that have already been administered. The literature revealed a variety of surveys of school choice (Beamish & Morey, 2013; Beavis, 2004; Cahill, 2009; Campbell et al., 2009; Independent Schools Queensland, 2007, 2011, 2015, 2019). These surveys were used to generate a theoretical model and many of the items included in this survey have been adapted from these. Structurally, the survey was organised into four sections, see Appendix B.

From the literature, thirty-two factors of school choice were identified as being frequently cited and have been coalesced into this research. There was one addition, "Seventh-day Adventist school", as a factor of choice due to these schools being a part of ASA. These thirty-three factors were then integrated into four broad domains: school domain, curriculum domain, student domain and services domain. In the survey these domains were labelled School Domain A, School Domain B, School Domain C, and School Domain D, respectively. The generic labels were to minimise any potential bias or preconceptions of respondents. Each of these four domains had a number of factors of school choice. School Domain A, deemed 'School Domain', included items identifying the philosophical orientation of the school, organisational set up, and physical descriptions of the school. The factors in this domain were Christian school, Seventh-day Adventist school, co-educational, K-Year 12, small class sizes, size of the school, appearance of buildings and classrooms, appearance of the school grounds, integration of computer technology into curriculum, technology and science facilities, and library facilities. School Domain B, deemed 'Curriculum Domain', identified items that focused on a variety of learning pathways, a wide range of subjects and quality education. These included the following factors: artistic and musical, sporting opportunities, range of subjects offered, the inclusion of project-based learning, provision for special needs, a talented student's program, range of camps and trips, quality of teaching, academic results and a well-rounded education. School Domain C, deemed 'Student Domain', was orientated around the student body and included factors relating to a supportive environment, the teaching of values and student appearance and behaviour. The factors included in this domain were the availability of counselling and/or chaplaincy, a nurturing environment, the teaching of Christian values, the wearing of uniform, the appearance of students, behaviour of students and behaviour management. School Domain D, deemed 'Services Domain', related to affordability, accessibility and services available at the school. The factors included were school fees affordability, proximity to home, transport accessibility, before and after school care, and early learning centre/Pre-Kindy.

Phase One of data collection involved a survey sent out to all parents at the four selected Seventh-day Adventist Schools in the NNSW Conference region. Two of these schools are considered urban schools and two are rural schools. The principal of each school was initially contacted by email explaining the research and requesting permission to send a survey to all school parents. All four principals were obliging and supported the research.

When permission was obtained all parents were sent a link to the survey via email and the survey was also mentioned in the school newsletter to provide added exposure and encouragement for parents to participate.

The sample size in quantitative research is typically large to allow for rigorous and useful results (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). A total of 1879 families were enrolled at the four schools involved in this research. Most school email systems automatically sent the email to both parents in the same family, totalling 4500 initial emails being sent. Two reminder emails were sent to families a couple of weeks apart. A total of 1987 emails were sent from Urban School 1 representing 1028 students from Pre-Kindy to Year 12; 1791 emails were sent from Urban School 2 representing 931 students from Pre-Kindy to Year 12; 141 emails were sent from Rural School 1 representing 214 students from Pre-Kindy to Year 12; and 581 emails were sent from Rural School 2 representing 580 students from Pre-Kindy to Year 12. 778 parents responded to the survey, however, 718 parents answered all questions.

The process of recruiting interview volunteers was within the survey instrument. At the end of the survey, a question allowed participants to voluntarily opt-in to semi-structured interviews at a date, time and location convenient to all parties. Survey data was collected and analysed using descriptive statistics (Punch & Oancea, 2014).

3.5.2 Phase Two – Qualitative Phase

Phase Two of data collection incorporated the use of semi-structured interviews. The interviews provided parents with an opportunity to address the research question by generating their own frameworks rather than being constrained by the survey framework. In qualitative research, sample sizes are often quite small (Wiersma & Jurs, 2005). Parents were given the opportunity to volunteer for these interviews within the survey and chosen according to availability, willingness and proximity. However, if there was a lack of volunteers then recommendations from the principal would be sought and phone calls by the researcher will be made to attract volunteers. These parents would then be contacted personally by this researcher to allow for voluntary participation and informed consent which includes a clear understanding of the purpose and main features of the research (Kvale, 1996).

Through the process of purposeful sampling (Creswell, 2007; Seidman, 2006) the participants were “selected because of their characteristics relative to the phenomenon under

study, rather than being selected randomly" (Wiersma & Jurs, 2005, pp. 203, 204). Patton points out that purposeful sampling is an imperative element of qualitative research and focuses on "selecting information-rich cases whose study will illuminate the questions under study" (2002, p. 230). Patton (2002) further illuminates this by stating that

> The logic and power of purposeful sampling lie in selecting *information-rich cases* for study in depth. Information-rich cases are those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the inquiry… Studying information-rich cases yields insights and in-depth understanding rather than empirical generalizations. (p. 230)

Selection of the participants took place through purposeful sampling to ensure the desired characteristics of interviewees were represented.

3.6 Data Collection

Creswell and Plano Clark (2011) describe that the function of data collection in research is to "gather information to address the questions being asked in the study" (p. 171). In mixed methods research the data collection constitutes both the quantitative and qualitative components. In this research data collection during the quantitative phase will consist of a survey and during the qualitative phase will consist of semi-structured interviews. A pilot study will also be conducted as a pre-test to ensure the survey instrument functions as expected.

3.6.1 Pilot Study

To ascertain the feasibility of a survey it is useful to conduct a pilot study (Ary et al., 2010). Specifically, Ary et al. (2010) comment on the usefulness of using a pilot study prior to conducting the main study:

> The pilot study provides the opportunity to assess the appropriateness of the data-collection methods and other procedures and to make changes if necessary… Unanticipated problems that appear can be solved at this stage, thereby saving time and effort later (p. 95).

Additionally, Cohen et al. (2007) identify three functions of a pilot study: "to increase the reliability, validity and practicability of the questionnaire" (p. 341). Bryman (2012) clearly encourages the use of a pilot study stating that "if possible, it is best to find a small set of respondents who are comparable to member of the population from which the sample for the full study will be taken" (p. 264). A pilot study was conducted before the survey was sent

to the wider school body. The pilot survey was conducted to identify and mitigate any potential problems with the actual instrument of the survey which was to be sent to all parents of the schools under study. Six people, who were known to the researcher and had children at one of the schools under study, were selected to participate. Lodico et al. (2006) suggest that because "the pilot participants represent the sample that is being surveyed, they are much more aware of the issues of that group than perhaps the researcher" (p. 112). The researcher outlined the purpose of the pilot study in an email with a link to the on-line survey. Pilot study participants were requested to provide feedback on the instrument of the survey and told that their responses would be deleted and not be considered part of the survey results. Specifically, participants were asked to comment on the time it took to complete the survey, whether the survey operated online correctly, whether the questions were clear and easy to understand, to evaluate the logic of the survey questions, to note any spelling or grammar mistakes and to provide any other feedback they felt was needed.

Five of the six participants selected for the pilot study responded. The feedback from the pilot study varied with generally useful comments. All respondents who completed the survey did so in 4 – 8 minutes. No spelling or grammatical errors were noted. The survey instrument also worked correctly, with participants being able to move from question to question without any issues. However, one respondent highlighted that they could leave some questions unanswered and move on to the next question. This was fixed by making all questions mandatory. Another respondent queried Section C – What does this school do well? Upon further consideration this section was removed completely from the survey as it was felt the question was too broad and that it did not relate to the research question on school choice. They answered the previous section based on the school they were at and felt that their answers were the same for both sections. Consequently, the instructions for Section C were emended by including bold text type to highlight the focus of the question. Another respondent noticed an 'OK' button that appeared at random times during the completion of the survey. This was investigated and was able to be removed.

As a consequence of the pilot study, the researcher could modify the original draft survey and create a more user-friendly instrument, whose data was consequently more useful and valid. The emended survey was then sent out to all parents of the four schools selected for this study using each school's email data base.

3.6.2 Phase One – Quantitative Phase

The survey consisted of five sections. The questions in each section were organised vertically for clarity, as Bryman (2012) suggests. Section 1 gleaned general information from the respondent such as the name of the school their child attended, the number of children at the school and the year level in which they were enrolled, whether the parent had a faith affiliation and asked for the respondent's gender. These were included for statistical purposes.

Sections 2, 3 and 4 incorporated the use of a Likert-type scale to elicit responses. Lodico et al. (2006) claim that the Likert-type scale "is the most widely used scale in survey research" and it was deemed the most appropriate for this research. Although many Likert-type scales commonly utilise three or five options (Tymms, 2017) this study chose four options to "force a decision from the respondents" (Tymms, 2017, p. 225). This avoided the possibility of respondents choosing a middle or neutral option rather than making a firm decision.

Section 2 related to factors of school choice. There were four domains, discussed previously, where respondents could choose from a Likert-type scale. The options were extremely important, very important, somewhat important, not important. Parents were asked: "Thinking about the factors that **may influence you** in choosing **an ideal** school for your child, please indicate using the scale provided how important these factors are to you." The bold letters and capital letters were placed for emphasis to ensure that respondents understood the focus of the question. Some issues were identified in the pilot study (discussed earlier) where respondents thought that Sections 2 and 3 were too similar. A clarifying sentence was included which read: (Please note: the same questions will be asked about factors for choosing **THIS** school in the next section). Section 2 also included the question: "Please indicate the **three** main factors (from the list above) that would influence you in choosing **an ideal school** for your child." The bold letters were included to provide emphasis, to highlight the focus of the question and to help parents respond appropriately.

Section 3 titled "Factors contributing to choosing this school" asked parents to consider the school their child was enrolled in. The question asked: "This question relates to **THIS** school. What factors influenced you in choosing **THIS** school for your child? Please indicate using the scale provided how important these factors were to you." The bold words and capital letters were again placed for emphasis to help respondents understand the focus of

the question. The Likert-type scale allowed respondents to choose between extremely important, very important, somewhat important and not important. The same four domains were included as those in Section 2. Section 3 also asked the respondents: “Please indicate the **three** main factors (from the list above) that influenced you in choosing **THIS** school for your child.” A comment box was provided for the answer.

Section 4 focused on the process of school choice. The question asked: “How important were the following in **influencing** you in your decision to send your child to **THIS** school?” Bold words and capital letters were again used to assist parents to appreciate the focus of the question. A Likert-type scale included options of extremely important, very important, somewhat important, not important. Elements to choose from were recommendation from others, open day visits, school website, social media, advertising, the reputation of the school in the community, own or spouse’s personal experience at the school, My School website, NAPLAN results, academic reputation, child’s own choice, closest school and always intended to send my child/ren to an SDA school.

Section 5 invited parents to opt-in to an interview to further expand on the concepts of the survey. This interview would be limited to a maximum of one hour, and could be conducted in person, over the telephone or through video conferencing. These options were included to cater for any potential COVID-19 restrictions on gatherings. The respondent was provided the option to leave their name, email address and phone number.

One limitation of at-home administered surveys is that if the respondent has any questions or experiences any unforeseen problems and cannot contact the researcher they may not complete the survey or incorrectly complete the survey (Cohen et al., 2007). However, the benefits of an on-line conducted survey outweigh these potential issues. An online survey allows its completion “in private, to devote as much time as they wish to its completion, to be in familiar surroundings, and to avoid the potential threat or pressure to participate caused by the researcher’s presence” (Cohen et al., 2007, p. 344). Cohen et al. (2007) believe that this can add to the reliability of the data.

Another issue that can occur with surveys that have sections with similar questions is the halo effect where initial impressions by the respondent can influence subsequent responses, limiting the reliability of the responses (Lodico et al., 2006). However, for the purposes of this survey it was felt that the instructions under each section were clear and would mitigate the likelihood of this occurring.

3.6.3 Phase Two – Qualitative Phase

A key tool for qualitative data collection is the in-depth interview. Patton (2002) proposes that the process of interviewing is based on the assumption "that the perspective of others is meaningful, knowable, and able to be made explicit" (p. 341). According to Mears (2017) in-depth interviews are

> purposeful interactions in which an investigator attempts to learn what another person knows about a topic, to discover and record what that person has experienced, what he or she thinks and feels about it, and what significance or meaning it might have. (p. 183)

Interviews serve a very specific purpose in qualitative research: "exploring and gathering experiential narrative material… for developing a richer and deeper understanding" (Van Manen, 2015, p. 66). Seidman (2006) echoes van Manen stating that "At the root of in-depth interviewing is an interest in understanding the lived experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience" (p.9). Gordon (2016) believes that interviews are useful in understanding decision-making processes and therefore are very useful in this research of parental school choice.

Further to this, the purpose of the qualitative interview is to glean nuanced descriptions using words rather than numbers (Kvale, 1996). Marshall and Rossman (2016) discuss the benefits of interviews further: they can yield large quantity of data, immediate follow-up and clarification is possible and the process of interviews makes it possible to understand the meanings that everyday activities hold for people.

Mears (2017) describes interviewing as a collaborative activity that has challenges that need to be acknowledged. Discussion of the relationship between the interviewer and interviewee revolves around control, hierarchical power and hidden agendas (Creswell, 2007; Flick, 2009; Mason, 2002; Mears, 2017). An awareness of these potential pitfalls is a critical step to minimise their impact on the research.

There are a number of different types of interviews that can be utilised. At one extreme are highly structured interviews with ordered, specific questions and at the other extreme are unstructured interviews with broad topics but no specific questions (Merriam, 2002). Semi-structured interviews lie between these two extremes and incorporate guiding questions to allow the issue to be explored more flexibly. Maykut and Morehouse (2005) describe the process thus:

> This purposeful conversation is not scripted ahead of time. Rather, the researcher asks questions pertinent to the study as opportunities arise, then listens closely to people's responses for clues as to what question to ask next, or whether it is important to probe for additional information. (p.77)

To provide a wide spectrum, where possible, participants would be from varied cultural backgrounds, ages, genders, religions, etc. The participants could come from either the school's primary or secondary sector; ideally, both sectors would be represented in the interview process.

3.6.3.1 Semi-structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were chosen as the qualitative component of this research. Mears (2017) defines interviews as being

> purposeful interactions in which an investigator attempts to learn what another person knows about a topic, to discover and record what that person has experienced, what he or she thinks and feels about it, and what a significance or meaning it might have. (p. 183)

The questions in the interview were semi-structured, meaning that while there was a sequence of suggested questions there was also an openness to change the sequence and questions in order to follow up and develop answers given (Kvale, 1996). Semi-structured interviews are considered one of the most important sources of evidence in case study research (Yin, 2018) and can yield rich and detailed information (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). These "guided conversations" (Yin, 2018, p. 118) explore "the experiences, motives, and opinions of others and learn to see the world from perspectives other than their own" (Rubin & Rubin, 2012, p. 3).

The researcher initially asked questions relating to the number of children at the school, the grades they were in and whether other schools were considered before they chose their current school. Parents were then asked why they chose their current school. Occasionally, parents were interrupted by the researcher to clarify any points made.

In the context of this research, following the approach suggested by Charmaz (2006), interviews were used to generate data because they allowed the researcher to go beneath the surface of the described experience, to glean more detail, ask for reflection and to check for accuracy (p. 26). This provided for a richer, more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon of parental school choice and the consequent emerging themes.

3.7 Data Analysis

Once data is collected it must undergo analysis to provide meaningful information in relation to the research. It involves gathering, organising, analysing and interpreting the collected data (Best & Kahn, 2006). Descriptive statistics was the primary method of analysing the quantitative data collected during this research. Graff (2017) believes that descriptive statistics allows the researcher to "better understand the data trends" (p. 62). The primary method of analysing the qualitative data was the principles of grounded theory where the content is analysed by identifying recurrent themes. The quantitative and qualitative data findings are presented in written narrative form and visual formats such as tables and graphs.

3.7.1 Phase One – Quantitative Phase

The quantitative phase involved collecting survey responses. In order to make useful conclusions from the responses researchers often use descriptive statistics. Best and Kahn (2006) provide a simple but useful definition of analysis using descriptive statistics: "Descriptive statistical analysis involves the description of a particular group" (p. 396). The techniques used to describe the particular group can include tables organising data into themes and graphing the data using a variety of graphs. This research used bar graphs, spider graphs and pie charts to provide a visual summary of the data.

3.7.2 Phase Two – Qualitative Phase

The qualitative phase involved collecting data using semi-structured interviews that had been transcribed. The content was analysed thematically to discover recurring themes. The principles of grounded theory were used. Graff (2017) explains the complexity of the process:

> Grounded theory involves a cyclical process in which data are collected and analyzed, and a coding scheme is developed; additional data collection may be needed until saturation is reached and there are no new constructs emerging. There is movement back and forth between the emerging theory and data or constant comparison. (p. 61)

This method of analysing qualitative data constantly compares the respective interview data to identify similarities and differences (Lodico et al., 2006). The grounded theory process allows the researcher to "develop theoretical analyses from the beginning" (Charmaz, 2006, p. 2). Grounded theory begins with the data, it continues by analysing and reviewing the data, and concludes by allowing the theory to emerge (Cohen et al., 2007). Grounded theory methods are systematic yet flexible guidelines "for collecting and analysing qualitative data

to construct theories 'grounded' in the data themselves." (Charmaz, 2006, p. 2). Ary et al. (2010) concur with Charmaz stating that concepts are constructed from data analysis, enabling the formation of a theory grounded in the data. By using qualitative research the researcher strives to understand social phenomena (Wiersma & Jurs, 2005):

> … a theory may develop as the research is conducted, if it does it may be changed, dropped, or refined as the research progresses. If a theory develops based on the data, we have a "grounded theory," that is, a theory grounded in the data rather than based on some a priori constructed ideas, notions, or system (p. 14).

Akin to Charmaz (2006) and Kvale (1996), Creswell (2007) purports that interviews "play a central role in the data collection in the grounded theory study" (p. 131). Coding is the first step in grounded theory analysis. Specifically, coding separates, sorts and synthesises the data by attaching labels to make comparisons between data and is the link between collecting data and developing an emergent theory (Charmaz, 2006). Waring (2017, p. 105) views coding as the process where data is "broken down, examined, compared, conceptualised and categorised". The next step in analysing the data, is memo-writing which further assists in interpreting the findings (Charmaz, 2006). Waring (2017) defines memos as the "written forms of abstract thinking about data" (p. 105). Memos can be in note form or even diagrams (Waring, 2017). The process of writing analytical notes, or memos, allows the analysis of the data and, according to Charmaz (2006, p. 72), "memos catch your thoughts, capture the comparisons and connections you make, and crystallize questions and directions for you to pursue".

The final step in developing a grounded theory involves what Charmaz (2006) refers to as theoretical sampling, saturation and sorting. Theoretical sampling involves seeking relevant data to "*develop* your emerging *theory"* (Charmaz, 2006, p. 96) and therefore directs the research. Saturation helps to elaborate on the categories found in coding and continues until there are no new categories to be found. According to Charmaz (2006) "categories are 'saturated' when gathering fresh data no longer sparks new theoretical insights, nor reveals new properties of these core theoretical categories" (p. 113). Sorting allows for the organising of the analysis already done and provides an avenue of "refining theoretical links" (Charmaz, 2006, p. 115).

3.8 Ethical Considerations

A useful definition of ethics is "the study of what are good, right or virtuous courses of action" (Punch & Oancea, 2014, p. 58). Hammersley (2017) provides an overview of the

complexities of research ethics and proffers a definition: "it refers to all of the *values* that ought to inform the work of researchers" (p. 58). Hammersley (2017) also identifies important principles to consider when conducting research, such as minimising harm, protecting privacy and respecting autonomy. Gordon (2016) provides additional principles of ethics to consider when doing research. Firstly, the participants should be fully informed; secondly, they must give their consent to be a part of the study and the right to withdraw from participating at any time; thirdly, they must be protected from harm, which includes the information they are providing; finally, participants should be protected from undue stress or danger, including physical and/or emotional harm.

There are a number of ethical considerations regarding interviews to ensure the rights of subjects are protected. Mears (2017) provides a sobering reminder of responsibilities for the researcher: "As a visitor in your study participants' world, you are responsible for communicating honestly, treating them fairly, accurately representing their meaning, and using their interviews only as promised" (p. 187). To fulfil these responsibilities for this research participants were provided with a Survey Information Statement to read prior to completing the survey outlining their rights as participants and the purpose of the research, see Appendix C. Completing the survey online implied consent. Those participating in the interviews were provided with an Interview Information Statement, see Appendix D, outlining the purpose of the research and an Interview Participant Consent Form, see Appendix E, which was signed prior to the commencement of the interview assuring them they could withdraw from the interview at any time. To ensure the protection from physical and/or emotional harm, all interviews were conducted in a safe location at the school where their children were enrolled, and participants were assured that they could contact the school counsellor or chaplain if the interview triggered any negative emotions.

Protecting the participants' privacy should be paramount and assured by anonymity and confidentiality (Kvale, 1996; Neuman, 2006). It is imperative to distinguish between these two terms, which often cause confusion. Babbie (2010) states that "A research project guarantees **anonymity** when the researcher – not just the people who read about the research – cannot identify a given response with a given respondents" (p.67). Essentially, anonymity aims to remove all "identifying features and characteristics" of a participant (O'Reilly et al., 2013). Giordano et al. (2007) suggest that "participant anonymity is the mechanism through which privacy and confidentiality are maintained" (p. 264). Babbie (2010) contrasts this to confidentiality: "A research project guarantees **confidentiality** when the researcher can

identify a given person's responses but essentially promises not to do so publicly" (p.67). This means that an individual's privacy is protected by not disclosing what is shared with the researcher (O'Reilly et al., 2013). Giordano et al. (2007) add to the complexity of understanding these elements that are vital to the ethical consideration of research:

> In the research setting, confidentiality involves the management of private information; this is grounded in respect for the persons and entails three dimensions: (a) the autonomy of persons and their freedom to have and maintain privacy and secrecy to whatever extent they choose, (b) the concept that secrets can be shared as each person chooses, and (c) the understanding that the promise of confidentiality is binding… (p. 264)

The survey was designed in such a way that the participants could not be identified, ensuring anonymity. However, if a participant wanted to be part of the interview process they could provide their name, phone number and email address for the sole purpose of contact. To remain anonymous Neuman (2006) suggests that "researchers discard the names or addresses of subjects as soon as possible and refer to participants by a code number only, to protect anonymity" (p. 139). Anonymity was maintained in the survey research by presenting the data collected in aggregate form through the use of descriptive statistics which ensured the information could not be linked to a specific individual.

Anonymity was preserved during the interview process by removing any identifiable personal details from the study and giving each parent a pseudonym. Assured privacy often allows the participants to speak freely and feel at ease. Each interview was recorded, after gaining consent from the participants. The interviews were then transcribed and stored initially securely on an external hard drive. At the conclusion of the research, the data was deleted permanently, in accordance with ethics procedures. Anonymity was further assured with interview data being reported using a pseudonym for each parent and schools as Urban School 1, Urban School 2, Rural School 1 and Rural School 2. Confidentiality was assured in the Interview Information Statement, see Appendix D.

A comprehensive ethics application was prepared and sent to Avondale University College's ethics committee for approval, as per research regulations. A minor amendment relating to the COVID-19 situation in Australia was suggested and included. This amendment allowed for telephone interviews and interviews over the internet using platforms such as Zoom or Skype if required to limit social interaction. The application was then formally accepted and confirmed, see Appendix A.

3.9 Triangulation

Biesta (2017, p. 160) provides a useful definition of triangulation proposing that it is "seeking the convergence and corroboration of results from different methods and designs studying the same phenomenon". Mixed methods research provides this opportunity by using both quantitative and qualitative approaches and the convergent parallel design is a particularly useful approach to glean triangulated results (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). The benefits of triangulation lie within the "premise that a research topic can be better understood if it is viewed from more than one perspective" (Denscombe, 2017, p. 167). According to Stake (1995) triangulation allows the researcher to "…see if the phenomenon or case remains the same at other times, in other spaces…" (p. 112). Further to this, Carter et al. (2014) iterate that triangulation is a research strategy used to view data "through the convergence of information from different sources" (p. 545). In this research the convergence occurs through the use of the quantitative approach (surveys) and qualitative approach (interviews). The most common use of triangulation in social research is methodological triangulation where results can be compared between methods (Denscombe, 2017). Further, it has been argued that the "key to this form of triangulation is the use of approaches that are markedly different and which allow the researcher to see things from as *widely different perspectives* as possible" (Denscombe, 2017, p. 168). Mears (2017) adds that "in-depth interviewing can also function to clarify or triangulate data obtained through other means" (p. 183), such as surveys.

The benefits of triangulation are well documented (Bryman, 2012; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011; Guion et al., 2011; Thurmond, 2001) and include revealing unique findings, discovering that findings can be mutually corroborated and providing a clearer understanding of the phenomenon. However, Denscombe (2017) cautions that there is a risk that the findings from the divergent methods may not corroborate each other but emphasises that "the contradictions could be very interesting – revealing… fascinating complications within the phenomenon being studied" (p. 172). Triangulation in this research was assisted using surveys and semi-structured interviews.

3.10 Reliability and Validity

Reliability and validity are cited as necessary components of research, and the terms are often used in the mixed methods paradigm. Some authors use both these terms with either strand of mixed methods research, for example, Muijs (2004) uses both terms in relation to

quantitative methods, while others, such as Corbin and Strauss (2015), discuss reliability and validity in relation to qualitative methods. Some researchers, such as Bryman (2012), attempt to distinguish between the use of these terms in quantitative research and qualitative research. Bryman (2012) suggests that validity is "concerned with the integrity of the conclusions that are generated from a piece of research" (p.47) especially as it relates to qualitative data and reliability as a measure of a study's consistency and repeatability particularly in relation to quantitative data (p. 168). Although an in-depth discussion of the use of these terms is beyond the scope of this research, it is noted that Creswell and Plano Clark (2011) refer to the checking of the quality of data in both quantitative and qualitative orientations as 'validity'. Alternative terms such as 'inference quality' (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009) and 'legitimation' (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2006) have been proposed in an attempt to further divorce the description of qualitative from quantitatively associated terminology. Guba and Lincoln (1985) propose that 'trustworthiness' is an acceptable criterion to measure a study's quality.

Corbin and Strauss (2015) highlight the need for reliability and validity in the evaluation of qualitative research but acknowledge the lack of consensus in the use of terminology and the lack of universal criteria to evaluate qualitative research. They proffer alternate terminology specifically in relation to qualitative research, such as credibility, truthfulness, trustworthiness and rigour. They present numerous strategies proffered by other researchers (Chiovitti & Piran, 2003; Creswell & Miller, 2000; Silverman, 2005) to increase the validity and reliability of findings but they also recognise that these strategies may not "evaluate it for its creative aspects" (p.343). They also suggest several strategies to support quality in research such as methodological consistency, clarity of purpose, self-awareness, and sensitivity to participants and data (p. 347).

Bryman (2012) concedes that even though reliability and validity can be differentiated they are intertwined "because validity presumes reliability" (p. 173). Hence, for the purposes of consistency and ease of understanding, the terms reliability and validity will be used to denote the checking of quality in both the quantitative and qualitative strands with the understanding that there is a difference in methodological orientation.

In the qualitative orientation of this research a series of strategies was adopted to ensure qualitative reliability and validity. In the qualitative strand, validity, is primarily informed by striving for the accuracy and transparency of the information obtained through the process of qualitative data collection (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). Strategies adopted to ensure validity included member checking and triangulation, which were discussed in

detail earlier in this chapter. A further form of verification suggested by Creswell (2009) is the presence of 'rich, thick description' which allows the researcher to explore in-depth detail of the participants' experience. This too was used by allowing participants to contribute to the study through in-depth semi-structured interviews. Conference presentations to peers within academic circles and the educational sphere were conducted and were also valuable tools in verifying data interpretations and seeking feedback. Displaying extracts from the primary data allowed the researcher access to the perception of different voices and offered an opportunity to participate in a collaborative exercise in accruing meaning about the research phenomenon. Such rich data allows for the possible transfer of information to similar settings. These strategies will be discussed in the detailed analysis of qualitative data in Chapter 5.

In the quantitative orientation of this research a series of strategies was adopted to ensure quantitative reliability and validity. Muijs (2004) view of reliability and validity is useful to this research as he focuses on educational research. As Muijs (2004) proposes, the aim of quantitative research is to

> generalise from our sample to the population. When we find a certain relationship or difference in our sample, we want to know whether this is because there is a difference in the population, or whether this is a coincidence or idiosyncrasy of our sample. (p. 83)

He points out that quantitative research is the pursuit of measuring something and following from this there is the need to ascertain how well measurement is achieved. Both reliability and validity in quantitative research can be tested and improved upon. Strategies used in this research to test reliability and validity involved conducting a pilot test of the survey instrument and adjusting the questions in the survey. Again, conference presentations were conducted that displayed initial statistical data allowing verifying data interpretations and seeking feedback. These strategies have been discussed in detail earlier in this chapter. These strategies will be discussed in the detailed analysis of quantitative data in Chapter 4.

3.11 Insider Research

Earlier in this chapter, it was suggested that the researcher's emic, or inside, position changes during the research process to become an etic, or outside position (Cohen et al., 2007; Halilovich, 2014). It is accepted by many scholars that this positioning is rarely static and indeed is fluid along the research continuum (Atkins & Wallace, 2012; Hellawell, 2006; Hoare et al., 2012; Mercer, 2007; Ross, 2017). As such, it is important to recognise the

concept of insider research where the positionality of the researcher is understood and acknowledged for methodological and ethical issues to be identified and addressed. Greene (2014) explains that insider research "is that which is conducted within a social group, organization or culture of which the researcher is also a member" (p. 1). Much is discussed in the literature about the advantages and challenges of insider research (Atkins & Wallace, 2012; Brannick & Coghlan, 2007; Greene, 2014; Hellawell, 2006; Mercer, 2007; Sikes & Potts, 2008; Unluer, 2012).

There are strong arguments in the literature that outline the advantages of being an insider researcher. Researchers such as Atkins and Wallace (2012), Greene (2014) and Mercer (2007) claim that being an insider can provide easier access to participants. In this research being an insider, a member of the school system certainly provided easier access to each school and each school principal was amenable to the researcher accessing parents to participate in interviews. Atkins and Wallace (2012) state that participants are more likely to participate with research and participants may disclose more because they feel comfortable with an insider researcher. This was certainly the case in the school where this researcher works. The number of parents that were agreeable to participating in interviews was the most of all schools, almost double the number of the other urban school with similar student numbers. Some parent participants seemed more comfortable discussing their school choices because they knew that the researcher was a teacher within the school system. Another important advantage of being an insider to this research is the cultural or organisational knowledge that it provides (Atkins & Wallace, 2012; Greene, 2014; Unluer, 2012). In this research it was certainly advantageous for the researcher to understand the faith-based culture of the schools to be able to fully discuss parental reasons for choosing a faith-based school. Understanding the organisational structure of the schools was also useful in ascertaining who to contact to enable the research to be conducted and to be able to work within the school's daily program. Sikes and Potts (2008) summarise these advantages well:

> … inside researchers readily know the language of those being studied, along with its particular jargon and are more likely to empathise with those they study because of in-depth understanding of them… are often more willing to discuss private knowledge with those who are personally part of their world, are often more likely to understand the events under investigation… Inside researchers find that those they study are often more likely to volunteer information to them than they would to outsiders (p. 177).

Equally strong arguments in the literature outline the challenges that insider research brings to qualitative research. The most common cited challenges are bias, role duality and

power relationships (Atkins & Wallace, 2012; Brannick & Coghlan, 2007; Greene, 2014; Ross, 2017; Unluer, 2012). Insider bias, where a researcher's own beliefs and experiences influence results, is an important consideration. Greene (2014) reminds the researcher that "The insider researcher must then be wary of projecting one's own views onto participants, or the data analysis" (p. 4). Throughout the interview process this researcher made concerted effort to avoid potential biases from entering research results by allowing the interviewee to speak with little interruption or direction from the researcher. Furthermore, the researcher has been mindful to maintain appropriate analytical tools during data analysis and, in particular, for this study's qualitative component, the principles of grounded theory were closely followed.

Role duality and power relationships are other challenges of which an insider researcher must be aware. Brannick and Coghlan (2007) warn that "… insider researchers are likely to encounter role conflict and find themselves caught between loyalty tugs, behavioural claims, and identification dilemmas" (p. 70). The researcher's role in one of the schools being researched was well-known. Many parents of the school have had direct interaction with the researcher as a classroom teacher and Year Advisor and a couple of parents that were interviewed were in this category. Inasmuch as this can be an advantage in creating easy rapport, the researcher was keenly aware that the participant may assume that the researcher would have certain knowledge and not provide the explicit detail needed. This was mitigated by asking the participant to explain elements that had been only vaguely mentioned. Power relationships, in this research being teacher-parent, can exist where the participant may feel obligated or coerced to give information that they feel the researcher wants to hear or omit information that they may compromise them in some way. Data was also collected from schools that had no connection to the researcher in which there was a researcher-respondent relationship rather than a researcher-parent relationship. This researcher addressed these potential concerns by explaining the purpose of the research to the participant and how confidentiality and anonymity would be preserved. The researcher also clearly articulated that the participant was able to withdraw from the interview at any time.

It is important to acknowledge that it is possible for a researcher to be an insider researcher as well as an outsider researcher simultaneously or fluidly during the course of their research (Halilovich, 2014; Hellawell, 2006). Hellawell (2006) states that "there may be some elements of insiderness on some dimensions of your research and some elements of outsiderness on other dimensions" (p. 490). For example, this researcher is an insider to the

school she works at, but an outsider to the other three schools that are part of the research. The researcher is an insider to the parents that are affiliated with the SDA church as the researcher is also a member of the SDA church. This also makes the researcher an outsider to parents who have another faith affiliation or no faith affiliation.

Reflexivity can be a useful tool for understanding and recognising the dichotomy of insider/outsider research. Hellawell (2006) promotes reflexivity as the "ability objectively to stand outside one's own writing" (p. 483). Hellawell (2006) and Greene (2014) urge researchers to practice this strategy in their research. This researcher appreciates that reflexivity is not always easy but has attempted to be reflexive in the research. This was done by acknowledging her position within the research and identifying methodological considerations (Greene, 2014). In this research the researcher acknowledges their position as a teacher in one of the schools within the study, as a member of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. The researcher declared bias at the start of the study as being a member of the faith-based organisation aligned with this research. Although there may have been concerns about impartiality and participant relationship before the start of the research, in practice, an insight into the faith-based worldview and membership status worked to the advantage of participant relationships. Trust was established quickly on the grounds of mutual faith-based membership but without the concern of a priori knowledge of organisational dynamics. While strict boundaries of protocol were maintained, the researcher is confident to report that interviews were conducted in a relaxed atmosphere where every effort was made to ensure participant value. This approach represents a verification procedure described by Creswell (1998).

The concept of insider research or "practitioner enquiry" (Hellawell, 2006, p. 484) is particularly pertinent to this study as the practitioner is a teacher enquiring about parent perceptions within a faith-based school system where she is employed. It is acknowledged by the researcher, however, that despite all efforts to the contrary, a neutral qualitative researcher is a fallacy and there is no denying the subtle influence of researcher identity and worldview (Holmes, 2020). In line with a pragmatic underpinning of the research it is also recognised that knowledge is provisional and that there is no one final analysis. Qualitative analysis does, however, allow for the emergence of patterns of human behaviour which provide valuable insight into the research phenomenon. As such the current qualitative findings will add to the ongoing dialogue about faith-based school choice in a specific context.

3.12 Summary

This chapter outlined the methodology that was employed in this research into school choice and the factors that influence parents to choose a school for their children, and in this research the focus is on selected urban and rural Seventh-day Adventist schools. This chapter also presented the study's worldview, pragmatism, and discussed the reasons for this choice and the benefits of this worldview to this study. There was then an exposition into the theoretical lenses which provided a framework to direct the research. Two lenses were adopted, social identity theory and secular goods theory. These two lenses provide clarity to understanding the complexity of school choice, especially as it relates to a faith-based school system.

The chapter also outlined the research design, the rationale for this design, the respective elements of this design: choice of participants, data collection procedures and data analysis. A mixed methods approach was identified as the most useful in gleaning meaningful data to help answer the research question. The incorporation of both quantitative and qualitative methods can provide greater insight into the understanding of school choice than either of these methods alone. Furthermore, the convergent parallel design was deemed the most appropriate where the quantitative and qualitative phases of data collection are both concurrent and separate without either dominating or driving the research. A detailed discussion of participants, data collection and data analysis was provided to outline the details of how the study explored school choice in the context of faith-based schools. There was also a discussion of ethical considerations, triangulation, reliability and validity, and insider research.

The following chapter, Chapter 4: Quantitative Data, Results and Analysis present the research finding from the survey distributed to parents of the four schools involved in this research.

CHAPTER 4: QUANTITATIVE DATA, RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

4.1 Introduction

The aim of this research was to explore school-related factors that influenced a growing number of parents to choose faith-based schools, and their children's current faith-based school in particular, to educate their children. This research was focused on a specific faith-based school system in the North New South Wales region. As was presented in Chapter 3: Methodology a mixed methods convergent parallel design in two phases was used to explore the research question and sub-questions.

In this chapter Phase One, the quantitative component is presented as data, results and analysis. Quantitative approaches to research use the results of the respective analyses of numerical data to document frequencies, explore relationships between items and scales, and search for variations across respondent groups and contexts. In this ex-post facto cross-sectional study an online survey instrument was employed to ascertain parents' attitudes and behaviours in relation to school choice decisions in a faith-based school context. Firstly, survey questions were asked about the parent's perspectives on the importance of each item in choosing an *ideal* school for their children. Secondly, parents were asked to rate the importance of each survey item in choosing their children's *current* school. Finally, parents were asked to rate the importance of a series of mechanisms in providing them with information regarding their choice of school.

This chapter provides a discussion of the survey instrument, data collection, sample characteristics, and detailed data analysis. The next chapter, Chapter 5, will focus on Phase Two, the qualitative phase, of this research. The quantitative and qualitative phases are discussed separately to facilitate a clearer understanding. In practice the paradigms were concurrent and data collection and analysis were undertaken simultaneously.

4.2 The Survey Instrument

This research adopted the literature-generated four domain model (School, Curriculum, Student and Services Domain) for its survey instrument construction. The survey instrument consisted of four sections. Section 1 comprised of general information items relating to the respondent's gender, faith affiliation and location of school as well as items relating to the child's education. This information was used to gain an understanding of the

sample characteristics. Section 2 comprised of 33 school choice items arranged in four domains. Each domain contained items to be rated by the respondent from the perspective of the importance of each item in choosing an *ideal school* for their child/ren. Section 3 comprised of the same 33 school choice items to be rated by the respondent but in relation to choosing their child's *current school*. For each item in Sections 2 and 3 respondents were asked the level of importance they placed on the respective item in terms of school choice from Not Important – 1, Somewhat Important – 2, Very Important – 3, Extremely Important – 4. Section 4 consisted of 13 items relating to how important a list of items was in obtaining information about the school they were considering for their child's education. These were also rated from Not Important – 1, Somewhat Important – 2, Very Important – 3, Extremely Important – 4.

4.3 Data Collection

This research adopted the literature-generated four domain model for its survey item construction (33 items constructed). For each item respondents were asked the level of importance in terms of school choice, they placed on the respective school characteristic element identified in each item (Not Important – 1 to Extremely Important – 4). Data were collected from parents at four North NSW Conference region schools via the online survey platform Survey Monkey. 1879 families were contacted via email and invited to participate in the online school choice survey. 778 parents responded giving a response rate of 41.4%.

4.3.1 Sample Characteristics

This cross-sectional online survey included data that identified the school the child attended, the number of children the respondent had at the school, what grade the child was enrolled in, the faith affiliation of the parent and the gender of the respondent.

4.3.2 Location

The first question in Section 1 identified the location of each respondent. Two of the surveyed schools in this research were urban schools and two were rural schools, identified as Urban School 1, Urban School 2, Rural School 1 and Rural School 2. 393 of the 778 respondents were parents with children at Urban School 1 (50.51%) and 281 of the 778 respondents were parents with children at Urban School 2 (36.12%). The rural schools participating in this research were Rural School 1 and Rural School 2 with 55 respondents (7.07%) and 49 respondents (6.3%) respectively.

The large variations in numbers of parent respondents between urban and rural schools is expected and reflects the differences of school enrolments in the different locations. The urban schools in this study have a much larger enrolment of students when compared to the rural schools, see Chapter 1: Research Orientation

4.3.3 Number of Children at School

The second question in Section 1 of the survey asked parents to provide the number of children they had at their respective school. Parents with one child at school numbered 381 (43.97%) of 778 respondents, parents with two children at school numbered 303 (38.95%), parents with three children at school numbered 75 (9.64%) and parents with four or more children at school numbered 19 (2.44%). Parents with one child enrolled at their chosen school were the largest portion of survey respondents with numbers reducing with more children at the school.

4.3.4 Enrolment Grade

The third question in Section 1 of the survey asked the current enrolment grade of each child at school. The options ranged from Pre-Kindy through to Year 12. The largest number of enrolled children were in Year 7 with 137 (17.61%) of respondents stating that they had a child in this grade. The grade with the least number of child enrolments was Year 12 with 45 (5.78%) respondents selecting this grade.

4.3.5 Faith Affiliation

Question 4 asked respondents to identify their faith affiliation. The options were Seventh-day Adventist, Other Faith Affiliation and Non-faith Affiliation. The largest proportion of respondents identified themselves as having another faith affiliation, 349 respondents (44.63%). These respondents had the ability in the survey to specify with what other faith they identified. Responses for Other Faith Affiliation included a variety of Christian denominations, which made up 81.4% of this category. Parents also identified themselves as affiliated with other world faiths: Islam, Buddhism, Daoism, Sikhism, Hinduism, Baha'i and Judaism, which made up 18.6% of this same category. The next largest group were those that identified themselves as having no faith affiliation, 285 respondents (36.45%). Parents that were affiliated with the Seventh-day Adventist Church were the smallest group, 148 respondents (18.93%) overall.

4.3.6 Gender

Of the 778 respondents 590 were female representing 75.84% of the total respondents and 170 were male representing 21.85% of the total number of respondents. 18 respondents preferred not to answer this question reflecting 2.31% of the total number of respondents. This distribution shows that three-quarters of the survey respondents were female. The sample, as research suggests, reflects the portions of the population, women and mothers, that make the majority of school choice decisions (Campbell et al., 2009; Dockett & Perry, 2017; Jamal Al-deen, 2018; Kaplun et al., 2017; Warren, 2016; Wilkins, 2014). The distribution in this research reinforces this finding.

4.4 Data Analysis

Each survey item was measured using a four-point Likert scale and the data from the questionnaire were entered into the statistical software package IBM-SPSS-26.0 (IBM-SPSS for Windows, 2019). Factor analysis was run to determine the factor structure of the respective parent school choice concepts related to the survey items. Internal reliability for each factor was evaluated and reported using Cronbach's Alpha. The values of each factor scale, for both the ideal school and current school context, were calculated and descriptive statistics for each scale were determined.

Repeated measures of analysis of variance were adopted to compare the respective school choice factors. Additionally, t-tests and One-way analysis of variance with post-hoc comparisons were run to locate any areas of significant difference between parent groups.

Data analysis will be performed on ideal school characteristics, current school characteristics, ideal school versus current school characteristics, the three most important items for choosing an ideal school and current school, and school choice information sources.

4.4.1 Ideal School Characteristics

The parent school choice data obtained from the online survey were transferred to the IBM SPSS 26 statistical program for analysis. The mean and standard deviation of the parents' responses to the 33 Section 2 survey items indicating the importance of each item in their school choice decision-making relating to ideal school characteristics were calculated. For each item in Section 2 respondents were asked the level of importance they placed on the respective item in terms of school choice from Not Important – 1 to Extremely Important – 4. Mean item ratings with values above 2.5 indicate that most parents rated each item as Very

Important or Extremely Important in their school choice decision-making. For this section, Section 2 of the survey, 718 parents completed every item and this sample was used for the following analysis.

4.4.1.1 Introduction

Parents placed a wide range of importance on the various ideal school aspects identified by the respective Section 2 survey items presented in Table 4.1. The lowest mean rating was 1.7674 indicating that most parents rated this item as not very important. The highest rating was 3.9095 indicating that this item was very important for almost all parents. Most items, however, had a mean response rating above 2.5000, indicating that these items were of considerable importance in their school choice decision-making for these parents. For a number of items (Christian school, K-Year 12, Provision for special needs, Teaching of Christian values, Before/after school care, Early Learning Centre/Pre-Kindy) the standard deviation is relatively large (greater than 1) which indicates that for these items there is a considerable difference in the item rating among the parents with a large group of parents rating these items as very important while at the same time a large group of parents also rated these items as not very important.

Table 4. 1

Ideal School Survey Items: Means and Standard Deviations

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Adventist school	718	1.00	4.00	1.7674	.96534
Christian school	718	1.00	4.00	2.3830	1.08603
Co-educational school	718	1.00	4.00	2.8050	.93491
K-Year 12	718	1.00	4.00	2.4708	1.08552
Small class sizes	718	1.00	4.00	3.3384	.74200
Size of the school	718	1.00	4.00	2.9373	.87438
Appearance of buildings and classrooms	718	1.00	4.00	2.7591	.77740
Appearance of the school grounds	718	1.00	4.00	2.8412	.74495
Integration of computer technology into curriculum	718	1.00	4.00	3.1741	.79682

Technology and science facilities	718	1.00	4.00	3.2730	.73039
Library facilities	718	1.00	4.00	3.1031	.78370
Artistic and musical opportunities	718	1.00	4.00	2.8900	.85186
Sporting opportunities	718	1.00	4.00	2.8259	.86722
Range of subjects offered	718	2.00	4.00	3.4540	.62712
Inclusion of project-based learning	718	1.00	4.00	2.9304	.83884
Provision for special needs	718	1.00	4.00	2.7187	1.02082
Talented students' program	718	1.00	4.00	2.6852	.92000
Academic results	718	1.00	4.00	3.1170	.78174
Range of camps and trips	718	1.00	4.00	2.7201	.86036
Quality of teaching	718	1.00	4.00	3.9095	.30136
Well-rounded education	718	2.00	4.00	3.8064	.40926
Availability of counselling and/or chaplaincy	718	1.00	4.00	3.0696	.85204
Nurturing environment	718	1.00	4.00	3.7451	.49875
Teaching of Christian values	718	1.00	4.00	2.8858	1.00808
Wearing of uniform	718	1.00	4.00	3.0362	.89400
Appearance of students	718	1.00	4.00	3.1017	.84138
Behaviour of students	718	2.00	4.00	3.7396	.47577
Behaviour management	718	2.00	4.00	3.7716	.46426
School fees affordability	718	1.00	4.00	3.1811	.73417
Proximity to home	718	1.00	4.00	2.6476	.80778
Transport accessibility	718	1.00	4.00	2.7799	.89414
Before/after school care	718	1.00	4.00	1.8969	1.01754
Early learning centre/Pre-Kindy	718	1.00	4.00	1.9889	1.11157
Valid N (listwise)	718				

4.4.1.2 Factor Structure

Factor Analysis was adopted to generate a reasonable number of factors from the respective 33 survey items, from which factor scales were calculated to represent the survey

data. Factor Analysis is a data reduction process where a smaller number of conceptual factors are generated that contain the essential information from the survey items.

The sample size (718 complete parent responses) is adequate for factor analysis of 33 survey items (Coakes & Steed, 2003). Normality tests relating to skewness and kurtosis were conducted for each item. These tests indicated that all the items except the 'Quality of teaching' item were near normally distributed. Most parents rated the 'Quality of teaching' item highly and predicably registered a high skewness value of -3.617. Factor analysis, however, is generally robust to the assumptions of normality. Initially, Principal Axis Factoring (PAF) with Varimax Rotation and Kaiser Normalisation was conducted. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) test of .812 is indicative of matrix factorability and the measures of sampling adequacy for the 33 respective items were in the range .920 to .672, which is well above the accepted level of .5 (Field, 2018). The factors which had Eigenvalues over Kaiser's criterion of one, in combination, explain 45.94% of the variance. The Eigenvalues and scree plot suggested a five-factor structure for this school choice data set.

Factor Analysis of the 33 items adopting a five-factor model generated the following factor structure:

Factor One consisted of the School fees affordability, Proximity to home, Transport accessibility, Before/After school care, Early Learning Centre items.

Factor Two consisted of the SDA school, Christian school, Christian values, Chaplaincy/Counselling items.

Factor Three consisted of the Co-educational, K-12, Small class sizes, Size of school, Appearance of buildings, Appearance of grounds, ICT Facilities and integration, Technology & science facilities items.

Factor Four consisted of the Artistic and Music opportunities, Sporting opportunities, Range of subjects, Inclusion of PBL, Provision of special needs, Talented student program, Range of camps and trips, Quality of teaching, Academic results, Well-rounded education, Library facilities items.

Factor Five consisted of the Nurturing, Behaviour of students, Behaviour management, Appearance of students, Wearing of uniform items.

A number of items loaded on to more than one factor and in these cases the item was allocated to the factor that had the highest loading and/or the item was added to the factor to

which it was conceptually linked. No items were deleted as each item was considered a justified element in this school choice study, as indicated by their respective mean values presented in Table 4.1. The internal reliability of each factor, Factor One with a Chronbach's alpha of .602, Factor Two .761, Factor Three .758, Factor Four .767 and Factor Five .751, were all above the recommended value of .6 (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994).

Each factor was allocated a conceptual name. Factor One was named the **Context of School** factor as it covered both location of, and associated services offered by, the school. Factor Two was named the **Faith-based Characteristics** factor as it highlighted aspects of the faith-based nature of the school. Factor Three was named the **School Structure Characteristics** factor as it captured the nature of the educational and physical structure of the school. Factor Four was named the **Academic Program/Profile** factor as it captured the school's academic options and the school's perceived academic standard. Factor Five was named the **Student Interaction** factor as it accessed the perceived student-school interaction within the personal sphere.

A factor scale was generated for each factor by adding the corresponding factor item's mean responses adopting a 1 to 4 numerical value for each of the Likert scale options (Not Important – 1 to Extremely Important – 4) and dividing this total by the number of items in the scale. This produced a standardised factor scale where each factor had the same range of scores and factor scores could be easily compared. Further, the numerical values of the respective scales having this numerical configuration could also be understood in terms of the original online-survey responses (Not Important – 1 to Extremely Important – 4).

A review of the respective factor scale distribution graphs and the skewness (-.863 to +.177) and the kurtosis (-.840 to +.569) indices for each school choice factor would indicate that all the factors display a near normal distribution.

4.4.1.3 Factor Scale Data

Using factor scale data comparisons were made between the respective ideal school choice factors and further between the respondent characteristics: combined schools, school comparisons, parent faith affiliation comparisons, gender comparisons and parent socio-economic comparisons.

Combined Schools Comparisons

When parent survey responses from the four schools are considered together the data indicates that parents placed considerable importance on all the ideal school characteristics factors identified by the respective Section 2 survey factors, as presented in Table 4.2. Even the least important rating factor, Context of School, has a mean value of 2.4989 indicating that most parents rated this factor as being of some importance to them. The Faith-based Characteristics factor, with a mean value of 2.5265, is very close to the mean value of the Context of School factor but has a much greater standard deviation of .7490 than the Context of School factor and is indeed larger than all other school choice factors. This indicates that for the Faith-based Characteristics factor there is a considerable difference in the factor rating distribution among the parents with a large group of parents rating this factor as Very Important or Extremely Important while at the same time a large group of parents rated this factor as Not Important or Somewhat Important.

Table 4. 2

Ideal School Survey Factors' Relative Importance: Combined Data, Means and Standard Deviations

School-choice Factor	Relative Importance of Factor Rating	Mean Response	Standard Deviation of Response
Student Interaction	1	3.4788	.46928
Academic Program/Profile	2	3.1055	.42706
School Structure Characteristics	3	2.9499	.51423
Faith-based Characteristics	4	2.5265	.74901
Context of School	5	2.4989	.57116

The relative importance of each factor in parents' ideal school choice decision-making is illustrated in Figure 4.1. The Student Interaction factor presented the highest rating of 3.4788 indicating that this factor was highly important for most parents. The next two factors Academic Program/Profile factor and the School Structure Characteristics factor registered mean values of around 3.0 indicating that these factors were of considerable importance to most parents, with the Academic Program/Profile rating higher with a mean

value of 3.1055. The Context of School and Faith-based Characteristics factors mean values were noticeably smaller than the other school choice factors.

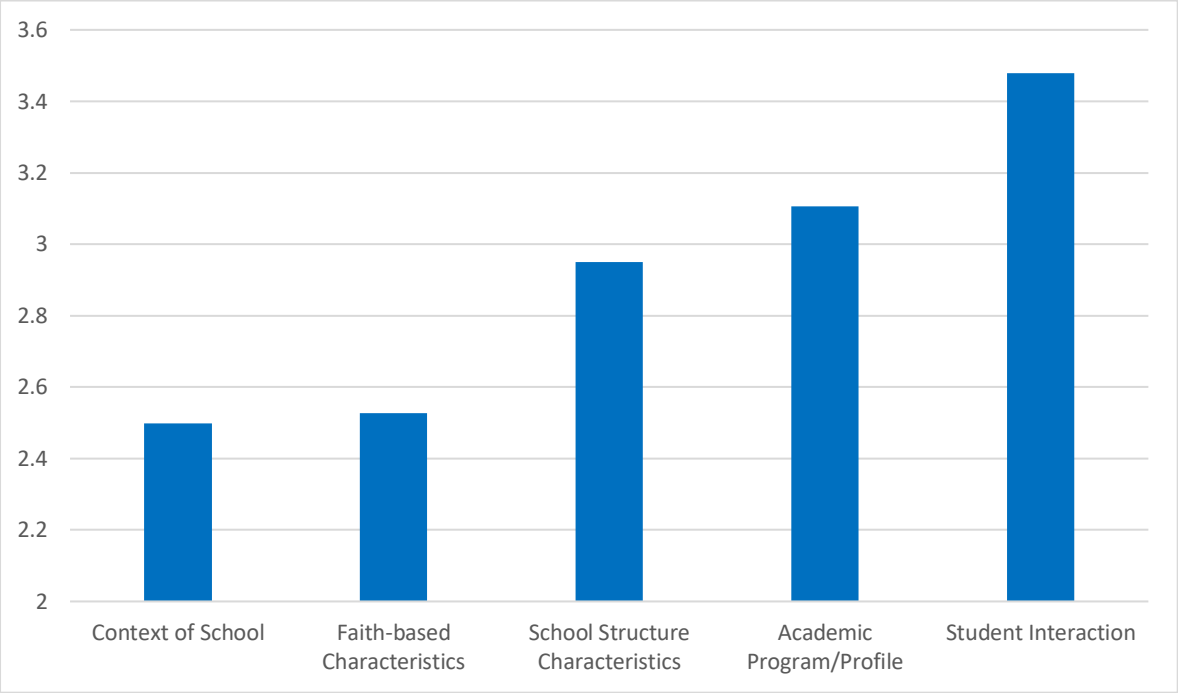


Figure 4. 1

Ideal School Choice Factor Scales: Combined Data, Mean of Responses

Repeated measures ANOVA indicated that there were statistically significant differences between these school-choice factors [$F(2.941, 2108.9) = 516.840$, $p < .001$]. Multiple comparison testing indicated there were significant differences between all the factors except between the Context of School and Faith-based Characteristics factors.

All Schools Comparisons

The parents' ideal school factor importance rating responses comparing the four schools surveyed (2 Urban schools, 2 Rural schools) is presented in Table 4.3. All schools rated Student Interaction as most important followed by Academic Program/Profile then School Structure Characteristics. The Faith-based Characteristics and Context of School were rated similarly with two schools, Rural 1 and Urban 1, rating them as 4 and 5 respectively and two schools, Rural 2 and Urban 2, rating them as 5 and 4 respectively, in terms of ideal school choice importance.

Table 4. 3

Ideal School Survey Factors' Relative Importance: School Comparisons

School-choice Factor	Rural School 1 Importance Rating (mean)	Rural School 2 Importance Rating (mean)	Urban School 1 Importance Rating (mean)	Urban School 2 Importance Rating (mean)
Student Interaction	1 (3.3192)	1 (3.3043)	1 (3.5270)	1 (3.4735)
Academic Program/Profile	2 (2.9703)	2 (3.1265)	2 (3.0825)	2 (3.1628)
School Structure Characteristics	3 (2.6851)	3 (2.8505)	3 (2.9942)	3 (2.9580)
Faith-based Characteristics	4 (2.6490)	5 (2.4946)	4 (2.5020)	5 (2.5425)
Context of School	5 (2.5500)	4 (2.5565)	5 (2.4343)	4 (2.5565)

The relative importance of each school-choice factor is illustrated in Figure 4.2. The order of the factors on the horizontal axis is kept the same as for the combined data to enhance the school comparisons. Even though there are noticeable differences between the four schools, all schools follow the same general trend, rating the respective school choice factors in a similar manner.

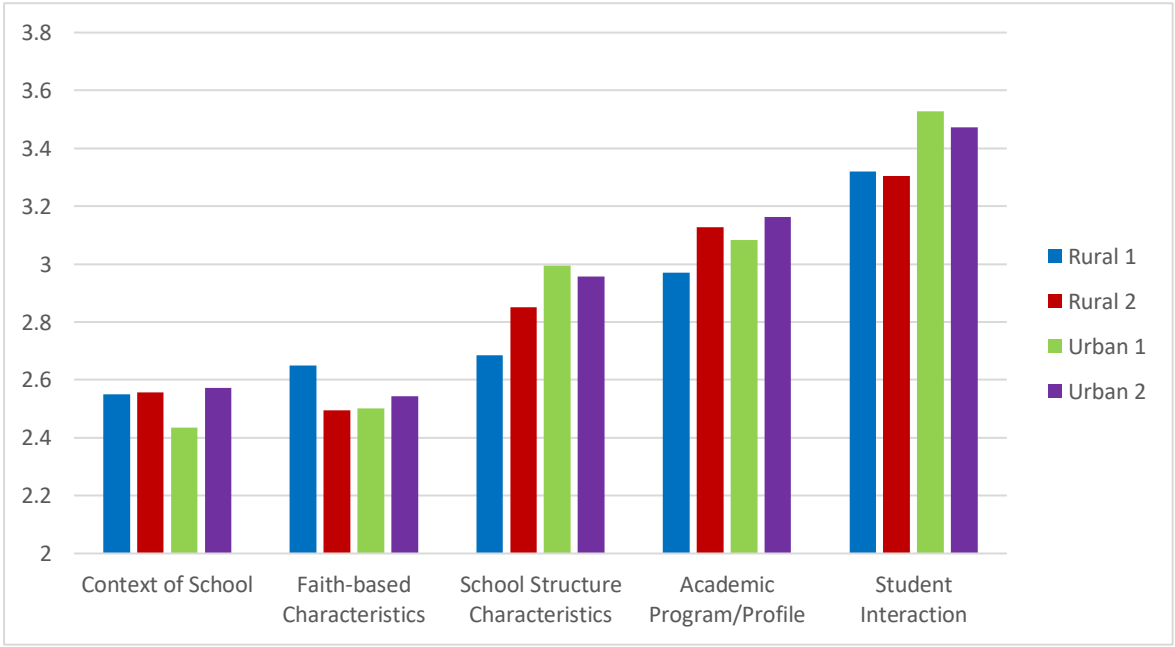


Figure 4. 2

Ideal School Choice Factor Scales: School Comparison Data, Mean of Responses

In terms of the parents' rating of the importance of the **Context of School** factor in their ideal school choice decision-making, analysis of variance calculations indicate that there is a significant statistical difference between the schools [$F(3,714) = 3.253$, $p = .021$]. Multiple comparison testing (Tukey) indicates there was no difference in importance rating of the Context of School factor in their school choice decision-making between Rural 1, Urban 2 and Rural 2 school parents. There was, however, a significant difference between Urban 1 and Urban 2, meaning the Context of School factor was considered less important by Urban 1 parents than the other schools in terms of ideal school choice decision-making.

In terms of the parents' rating of the importance of the **Faith-based Characteristics** factor in their ideal school choice decision-making, analysis of variance calculations indicate that there is no significant statistical difference between the schools [$F(3,714) = .660$, $p = .577$]. It is noted, however, that each school has a similar and relatively high standard deviation (.7 to .8) when compared to the other school choice factors (.4 to .5); therefore, it is more difficult to simply compare means as depicted in Figure 4.2.

In terms of the parents' rating of the importance of the **School Structure Characteristics** factor in their ideal school choice decision-making, analysis of variance calculations indicate that there is a significant statistical difference between the schools [$F(3,714) = 6.231$, $p < .001$]. Multiple comparison testing (Tukey) indicates there was no difference in importance rating of the School Structure Characteristics in their ideal school choice decision-making between Urban 1, Urban 2 school parents and no difference between Rural 1 and Rural 2. There was, however, a significant difference between Rural 1 and Urban 1, and Rural 1 and Urban 2 parents in the School Structure Characteristics factor rating, meaning the School Structure Characteristics factor was considered less important by Rural 1 parents than the other schools in terms of ideal school choice decision-making. However, it is noted that the Rural schools have lower factor means than the Urban schools.

In terms of the parents' rating of the importance of the **Academic Program/Profile** factor in their ideal school choice decision-making, analysis of variance calculations indicate a significant statistical difference between the schools [$F(3,714) = 3.688$, $p = .012$]. Multiple comparison testing (Tukey) indicates there was no difference in importance rating of the Academic Program/Profile in their ideal school choice decision-making between Urban 1 and Urban 2 and between Rural 1 and Rural 2 school parents. There was, however, a significant difference between Rural 1 and Urban 2 parents' Academic Program/Profile factor rating. Rural 1 parents rated this factor of less importance than the other schools' parents.

In terms of the parents' rating of the importance of the **Student Interaction** factor in their ideal school choice decision-making, analysis of variance calculations indicate that there is a significant statistical difference between the schools [F(3,714) = 5.526, p = .001]. Multiple comparison testing (Tukey) indicates there was no difference in importance rating of the Student Interaction in their ideal school choice decision-making between Urban 1 and Urban 2 school parents, and no difference between Rural 1 and Rural 2 school parents. There was, however, a significant difference between Urban 1 and Rural 1 and between Urban 1 and Rural 2 schools in the Student Interaction factor. But once again it is noted that the Rural schools do have lower factor means than the Urban schools.

The schools' ideal school choice factor data was then collated such that data from both rural schools were combined and data from both urban schools were combined. Figure 4.3 displays this school type (Rural versus Urban) data comparison. For the first 2 factors, Context of School and Faith-based Characteristics, even though they are relatively low for both the urban and rural schools, parents from the rural schools rate these higher than the parents from urban schools. In contrast, even though both the urban and rural schools' parents rate the final three factors relatively high, the urban schools' parents rate these higher than the rural schools' parents.

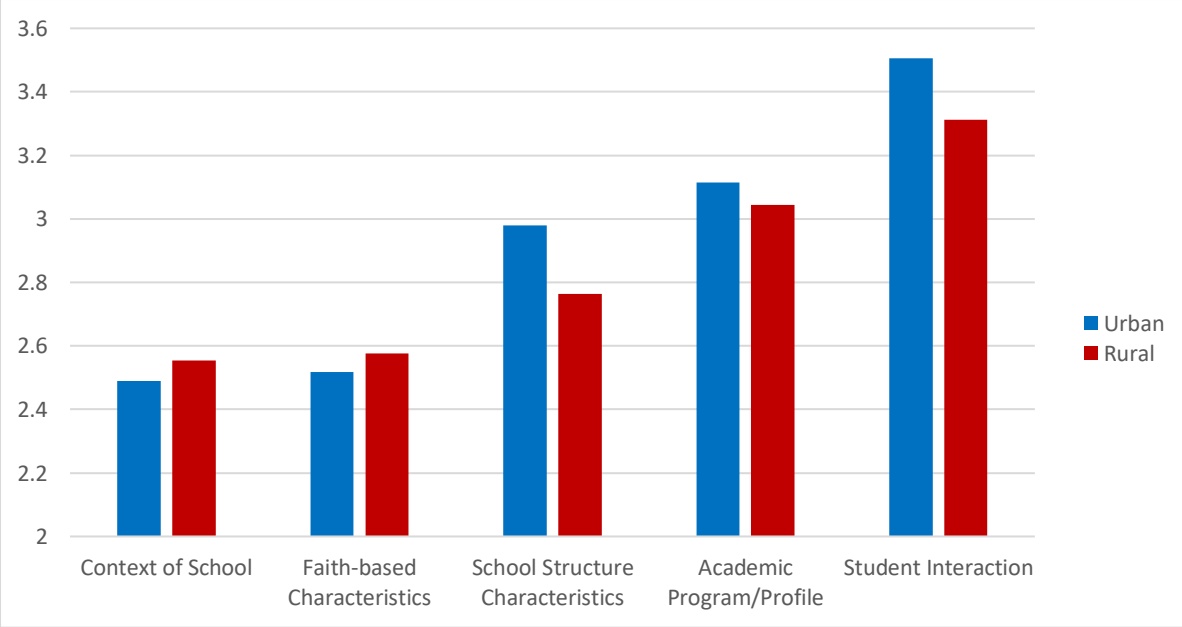


Figure 4. 3

Ideal School Choice Factor Scales: School Type Data, Mean of Responses

In terms of the parents' rating of the importance of the Context of School, the Faith-based Characteristics and the Academic Program/Profile factors in their ideal school choice decision-making, t-Test analysis indicate that there is no significant statistical difference between the school type parent responses [$t(716) = 1.010$, $p = .313$], [$t(716) = .712$, $p = .477$] and [$t(716) = 1.545$, $p = .123$] respectively. In contrast there is a significant statistical difference in the school type parent response for the School Structure and Student Interaction school choice factors [$t(716) = 3.915$, $p < .001$] and [$t(716) = 3.817$, $p < .001$] respectively. Urban school parents placed greater importance on the School Structure factor registering a mean of 2.9794 while Rural parents registered a mean of 2.7628 for this factor. Urban school parents also placed greater importance on the Student Interaction factor registering a mean of 3.5052 while Rural school parents registered a mean of 3.3122 for this factor.

Parent Faith Affiliation Comparisons

In the survey parents were asked to indicate their faith affiliation. The responses of the parents' three faith affiliations groupings from the four schools surveyed (SDA faith affiliation, Other Faith affiliation, Non-faith affiliation) are presented in Table 4.4. These ratings were in relation to ideal school choice. Student Interaction, Academic Program/Profile & School Structure Characteristics school choice factors were rated in 1, 2, 3 order of importance for both the Other Faith and Non-faith parent groups. Other Faith affiliated parents then ranked Faith-based Characteristics as 4th and Context of School as 5th. These two factors were reversed for Non-faith affiliated parents. However, this rating order was different for the SDA faith affiliation parent group who placed the Faith-based Characteristics factor as Number 1 in terms of school choice importance. In contrast, the Non-faith parent group rated this factor as Number 5.

Table 4. 4

Ideal School Survey Factors' Relative Importance: Parent Faith Affiliation Comparisons

School-choice Factor	SDA faith affiliation Importance Rating (mean)	Other faith Affiliation Importance Rating (mean)	Non-faith Affiliation Importance Rating (mean)
Student Interaction	2 (3.3143)	1 (3.5479)	1 (3.4793)
Academic Program/Profile	3 (3.0157)	2 (3.1241)	2 (3.1279)
School Structure Characteristics	4 (2.7415)	3 (2.9857)	3 (3.0106)
Faith-based Characteristics	1 (3.3741)	4 (2.5452)	5 (2.0870)
Context of School	5 (2.5744)	5 (2.5105)	4 (2.4481)

The relative importance of each school-choice factor is illustrated in Figure 4.4. What is immediately noticeable is that SDA-affiliated parents place greater importance on the Context of School and Faith-based Characteristics school choice factors than the other parent faith affiliation groups. Also, the SDA-affiliated parents rate the School Structure Characteristics, Academic Program/Profile and Student Interaction school choice factors of lesser importance than the other parent Faith affiliated groups.

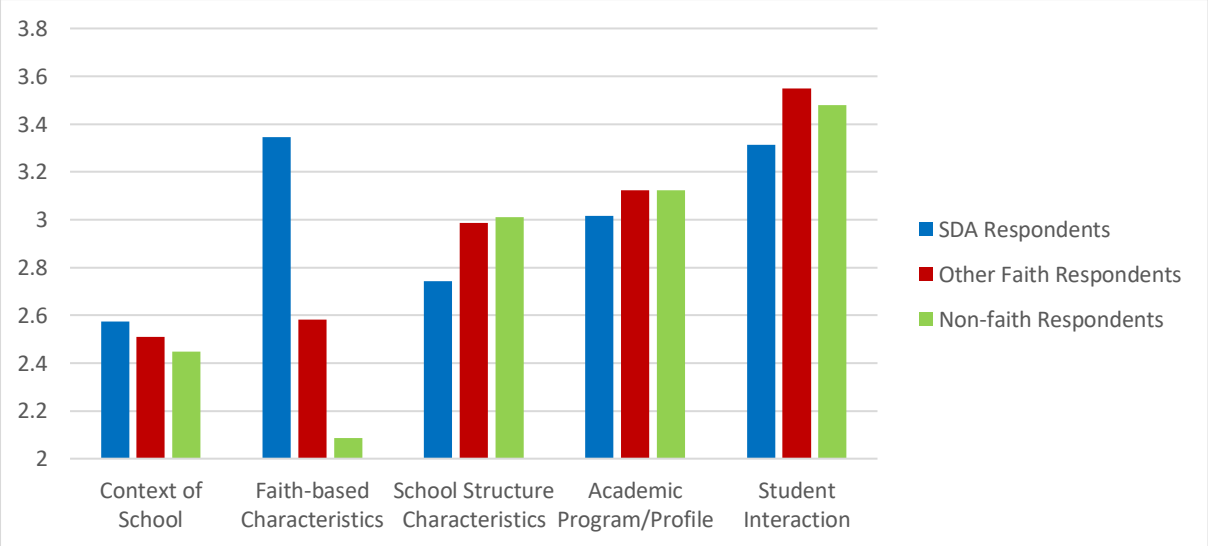


Figure 4. 4

Ideal School Choice Factors: Parent Faith Affiliation Comparison Data, Mean of Responses

In terms of the parents' rating of the importance of the **Context of School** factor in their ideal school choice decision-making, analysis of variance calculations indicated that there is no significant statistical difference between the schools [$F(2,715) = 2.302$, $p = .101$].

What is notable about this faith affiliation data is the difference between all three parent affiliation groups regarding the importance of a school's **Faith-based Characteristics** factor in ideal school choice decision-making. Analysis of variance calculations indicate that this difference between the schools was significant [$F(2,715) = 207.653$, $p < .001$]. Multiple comparison testing (Tukey) indicates there was a significant difference in importance rating of Faith-based Characteristics in their ideal school choice decision-making between all parent faith affiliation groups. It was the SDA affiliation parents that rated the importance of the school's Faith-based Characteristics factor (mean rating 3.3741) significantly higher than the Other Faith affiliation group (mean rating 2.5452), which in turn rated school Faith-based Characteristics significantly higher than the Non-faith affiliation group of parents (mean rating 2.0870).

What is also notable about this data is the similarity between two parent affiliation groups in terms of the importance of a school's **School Structure Characteristics** in the ideal school choice decision-making. Analysis of variance calculations indicate that there is a significant statistical difference between the parent affiliation groupings [$F(2,715) = 14.060$, $p < .001$]. Multiple comparison testing (Tukey) indicates that SDA affiliation parents rated the importance of School Structure Characteristics factor significantly lower than the Other Faith and Non-faith parent affiliation groups, but there was no significant difference between the Other Faith and Non-faith groups.

Further, what is notable about this data is again the similarity between two of the parent affiliation groups in terms of the importance of a school's **Academic Program/Profile** factor in ideal school choice decision-making. Analysis of variance calculations indicate that there is a significant statistical difference between the parent affiliation groupings [$F(2,715) = 3.637$, $p = .027$]. Multiple comparison testing (Tukey) indicates that SDA-affiliated parents rated the importance of the Academic Program/Profile factor significantly lower than the Other Faith and Non-faith parent affiliation groups, but there was no significant difference between the Other Faith and Non-faith groups.

Finally, what is notable about faith affiliation data is once again the similarity between two of the parent affiliation groups in terms of the importance of a school's

Student Interaction factor in ideal school choice decision-making. Analysis of variance calculations indicate that there is a significant difference between the parent affiliation groupings [$F(2,715) = 11.945$, $p < .001$]. Multiple comparison testing (Tukey) indicates that SDA affiliated parents rated the importance of Student Interaction factor significantly lower than the Other Faith and Non-faith parent affiliation groups, but there was no significant difference between the Other Faith and Non-faith groups.

Parent Gender Comparisons

The survey asked parents to respond to the question "What is your gender?" The options provided were male, female and prefer not to answer. Three-quarters of respondents, 590 of 778, were female (76%), 170 respondents were male (22%) and a small number preferred not to answer, 18 of 778 (2%).

Table 4. 5

Ideal School Survey Factors' Relative Importance: Parent Gender Comparisons

School-choice Factor	Female (mean)	Male (mean)	Prefer not to answer (mean)
Student Interaction	1 (3.4871)	1 (3.4579)	1 (3.4000)
Academic Program/Profile	2 (3.1193)	2 (3.0537)	2 (3.1515)
School Structure Characteristics	3 (2.9494)	3 (2.9520)	3 (2.9417)
Faith-based Characteristics	4 (2.5290)	4 (2.5346)	5 (2.3500)
Context of School	5 (2.5221)	5 (2.4075)	4 (2.6267)

The mean parent responses of the three gender options (female, male, prefer not to say) to the relative importance of the school-choice factors are presented in Table 4.5. The importance rating of each school-choice factor, Student Interaction, Academic Program/Profile, School Structure Characteristics, Faith-based Characteristics and Context of School, is almost uniform between the gender groups. Both female and male parents ranked them in the order presented in the table. The only difference occurred in the parents who preferred not to answer the gender question. These parents identified the first three factors in the same order as the female and male, however, they ranked Context of School as Number 4 and Faith-based Characteristics as Number 5, the least important school-choice factor. All parents, irrespective of gender, rate Student Interaction as the most important school-choice

factor followed by Academic Program/Profile and School Structure Characteristics. Parents who identified clearly as female or male ranked Faith-based Characteristics as the fourth most important factor and lastly, Context of School was ranked fifth. These last two factors were reversed for those parents who preferred not to identify their gender.

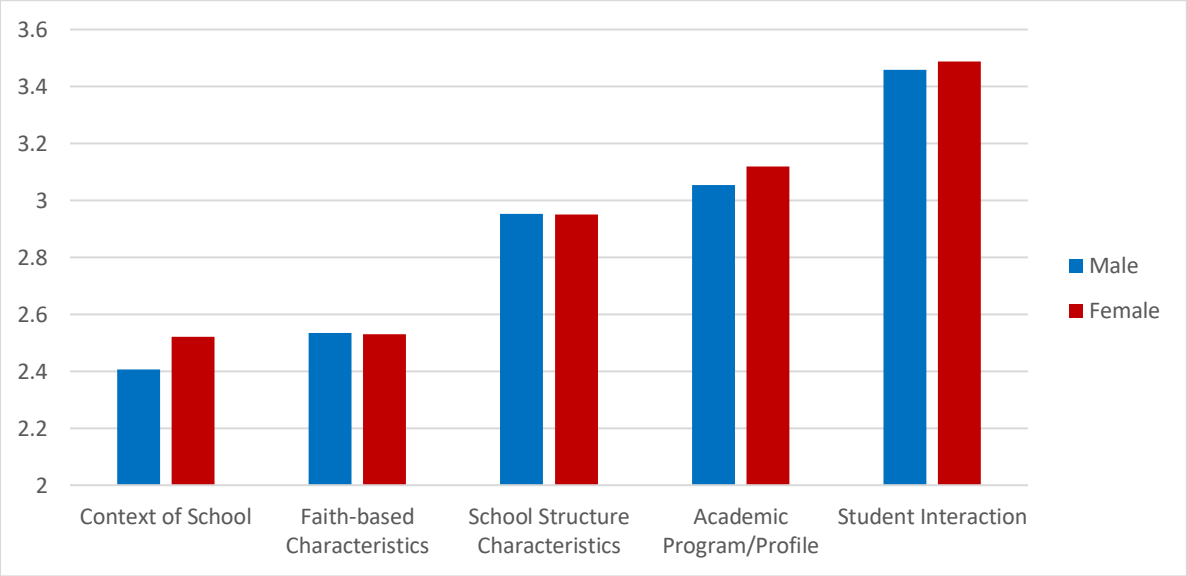


Figure 4. 5

Ideal School Choice Factors: Parent Gender Comparison Data, Mean of Responses

When asked about an ideal school, the relative importance of parents' school choice decision-making for both male and female respondents is illustrated in Figure 4.5. When conducting gender comparison data only male and female respondents were considered due the minimal number of parents preferring not to identify their gender. Statistical testing within each school choice factor indicated that there was no statistically significant difference between the respective parent gender declarations for the Faith-based Characteristics, School Structure Characteristics, Academic Program/Profile and Student Interaction factors. For the **Context of School** factor, however, there is a statistically significant difference between the mean female and male responses [t(701) = -2.230, p = .026]. In the Context of School the mean of the female responses (2.5221) was significantly larger than the mean of the male responses (2.4075).

Parent Socio-Economic Status Comparisons

The respective schools' parent communities' CTC (Capacity To Contribute) scores were used as a marker for parent socio-economic status. CTC is a Direct Measure of Income (DMI) and is used to evaluate parents' financial resources. Based on a two-year rolling average DMI score, the CTC values are calculated by the government for all non-government school parent populations and posted on the website of the Australian Government Department of Education (Australian Government Department of Education, 2021).

The distribution of the 2019, 2020 CTC scores are shown in Figure 4.6, with a low of around 70 apart from a couple of outliers with upper values around 130.

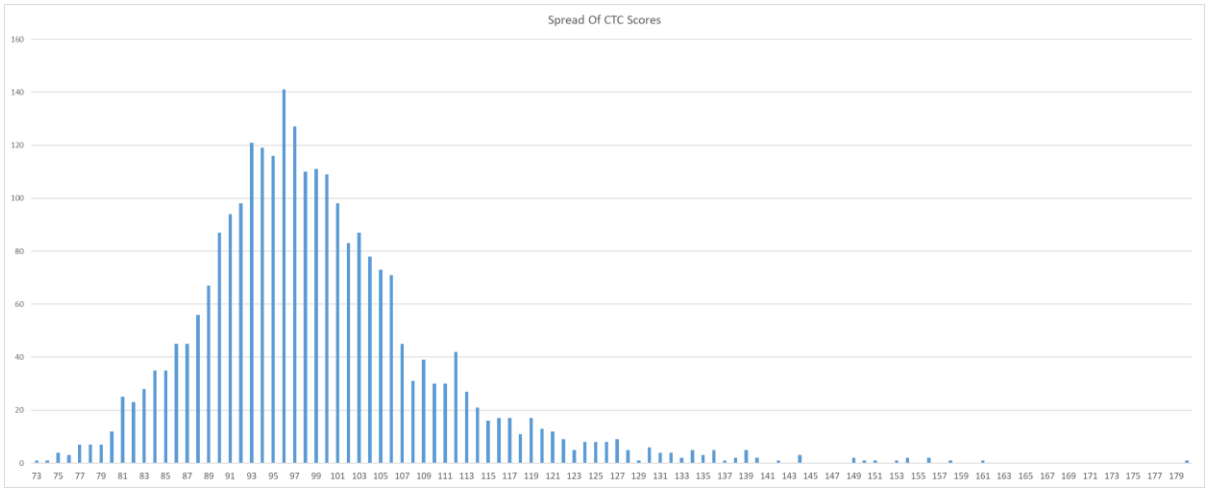


Figure 4. 6

Distribution of Parent Community CTC Scores

This school parent CTC distribution was divided into five equal segments, each containing approximately 20% of the population (CTC scores are calculated as whole numbers, which does not allow for segments containing exactly 20% of the population). The five segments were then labelled as Very Low, Low, Medium, High and Very High socio-economic status communities (Table 4.6) for this research project to give a relative measure of socio-economic status for the schools from which the school choice data was collected.

Table 4. 6

Socio-Economic Status Groups

Socio-economic Status group	CTC score Range	Percentage of the population
Very Low	90 or less	18.35
Low	91 - 95	19.81
Medium	96 - 99	18.77
High	100 -106	23.00
Very High	107 or Greater	18.30

Using the CTC scores as a socio-economic status marker both Rural schools used in this research fit within the low socio-economic range and both Urban schools fit within the high socio-economic status range. The importance of each school-choice factor relative to the socio-economic status marker is illustrated in Figure 4.7. In terms of the parents' rating of the importance of the Context of School, the Faith-based Characteristics and the Academic Program/Profile factors in their school choice decision-making, t-test analysis indicate that there is no statistically significant difference between parent socio-economic status response [$t(716) = 1.010$, $p = .313$], [$t(716) = .712$, $p = .477$] and [$t(716) = 1.545$, $p = .123$] respectively. In contrast there is a statistically significant difference in parent socio-economic status response for the School Structure and Student Interaction school choice factors [$t(716) = 3.915$, $p < .001$] and [$t(716) = 3.817$, $p < .001$] respectively. Parents within the high socio-economic parent community placed greater importance on the School Structure factor registering a mean of 2.9794 while parents within the low socio-economic parent community registered a mean of 2.7628 for this factor. School parents within the high socio-economic parent community also placed greater importance on the Student Interaction factor registering a mean of 3.5052 while those within the low socio-economic parent community registered a mean of 3.3122 for this factor.

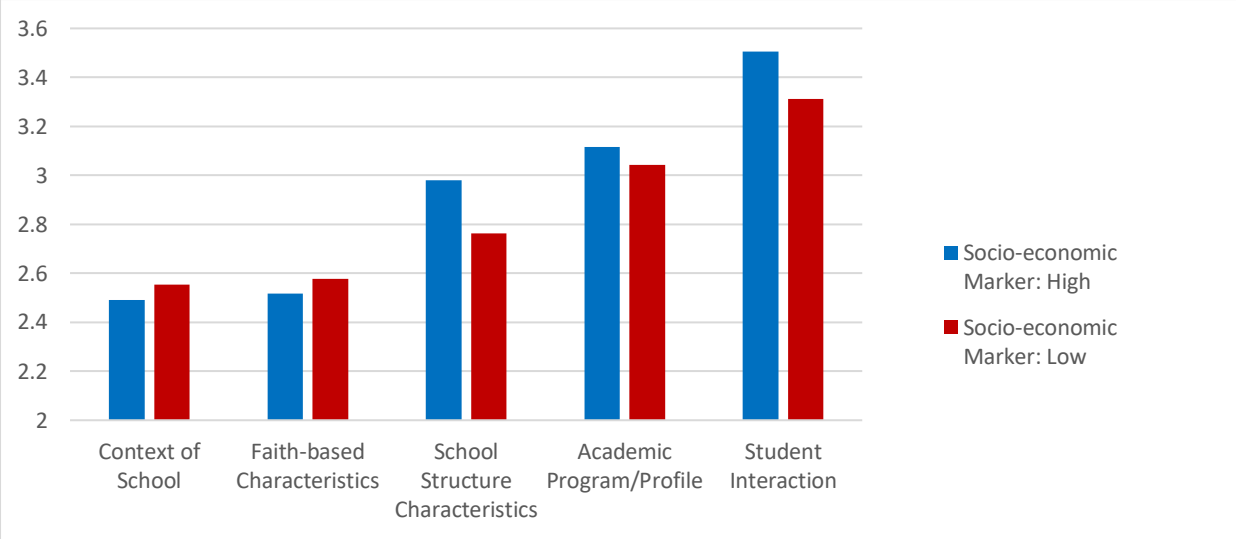


Figure 4. 7

School Choice Factors: Socio-economic Status Comparison Data, Mean of Responses

The school choice comparison data between school type and a school's parent community socio-economic status parallels previous Urban/Rural analyses. This begs the question, are the Rural/Urban differences due to the respective school parent community socio-economic status or geographical factors? Further research is required to address this question.

4.4.1.4 Summary of Ideal School Characteristics

In Section 2 of the survey parents were asked to rate the importance of 33 items in relation to their school choice decisions when considering an ideal school. These 33 items were reduced to five conceptual school choice factors using Factor Analysis. These five factors were: Context of School (a factor that captured the location and services offered by the school), Faith-based Characteristics (a factor that highlighted the faith-based nature of the school), School Structure Characteristics (a factor that highlighted the educational and physical structure of the school), Academic Program/Profile (a factor which captured the academic options provided by and the perceived academic status of the school), and Student Interaction (a factor that accessed the perceived student-school interaction within the personal sphere) factor. In this research school choice understandings were based on analyses of these five conceptual school choice factors.

For this sub-section 4.4.1, parents' responses were used in relation to school choice decisions when considering an ideal school. Responses were calculated using mean factor values obtained from the respective survey items. These means values ranged from 1 (not important) to 4 (extremely important). A mean above 2.5 indicates that the majority of parents identified this factor as either very important or extremely important in their school choice decision-making.

When data from all schools are combined the responses from parents indicate that they place considerable importance on all five school characteristics factors. The highest mean value of 3.4788 for the Student Interaction factor suggests that most parents rated this factor as being considerably important; even the lowest mean value of 2.4989 for the Context of School factor still indicates that most parents rated this factor as having some importance to them. The Faith-based Characteristics factor had a mean of 2.5265 which was just slightly larger than the rating for the School Context factor. However, the relatively large standard deviation of .74901 for the Faith-based Characteristics factor indicates that there is a broad difference in the factor rating distribution for these parents with a large group of parents rating this factor as Very Important or Extremely Important and, conversely, a large group of parents rating this factor as Not Important or Somewhat Important.

Furthermore, repeated measures ANOVA indicated that there were statistically significant differences between School Structure Characteristics, Academic Program/Profile and Student Interaction factors. The Student Interaction factor was seen at the most important factor when making school choice decisions followed by the Academic Program/Profile factor then the School Structure factor (see Figure 4.1). There was no statistically significant difference between the Context of School and Faith-based Characteristics factors even though both factors were significantly less important than the other school choice factors.

This research incorporated results from two rural and two urban schools and used data to compare results from the respective schools. The mean was used to determine the relative importance of each of the five school choice factors for each school. All school types rated Student Interaction, Academic Program/Profile and School Structure as Number 1, 2 and 3 respectively. There was some difference in the rating of Faith-based Characteristics and Context of School factors between the respective schools, but the same general trend was discerned as these factors were rated as Number 4 or 5. Interestingly, measures analysis of variance indicated that within the majority of factors, Context of School, School Structure Characteristics, Academic Program/Profile and Student Interaction, there is a statistically

significant difference between each of the four schools. For the Faith-based Characteristics factor there was no statistically significant difference between the four schools.

However, differences were discovered in the parents' rating of the importance of the five factors when comparing rural and urban school types. Urban school parents placed a greater importance of the School Structure, Academic Program/Profile and Student Interaction factors than rural school parents. Rural school parents placed greater importance on the Context of School and Faith-based Characteristics factors (see Figure 4.3).

The survey asked parents to indicate their faith affiliation and they had a choice to select from SDA faith affiliation, Other faith affiliation (of these Other faith affiliation parents 91% identified an affiliation with a non-SDA Christian faith community) or Non-faith affiliation. The relative importance of the five school choice factors was analysed using these three faith affiliation categories. The mean values of the data indicates that the parents from Other faith affiliation and Non-faith affiliation were similar. However, the parents that indicated an SDA faith affiliation had a distinctly different set of means for the respective school choice factors (see Table 4.4).

The Other Faith and Non-Faith affiliation parent groups rated Student Interaction as Number 1, Academic Program/Profile as Number 2 and School Structure Characteristics as Number 3 in terms of school choice importance. The Other Faith affiliation parents rated the Faith-based Characteristics factor as Number 4 and Context of School factor as Number 5. Non-faith parents rated these last two factors in the reverse order with less importance placed on Faith-based Characteristics which ranked Number 5. Analysis of variance indicated that there was no statistically significant difference between the faith affiliation of parents in terms of the Context of School factor. However, there are statistically significant differences between the parent faith affiliation categories within the other four factors, Faith-based Characteristics, School Structure Characteristics, Academic Program/Profile and Student Interaction. In each case, the SDA-affiliated parental group rated these factors significantly lower than the other faith affiliation groups. Furthermore, it is important to note that SDA parents rated the school's Faith-based Characteristics significantly higher than Other Faith affiliated parents who in turn rated this factor significantly higher than Non-faith affiliated parents (see Figure 4.4).

The survey asked parents to indicate their gender with options of female, male or prefer not to say. Most respondents were female, 76%, 22% were male and a small number

preferred not to answer, 2%. Using mean parent responses, all parents, regardless of gender, rated Student Interaction as the most important ideal school choice factor followed by Academic Program/Profile and then School Structure Characteristics. Both female and male respondents ranked Faith-based Characteristics as the fourth most important factor followed by Context of School as the fifth most important factor. Interestingly, t-tests revealed that only within the Context of School factor was there a statistically significant difference between the mean female and male responses where female respondents considered the Context of School significantly more important than male respondents.

Each school's parent communities' CTC scores were used to determine parent community socio-economic status. This relative measure of the socio-economic status for each school was collected and each school was placed into one of five socio-economic status groups: Very Low, Low, Medium, High or Very High. Using these measures, it was found that both rural schools were deemed to fit within the Low socio-economic range and both urban schools were deemed to fit into the High socio-economic range. Also, t-test analysis indicated that there was no statistically significant difference between parent socio-economic status in relation to Context of School, Faith-based Characteristics and Academic Program/Profile school choice factors. However, analysis revealed that parents from the high socio-economic parent community placed greater importance on School Structure and Student Interaction factors than those from the low socio-economic parent community. It is important to note that these analyses could not determine between the impact of parent status and school type on the parents' school choice decisions.

4.4.2 Current School Characteristics

The mean and standard deviation of parents' responses to the 33 Section 3 survey items ranking the factors contributing to parents' choosing the current school their child attends were calculated. For each item in Section 3 respondents were asked to indicate the level of importance they placed on the respective item on a four-point Likert scale from Not Important – 1 to Extremely Important – 4. Mean item ratings with values above 2.5 indicate that the majority of parents rated the particular contributing survey item as Very Important or Extremely Important, with 615 parents completing every item in Section 3.

4.4.2.1 Introduction

Parents' rating of the various school choice items identified by the respective Section 3 survey items are presented in Table 4.7. The lowest mean rating was 1.8894 indicating that

most parents rated this item as not very important, and the highest rating was 3.9095 indicating that this item was very important for almost all parents. Most items, however, had a mean response rating above 2.5000, indicating that these items were of considerable importance to these parents in their school choice decision-making. For a number of items (Christian school, Adventist school, Provision for special needs, Teaching of Christian values, Before/after school care, Early Learning Centre/Pre-Kindy) the standard deviation is relatively large (greater than 1) which indicates that for these items there is a considerable difference in the item rating among parents with a large group of parents rating these items as very important while at the same time a large group rated these items as not important.

Table 4. 7

Current School Evaluation Survey Items: Means and Standard Deviations

	N	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Deviation
Christian school	615	1.00	4.00	2.4634	1.07755
Adventist school	615	1.00	4.00	1.8894	1.02928
Co-educational school	615	1.00	4.00	2.8423	.97334
K-Year 12	615	2.00	4.00	3.0244	.68563
Small class sizes	615	1.00	4.00	3.3301	.74413
Size of the school	615	1.00	4.00	3.0211	.84144
Appearance of buildings and classrooms	615	1.00	4.00	2.8407	.77247
Appearance of the school grounds	615	1.00	4.00	2.8715	.77717
Integration of computer technology into curriculum	615	1.00	4.00	3.0618	.82079
Technology and science facilities	615	1.00	4.00	3.1024	.81771
Library facilities	615	1.00	4.00	2.9089	.83383
Artistic and musical opportunities	615	1.00	4.00	2.7659	.91520
Sporting opportunities	615	1.00	4.00	2.6780	.92227
Range of subjects offered	615	1.00	4.00	3.2309	.75416
Inclusion of project-based learning	615	1.00	4.00	2.7837	.91694
Provision for special needs	615	1.00	4.00	2.4667	1.08669
Talented student program	615	1.00	4.00	2.4537	.97896
Range of camps and trips	615	1.00	4.00	2.6472	.89555
Quality of teaching	615	2.00	4.00	3.7854	.44879
Academic results	615	1.00	4.00	3.0569	.81016
Well-rounded education	615	2.00	4.00	3.7610	.47385
Availability of counselling and/or chaplaincy	615	1.00	4.00	2.9203	.89433

Nurturing environment	615	1.00	4.00	3.7447	.52761
Teaching of Christian values	615	1.00	4.00	2.8260	1.00031
Wearing of uniform	615	1.00	4.00	2.9593	.91315
Appearance of students	615	1.00	4.00	3.0602	.80590
Behaviour of students	615	1.00	4.00	3.6553	.55762
Behaviour management	615	1.00	4.00	3.6602	.59033
School fees affordability	615	1.00	4.00	3.0244	.80979
Proximity to home	615	1.00	4.00	2.6683	.80948
Transport accessibility	615	1.00	4.00	2.6667	.89576
Before/after school care	615	1.00	4.00	1.7642	.98094
Early learning centre/Pre-Kindy	615	1.00	4.00	1.9480	1.13167

4.4.2.2 Factor Structure

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, factor analysis was used to generate a reasonable number of factors from which the five conceptual factors were generated that contain the essential information from the 33 survey items. The five factors are Context of School, Faith-based Characteristics, School Structure Characteristics, Academic Program/Profile and Student Interaction. The sample size of 615 complete parent responses is adequate for Factor Analysis (Coakes & Steed, 2003).

4.4.2.3 Factor Scale Data

Using factor scale data comparisons were made between the respective current school choice factors and further between the respondent characteristics: combined schools, school comparisons, parent faith affiliation comparisons, gender comparisons and parent socio-economic comparisons.

Combined Schools Comparisons

When parent survey responses from the four schools are considered together the data indicates that parents placed considerable importance on all the school characteristics factors identified by the respective Section 3 survey factors as presented in Table 4.8. Even the least important rated factor, Context of School, has a mean value of 2.4143 indicating that most parents rated this factor as being of some importance to them. The Faith-based Characteristics factor with a mean value of 2.5248 is close to the mean value of the Context of School factor but has a much higher standard deviation of .77081 than the Context of School factor and indeed larger than all other school choice factors. This indicates that for the

Faith-based Characteristics factor there is a considerable difference in the factor rating distribution among the parents with a large group of parents rating this factor as Extremely Important or Very Important while at the same time a large group rating this factor as Somewhat Important or Not Important. Interestingly, the considerable difference in the factor rating distribution for the Faith-based Characteristics factor for current school rating is comparable to parents' ideal school choice rating.

Table 4. 8

Current School Survey Factors' Relative Importance: Combined Data, Means and Standard Deviations

School-choice Factor	Relative Importance of Factor Rating	Mean Response	Standard Deviation of Response
Student Interaction	1	3.4159	.50670
Academic Program/Profile	3	2.9580	.50859
School Structure Characteristics	2	3.0118	.52076
Faith-Based Characteristics	4	2.5248	.77081
Context of School	5	2.4143	.57984

The relative importance of each factor in parents' current school choice decision-making is illustrated in Figure 4.8. The Student Interaction factor presented the highest rating of 3.4159 indicating that this factor was highly important for most parents. The School Structure Characteristic factor rated second, with a mean value of 3.0118, and the Academic Program/Profile factor registered a mean value of around 2.9580, indicating that both these factors were of considerable importance to most parents. The Faith-based Characteristics and Context of School factors' mean values were noticeably smaller than the other school choice factors.

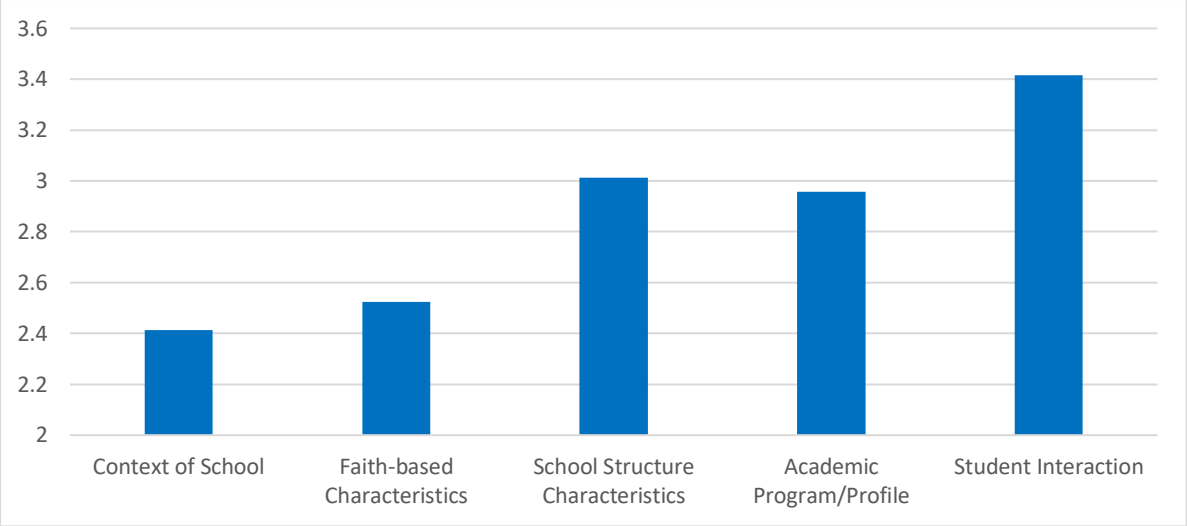


Figure 4. 8

Current School Choice Factor Scales: Combined Data, Mean of Responses

Repeated measures ANOVA indicated that there were statistically significant differences between these school-choice factors [F(2.724, 1672.323) = 403.110, p <.001]. Multiple comparison testing indicated there were statistically significant differences between all pairs of factors.

All Schools Comparisons

The parents' School Choice Factor importance rating responses from the two urban schools and two rural school is presented in Table 4.9. All rural and urban schools rated Student Interaction as most important in their decision to choose their current school. Rural School 2 and Urban School 2 rated the factors in the same order of importance: Student Interaction as Number 1, Academic Program/Profile as Number 2, School Structure Characteristics as Number 3, Faith-based Characteristics as Number 4 and Context of School as Number 5. Rural School 1 and Urban School 1 also paralleled their rankings but differed from the other two schools by reversing the ranking of School Structure Characteristics as Number 2 and Academic Program/Profile as Number 3.

Table 4. 9

Current School Survey Factors' Relative Importance: School Comparisons

School-choice Factor	Rural School 1 Importance Rating (mean)	Rural School 2 Importance Rating (mean)	Urban School 1 Importance Rating (mean)	Urban School 2 Importance Rating (mean)
Student Interaction	1 (3.2000)	1 (3.1850)	1 (3.4786)	1 (3.4113)
Academic Program/Profile	3 (2.7697)	2 (2.9227)	3 (2.9608)	2 (3.0004)
School Structure Characteristics	2 (2.8000)	3 (2.8438)	2 (3.0708)	3 (3.0000)
Faith-based Characteristics	4 (2.5556)	4 (2.4688)	4 (2.5220)	4 (2.5330)
Context of School	5 (2.5378)	5 (2.4300)	5 (2.3566)	5 (2.4717)

The relative importance of each school-choice factor for the current schools is illustrated in Figure 4.9. The order of the factors on the horizontal axis is kept the same as previous to further enhance the school comparisons.

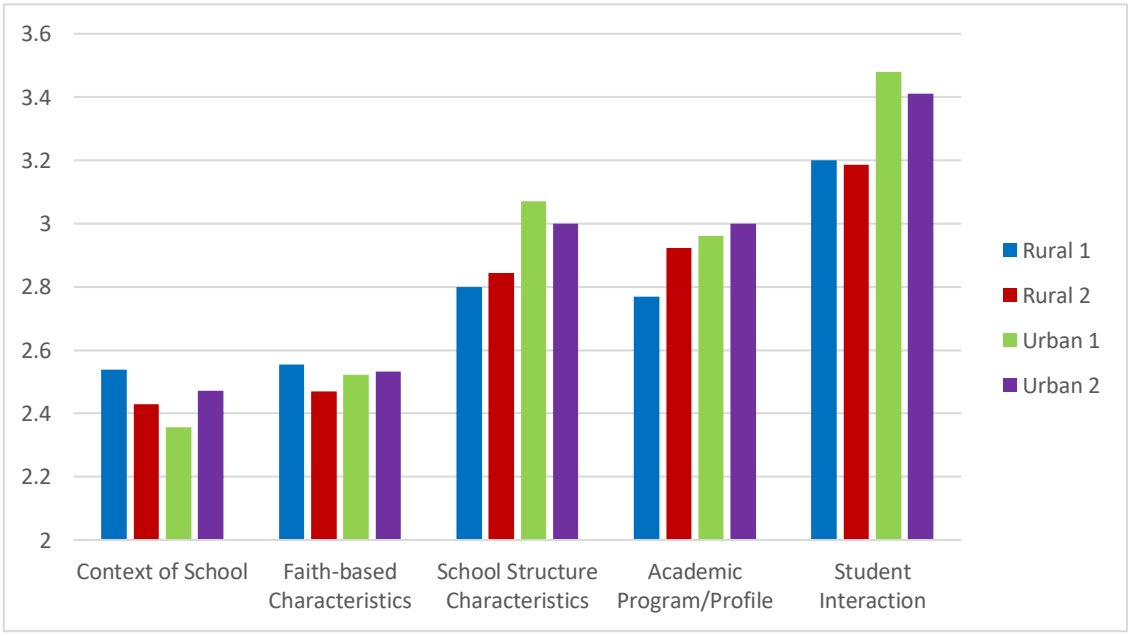


Figure 4. 9

Current School Choice Factor Scales: School Comparison Data, Mean of Responses

In terms of the parents' rating of the importance of the **Context of School** factor in their school choice decision-making, analysis of variance calculations indicate that there is no significant statistical difference between the schools [$F(3,611) = 2.449$, $p = .063$].

In terms of the parents' rating of the importance of the **Faith-based Characteristics** factor in their school choice decision-making, analysis of variance calculations indicate that there is no significant statistical difference between the schools [$F(3,611) = .103$, $p = .958$]. It is noted, however, that each school has a similar and relatively high standard deviation (.7 to .8) when compared to the other school choice factors (.4 to .6).

In terms of the parents' rating of the importance of the **School Structure Characteristics** factor in their school choice decision-making, analysis of variance calculations indicate that there is a significant statistical difference between the schools [$F(3,611) = 5.377$, $p = .001$]. Multiple comparison testing (Tukey) indicates there was no difference in importance rating of the School Structure Characteristics in their school choice decision-making between Rural 1, Urban 2 parents and Rural 1 and Rural 2 school parents and Urban 1 and Urban 2 parents. There was, however, a significant difference between Rural 1 and Urban 1 parents' School Structure Characteristics factor rating, meaning the School Structure Characteristics factor was considered less important by Rural 1 parents than the other schools in terms of school choice decision-making. However, it is noted that the Rural schools have lower factor means than the Urban schools.

In terms of the parents' rating of the importance of the **Academic Program/Profile** factor in their school choice decision-making, analysis of variance calculations indicate that there is a significant statistical difference between the schools [$F(3,611) = 2.636$, $p = .049$]. Multiple comparison testing (Tukey) indicates there was no difference in importance rating of the Academic Program/Profile in their school choice decision-making between Urban 1 and Urban 2 school parents and Rural 1 and Rural 2 school parents and Rural 2 and Urban 2 parents. There was, however, a significant difference between Rural 1 and Urban 2 parents' Academic Program/Profile factor rating. Rural 1 parents rated this factor of less importance than the other schools.

In terms of the parents' rating of the importance of the **Student Interaction** factor in their school choice decision-making, analysis of variance calculations indicate that there is a significant statistical difference between the schools [$F(3,611) = 7.342$, $p < .001$]. Multiple comparison testing (Tukey) indicates there was no difference in importance rating of the

Student Interaction in their school choice decision-making between Urban 1, Urban 2 and Rural 1 and Rural 2 school parents. There was, however, a significant difference between Rural 1 and both Urban 1 and Urban 2 school parents and Urban 1 and Rural 2 school parents in the Student Interaction factor. But once again it is noted that the Rural schools do have lower factor means than the Urban schools.

The schools' school choice factor data was further collated so that data from both rural schools and data from both urban schools were combined. Figure 4.10 displays this school type (Rural versus Urban) data comparison. For the Context of School factor, even though it is relatively low for both urban and rural schools, parents from the rural school rate this factor higher than parents from urban schools. In contrast, even though both the urban and rural schools' parents rate the final three factors relatively high, the urban schools' parents rate these higher than the rural schools' parents.

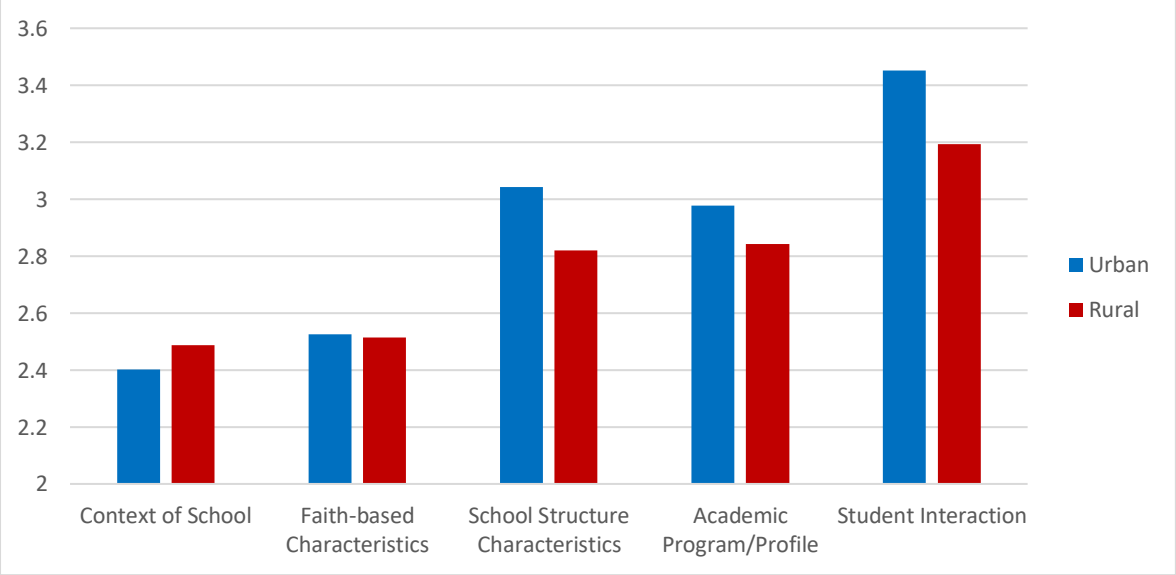


Figure 4. 10

Current School Choice Factor Scales: School Type Data, Mean of Responses

In terms of the parents' rating of the importance of the Context of School and the Faith-based Characteristics factors in their school choice decision-making, t-test analysis indicates that there is no significant statistical difference between the school type and parent response [t(613) = 0.130, p = .897] and [t(613) = 1.247, p = .213] respectively. In contrast there is a significant statistical difference in the school type parent response for the School

Structure, Academic Program/Profile and Student Interaction school choice factors [t(613) = 3.684, p < .001], [t(613) = 2.279, p = .023] and [t(613) = 3.684, p < .001] respectively. Urban school parents placed greater importance on the Academic Program/Profile factor registering a mean of 2.9767 while rural school parents registered a mean of 2.8417 for this factor. Urban school parents placed greater importance on the School Structure factor registering a mean of 3.0425 while rural school parents registered a mean of 2.8206 for this factor. Urban school parents also placed greater importance on the Student Interaction factor registering a mean of 3.4517 while rural school parents registered a mean of 3.1929 for this factor.

Once again, because the school type (Urban and Rural) divide parallels the parent community socio-economic divide (High and Low) the school socio-economic status of the respective school communities the importance of the school-choice factor ratings will follow the same patterns.

Parent Faith Affiliation Comparisons

The mean parent responses of the three faith affiliation groups from the four schools surveyed (SDA faith affiliation, Other Faith affiliation, Non-faith affiliation) is presented in Table 4.10. Parents with an SDA faith affiliation placed the Faith-based Characteristics factor as Number 1 which contrasted with Other Faith affiliation and Non-faith affiliation parents who rated this factor as Number 4 and Number 5 respectively. The Student Interaction factor was rated relatively high for all three parent groups with Other Faith affiliation and Non-faith affiliation parents both placing this factor as Number 1 while SDA parents placed this factor as Number 2. Parents identifying as Other faith affiliation and Non-faith affiliation both placed School Structure Characteristics as Number 2 while SDA parents placed this factor Number 4. All parent faith groups placed Academic Program/Profile as Number 3. The Context of School factor was generally rated lowest with SDA parents and Other faith affiliation parents rating it Number 5 and Non-faith affiliation parents rating it Number 4, ahead of Faith-based Characteristics.

All parent faith affiliation groups placed Context of School lowest with SDA parents and Other faith affiliation parents rating it Number 5 and Non-faith affiliation parents rating it Number 4.

Table 4. 10

Current School Survey Factors Relative Importance: Parent Faith Affiliation Comparisons

School-choice Factor	SDA faith affiliation Importance Rating (mean)	Other faith affiliation Importance Rating (mean)	Non-faith affiliation Importance Rating (mean)
Student Interaction	2 (3.2069)	1 (3.4793)	1 (3.4472)
Academic Program/Profile	3 (2.7994)	3 (2.9859)	3 (3.0056)
School Structure Characteristics	4 (2.7468)	2 (3.0560)	2 (3.0939)
Faith-Based Characteristics	1 (3.3703)	4 (2.5481)	5 (2.0644)
Context of School	5 (2.4328)	5 (2.4474)	4 (2.3659)

The relative importance of each school-choice factor in parents' current school choice is illustrated in Figure 4.11. What is immediately noticeable is that SDA-affiliated parents place greater importance on Faith-based Characteristics school choice factors than the other school parent faith affiliation groups. Also, SDA parents rate the School Structure Characteristics, Academic Program/Profile and Student Interaction school choice factors of lesser importance than parents identifying with Other Faith and Non-faith affiliation groups.

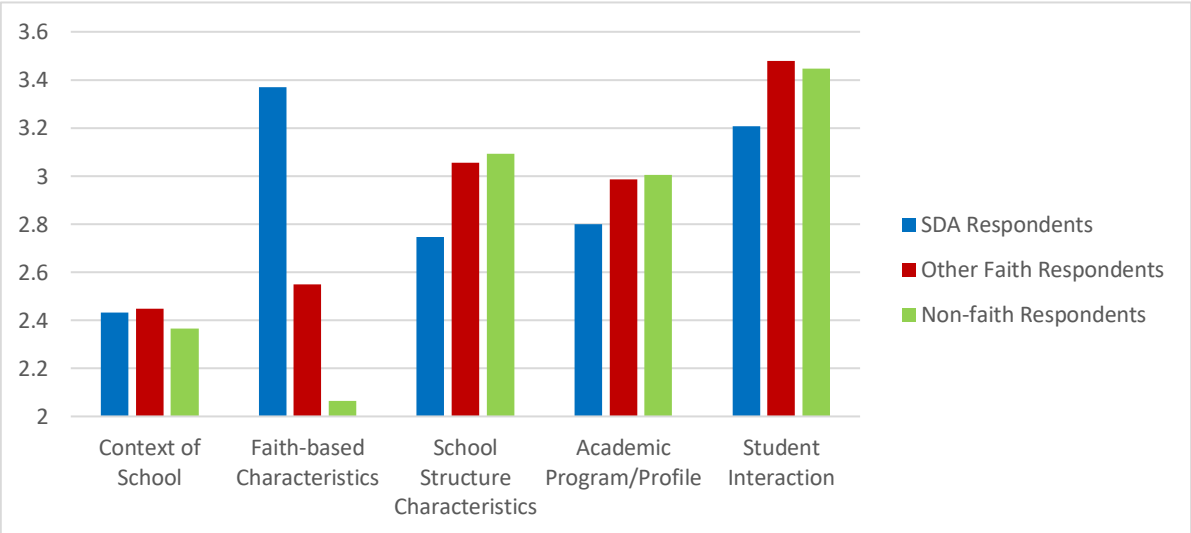


Figure 4. 11

Current School Choice Factors: Parent Faith Affiliation Comparison Data, Mean of Responses

In terms of the parents' rating of the importance of the **Context of School** factor in their school choice decision-making, analysis of variance calculations indicated that there is no significant statistical difference between the groups [$F(2,612) = 1.297$, $p = .274$].

What is notable about this faith affiliation data is the difference between all three parent affiliation groups in terms of the importance of a school's **Faith-based Characteristics** factor in school choice decision-making. Analysis of variance calculations indicate that this difference between the faith affiliation groups was statistically significant [$F(2,612) = 176.373$, $p < .001$]. Multiple comparison testing (Tukey) indicates there was a significant difference in the importance rating of Faith-based Characteristics in their school choice decision-making between all parent faith affiliation groups. It was the SDA affiliation parents that rated the importance of the school's Faith-based Characteristics factor (mean rating 3.3703) significantly higher than the Other Faith affiliation group (mean rating 2.5481), which in turn rated school Faith-based Characteristics significantly higher than the Non-faith affiliation group of parents (2.0644).

What is also notable about this data is the similarity between two of the parent affiliation groups in terms of the importance of a school's **School Structure Characteristics** factor in school choice decision-making. Analysis of variance calculations indicate that there is a significant statistical difference between the parent faith affiliation groupings [$F(2, 612) = 20.008$, $p < .001$]. Multiple comparison testing (Tukey) indicates that SDA faith affiliation parents rated the importance of School Structure Characteristics factor significantly lower than the Other Faith and Non-faith parent affiliation groups, but there was no significant difference between the Other Faith and Non-faith affiliation groups.

Further, what is again notable about this data is the similarity between two of the parent faith affiliation groups in terms of the importance of a school's **Academic Program/Profile** factor in their current school choice decision-making. Analysis of variance calculations indicate that there is a significant statistical difference between the parent faith affiliation groupings [$F(2,612) = 7.191$, $p = .001$]. Multiple comparison testing (Tukey) indicates that SDA-affiliated parents rated the importance of the Academic Program/Profile factor significantly lower than Other Faith and Non-faith parent affiliation groups, but there was no significant difference between Other Faith and Non-faith affiliation parent groups.

Finally, there is a similarity between two parent affiliation groups in terms of the importance of a school's **Student Interaction** factor in school choice decision-making.

Analysis of variance calculations indicate that there is a statistically significant difference between the parent affiliation groupings [$F(2,612) = 12.896$, $p < .001$]. Multiple comparison testing (Tukey) indicates that SDA-affiliated parents rated the importance of the Student Interaction factor significantly lower than Other Faith and Non-faith parent affiliation groups, but there was no significant difference between Other faith affiliation and Non-faith affiliation groups.

Parent Gender Comparisons

As stated earlier, parents were asked to identify their gender, either female or male, with the option not to answer. In section 3 parents were asked to reflect on the importance of factors that impacted their current school choice decision. Of the 615 parents that completed Section 3 of the survey the majority, again, were female, 470 (76%), 133 were male (22%) and 12 preferred not to identify their gender (2%). Interestingly, the percentages of each gender group respondent in Section 3 were identical to those in Section 2, even though fewer parents completed this section. Parent gender comparisons in relation to the importance of current school choice factors is presented in Table 4.11.

Table 4. 11

Current School Survey Factors' Relative Importance: Gender Comparisons

School-choice Factor	Female (mean)	Male (mean)	Prefer not to answer (mean)
Student Interaction	1 (3.4277)	1 (3.3729)	1 (3.4333)
Academic Program/Profile	3 (2.9805)	3 (2.8660)	3 (3.0985)
School Structure Characteristics	2 (3.0128)	2 (2.9906)	2 (3.2083)
Faith-based Characteristics	4 (2.5372)	4 (2.5282)	5 (2.0000)
Context of School	5 (2.4209)	5 (2.3684)	4 (2.6667)

The mean parent responses of the three gender options (female, male, prefer not to say) to the relative importance of school choice factors in parents' current school choice decisions at their current school is presented in Table 4.11. The importance rating of each school-choice factor is uniform between the female and male gender groups, ranking them Number 1 for Student Interaction, Number 2 for School Structure Characteristics, Number 3 Academic Program/Profile, Number 4 Faith-based Characteristics and Number 5 Context of

School. The only difference for parents who chose not to identify their gender was that the Context of School factor ranked Number 4 and Faith-based Characteristics factor ranked Number 5.

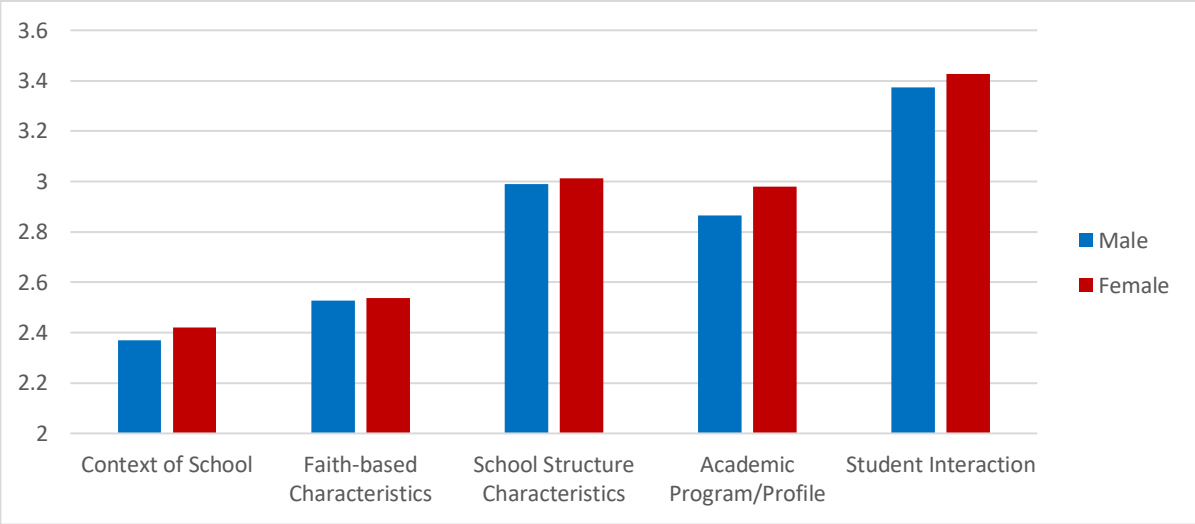


Figure 4. 12

Current School Choice Factors: Parent Gender Comparison Data, Mean of Responses

When asked about their current school, the relative importance of parents' school choice decision-making for both male and female respondents is illustrated in Figure 4.12. When conducting gender comparison data only male and female respondents were considered due the minimal number of parents preferring not to provide their gender. Statistical testing within each school choice factor indicated that there was no statistically significant difference between the respective parent gender declarations for the Context of School, Faith-based Characteristics, School Structure Characteristics and Student Interaction factors. For the Academic Program/Profile factor, however, there was a statistically significant difference between the mean female and male responses [$t(601) = -2.312$, $p = .021$]. In the Academic Program/Profile the mean of the female responses (2.9805) was significantly larger than the mean of the male responses (2.8660).

4.4.2.4 Summary of Current School Characteristics

Section 3 of the survey asked parents to rate the importance of 33 items in relation to what influenced them choosing their current school. As previously explained, these 33 items

were reduced to five conceptual school choice factors using factor analysis. These five factors were: Context of School (a factor which captured the location and services offered by the school), Faith-based Characteristics (a factor which highlighted the faith-based nature of the school), School Structure Characteristics (a factor which highlighted the educational and physical structure of the school), Academic Program/Profile (a factor which captured the academic options provided by and the perceived academic status of the school), and the Student Interaction (a factor that accessed the perceived student-school interaction within the personal sphere) factor. In this research school choice understandings were based on analyses of these five conceptual school choice factors.

For this sub-section 4.4.2, parents' responses were used in relation to school choice decisions when considering their current school. Responses were calculated using mean factor values obtained from the respective survey items. These means values ranged from 1 (Not Important) to 4 (Extremely Important). A mean above 2.5 indicates that the majority of parents identified this factor as either very important or extremely important in their school choice decision-making.

When data from all schools is combined the responses from parents indicate that they place considerable importance on four of the school characteristics factors, Faith-based Characteristics, School Structure Characteristics, Academic Program/Profile and Student Interactions. The highest mean value of 3.4159 for the Student Interaction factor indicates that most parents rated this factor as being an important consideration in their school choice decisions when choosing their current school. The lowest mean value of 2.4143 for the Context of School factor indicates that most parents rated this factor as being Not Important or Somewhat Important in their current school choice decision-making. The Faith-based Characteristics factor had a mean of 2.5248 which was just slightly higher than the rating for the Context of School factor. However, the relatively large standard deviation of .77081for the Faith-based Characteristics factor indicates that there is a broad difference in the factor rating distribution for these parents with a large group of parents rating this factor as Very Important or Extremely Important and conversely, a large group of parents rating this factor as Not Important or Somewhat Important. This was also the case for Faith-based Characteristics for ideal school choice.

Also, repeated measures ANOVA indicated that there were statistically significant differences between all these school-choice factors. The Student Interaction factor was seen as the most important factor when making school choice decisions, followed by the School

Structure factor and then the Academic Program/Profile factor (Figure 4.8). Multiple comparison testing indicated there were statistically significant differences between all pairs of factors.

Data from two rural schools and two urban schools was combined and Figure 4.10 shows this school type (Rural versus Urban) data comparison. The mean was used to determine the relative importance of each of the five school choice factors for each school type. For the first two factors, Context of School and Faith-based Characteristics, rural parents rate these similar or higher than urban school parents. In contrast, even though both the urban and rural schools' parents rate the final three factors, School Structure Characteristics, Academic Program/Profile and Student Interaction, relatively high, it is the urban schools' parents that rate these higher than the rural schools' parents. There was no significant statistical difference in terms of the parents' rating of the importance of the Context of School and the Faith-based Characteristics factors in their current school choice decision-making. However, there is a significant statistical difference in the school type parent responses for the School Structure Characteristics, Academic Program/Profile and Student Interaction factors. This research revealed that Urban school parents placed greater importance on the Academic Program/Profile, School Structure factor and Student Interaction factor than did Rural school parents.

As mentioned earlier, the survey asked parents to indicate their faith affiliation from three categories: SDA faith, Other faith or Non-faith affiliation. Of those who identified as Other faith 81.4% indicated that they belonged to a non-SDA Christian faith community. The relative importance of the five school choice factors was analysed using these three faith affiliation categories and are depicted in Figure 4.11.

What is apparent in analysing the mean responses of parent faith affiliation groups is that SDA faith-affiliated parents placed Faith-based Characteristics as Number 1 whereas Other faith affiliated parents rated this factor as Number 4 and Non-faith affiliated parents rated this factor as least important, Number 5. The Student Interaction factor was rated relatively high by all three parent groups with Other faith affiliated parents and Non-faith affiliated parents both rating this factor as Number 1. Parent faith affiliation groups rated Context of School generally low with SDA parents and Other faith affiliation parents rating it the lowest at Number 5 and Non-faith affiliation parents rating it Number 4, ahead of Faith-based Characteristics.

Analysis of variance revealed that there was no statistically significant difference between parent faith affiliation categories and the Context of School factor. However, there are statistically significant differences between the parent faith affiliation groups within the remaining four factors, Faith-based Characteristics, School Structure Characteristics, Academic Program/Profile and Student Interaction.

The survey asked parents to indicate their gender with options of female, male or prefer not to say. The majority of 615 respondents were female, 76%, 22% were male and a small number chose not to answer, 2%. Using mean parent responses, all parents, regardless of gender, rated Student Interaction as the most important ideal school choice factor followed by School Structure Characteristics and then Academic Program/Profile. Both female and male respondents ranked Faith-based Characteristics as the fourth most important factor followed by Context of School as the fifth most important factor. This was reversed with those parents who preferred not to answer. t-tests revealed that only within the Academic Program/Profile factor was there a statistically significant difference between the mean female and male responses, where female respondents considered this factor significantly more important than male respondents.

4.4.3 Ideal School Versus Current School Comparisons

4.4.3.1 Introduction

Parents were asked to consider 33 items that may influence them in choosing an ideal school for their child in Section 2 of the survey. They were then asked the same question with the same 33 items in Section 3 but in relation to the current school they chose for their child. In both sections of the survey parents were asked to rank the importance they placed on each item in their school choice decisions: Not Important – 1, Somewhat Important – 2, Very Important – 3 and Extremely Important – 4. This section of the research will compare factors influencing parents when choosing an ideal school and the factors that actually influenced parents to choose the current school for their child.

4.4.3.2 School Choice Factors

The mean responses of parent ratings of ideal school factors and current school factors are presented in Table 4.12. When considering their ideal school choice parents rated Student Interaction as the most important factor (3.4788) and this was mirrored in their current school choice, which also registered Student Interaction factor with the highest mean

(3.4159). The Context of School factor registered the lowest mean response for both frameworks. For the ideal school, the mean was 2.4989; for the current school, the mean was 2.4143. However, the current school mean response for the Academic Program/Profile factor and the School Structure Characteristics factor is in the reverse order of school-choice importance compared to the mean ideal school response (Table 4.12).

Table 4. 12

Ideal School Factors versus Current School Factors, Mean Responses

School-choice Factor	Ideal School (mean)	Current School (mean)
Student Interaction	1 (3.4788)	1 (3.4159)
Academic Program/Profile	2 (3.1055)	3 (2.9580)
School Structure Characteristics	3 (2.9499)	2 (3.0118)
Faith-based Characteristics	4 (2.5265)	4 (2.5248)
Context of School	5 (2.4989)	5 (2.4143)

The relative importance of each school-choice factor is illustrated in Figure 4.13 where parents rated the importance of these factors by adopting an *ideal* school as their frame of reference and then again adopting their *current* school as the frame of reference. Once again, the distribution of the importance of the school-choice factors for the current school responses generally follows ideal school response distribution (refer to Figure 4.13).

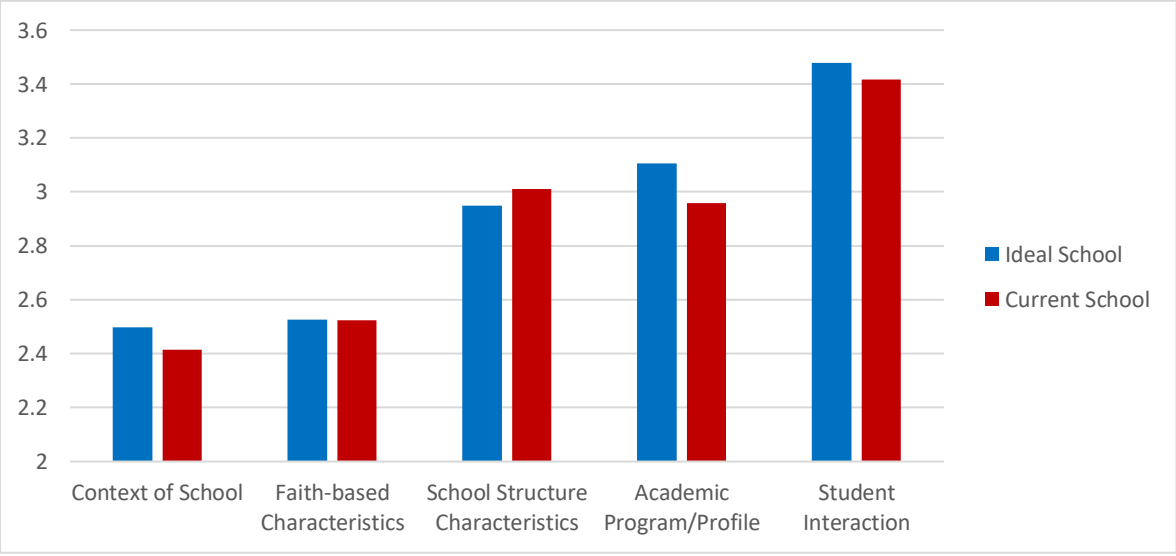


Figure 4. 13

School Choice Factors: Ideal School Verses Current School Comparison Data, Mean of Responses

Repeated measures ANOVA indicated that there were statistically significant differences between these school-choice factors when these choices are compared relative to the ideal school and the current school. To determine where these differences lie multiple comparison testing was carried out. With respect to the Context of School factor the ideal school ratings (mean of 2.4829) were significantly higher than the current school ratings (mean of 2.4143) and there was a statistically significant difference between the ideal school ratings and the current school ratings [$t(614) = 4.893$, $p < .001$]. For the Faith-based Characteristics factor, however, there was no statistically significant difference between the mean for ideal school response and the mean for current school response. For the School Structure Characteristics factor it was the mean response for the current school ratings (mean of 3.0118) that was significantly higher than the mean for the ideal school ratings (mean of 2.9236), [$t(614) = -6.630$, $p < .001$]. In contrast for both the Academic Program/Profile and Student Interaction factors it was the mean response for the ideal school (mean of 3.0848 and mean of 3.4784 respectively) that was significantly greater than the mean response for the current school (mean of 2.9580 and mean of 3.4159 respectively), [$t(614) = 9.451$, $p < .001$] and [$t(614) = 5.031$, $p < .001$].

4.4.3.3 Summary of Ideal School Versus Current School

Parents were asked to rate factors that would influence them when choosing an ideal school and what actually influenced them to choose their current school. The current school influencing factors follow very close the overall distribution of the ideal school choice factors with the Context of School factor having the least influence and the Student Interaction factor having the greatest influence. The research suggests that there is some difference between parents' ideal school choice and their current school choice. Apart from the School Structure Characteristics factor parents rated the ideal school factors higher than current school factors. This would suggest that the school the parents chose for their child did not reach the high standards they desired in an ideal school, but the current school standard was acceptable. The relative importance of the respective factors mostly followed the same trend for the ideal and current school contexts. However, there was no statistically significant difference between the two school choice frameworks for the Faith-based Characteristics factor.

4.4.4 Most Important Three Items For Choosing Ideal And Current School

4.4.4.1 Introduction

The research so far has focused on the respective school choice factors: Academic Program/Profile, School Structure Characteristics, Faith-based Characteristics, Context of School and Student Interaction. These five factors were created from 33 survey items which are the centre of this analysis. Section 2 of the survey asked parents to rank items that may influence them in choosing an ideal school for their child and Section 3 asked parents to rank the items that influenced them in choosing their current school for their child. At the end of each of these two sections a question was asked of parents to indicate the *three* main items from the lists provided in the previous questions that would influence parents in choosing an ideal school for their child (n = 638) and the *three* main items that influenced parents when choosing their current school (n = 615).

4.4.4.2 Frequency Analysis

Parent responses to these questions are presented in Table 4.13 as a frequency table listing items of school choice as they appeared in the survey. Frequency analysis is an important and useful tool for the interpretation of the data at a glance.

Table 4. 13

Frequencies of Most Important Items: Ideal School and Current School

Most Important Item	Ideal School Frequency	Current School Frequency
Christian school	39	41
Adventist school	27	40
Co-educational school	15	18
K-Year 12	22	49
Small class sizes	22	89
Size of the school	19	49
Appearance of buildings and classrooms	4	7
Appearance of the school grounds	10	23
Integration of computer technology into curriculum	11	11
Technology and science facilities	35	31
Library facilities	1	1
Artistic and musical opportunities	20	13

Sporting opportunities	15	15
Range of subjects offered	101	41
Inclusion of project-based learning	8	6
Provision for special needs	46	31
Talented student program	10	7
Range of camps and trips	3	5
Quality of teaching	297	214
Academic results	104	84
Well-rounded education	169	136
Availability of counselling and/or chaplaincy	8	14
Nurturing environment	305	290
Teaching of Christian values	131	128
Wearing of uniform	5	6
Appearance of students	5	13
Behaviour of students	84	79
Behaviour management	93	65
School fees affordability	84	70
Proximity to home	32	73
Transport accessibility	7	11
Before/after school care	8	11
Early learning centre/Pre-Kindy	9	29

The highest rated frequencies, listed more than 100 times, are presented in Table 4.14, in descending order of respondents' answers to ideal school choice.

Table 4. 14

Highest Rated Frequencies of Most Important Items

Most Important Items	Ideal School Frequency	Current School Frequency
Nurturing environment	305	290
Quality of teaching	297	214
Well-rounded education	169	136
Teaching of Christian values	131	128
Academic results	104	84
Range of subjects offered	101	41

It is interesting to note that the top three items that would influence parents in choosing an ideal school also correlated closely to the items that influenced parents in choosing their current school. The items that were rated highest for choosing both an ideal school and their current school were *Nurturing environment, Quality of teaching, Well-rounded education* and *Teaching of Christian values. Academic results* and *Range of subjects offered* were also rated as highly influential in choosing an ideal school but not as highly rated in choosing their current school. A number of other factors had a greater frequency for choosing their current school than *Range of subjects offered.* The lower *Academic results* frequency which appears in the current school rating may be due to parents placing more importance on *Nurturing environment, Quality of teaching, Well-rounded education* and *Teaching of Christian values* items. The *Range of subjects offered* rating for current schools is significantly lower than for parents' ideal school choice and may well be due to parents recognising the fact that schools cannot offer all the subjects they desire. As indicated in Table 4.13, the majority of most important items in current school choice ratings were lower than ideal school ratings by around 20%.

When considering which factor these items are part of, it was noted that the most important item, *Nurturing environment*, was part of the Student Interaction factor which also was the most important school-choice factor in both ideal and current combined data analysis, reinforcing these findings. The items *Quality of Teaching, Well-rounded education, Academic results* and *Range of subjects offered* were all part of Academic Program/Profile factor which was the second most important factor in school choice decision process in combined data analysis. Finally, the *Teaching of Christian values* item was also rated highly and belonged to the Faith-based Characteristics factor. It was noted that this factor was considered particularly important to SDA faith-affiliated parents and this item most probably reflects these parents' response to the item question. It is likely that parents from Other faith affiliations would also have contributed to this response.

Furthermore, items that rated 10 or less for frequency for both the top three ideal school choice and top three current school choice (respectively) are *Appearance of buildings and classrooms* (n = 4, 7), *Library facilities* (n = 1, 1), *Inclusion of project-based learning* (n = 8, 6), *Talented student program* (n = 10, 7), *Range of camps and trips* (n = 3, 5) and *Wearing of uniform* (n = 5, 6). *Appearance of buildings and classrooms* is part of School Structure Characteristics factor while *Wearing of uniform* belongs to Student Interaction factor. The remaining three, *Library facilities*, *Inclusion of project-based learning*, *Talented*

student program, *Range of camps and trips*, aspects of the Academic Program/Profile factor, are considered of minimal importance. However, there are other items in the Academic Program/Profile factor that parents consider to be high ranking items in school choice decisions (see Table 4.13). This difference needs further exploration.

As stated previously, at the end of Section 2 and Section 3 of the survey, the question was asked of parents to indicate the *three* main items from the lists provided in the previous questions that would influence parents in choosing an ideal school for their child and the *three* main items that influenced parents when choosing their current school. Interestingly, some parents deviated from these instructions and included words or phrases of other items that would influence them in choosing an ideal school or their current school. This seems to indicate that parents felt that the items provided did not reflect their main reasons for school choice. Most of these parents chose one or two items from the list and added their own to complete three items. Some parents did this for their ideal and current schools; others did this for either one or the other. There was no consistent pattern between parents.

With respect to choosing an ideal school, the most common extra words and phrases were “reputation” and “good reputation” with a frequency of 15. This appeared more frequently when indicating why parents chose their current school, with a frequency of 25. The next most frequent extra reason for choosing an ideal school related to communication. “Great communication”, “good communication” and “open communication” were expressed five times. Similar terms related to communication were added by parents when indicating the most important reasons for choosing their current school: “communication”, “more communication” were expressed three times. The idea of community was also expressed as a reason that parents would choose an ideal school with “community”, “family community” and “sense of community” being cited five times. With respect to current school, “community”, “good community” and “school community” were cited three times. Parents also included “school culture”, “good school” and “recommendation” twice each in their most important reasons for choosing their current school.

Many other words and phrases were cited in each section with a frequency of one. Some of the words and phrases for choosing an ideal school included: “fits into our lifestyle”, “friendliness”, “specialist model”, “wide range of religions”, “multicultural” and “aboriginal cultural diversity and responsiveness”. Some of the words and phrases for choosing their current school were similar such as: “multicultural” and “inclusive of all religions” as well as unique reasons such as: “safe”, “child wanted to be there”, “better friendship choices”,

"answer to prayer", "unavailability of other Christian schools in the area" and "better option than local schools".

4.4.5 School-Choice Information Sources

4.4.5.1 Introduction

Section 4 of the survey asked parents to rate how important certain information sources were in influencing their decision to send their child to their current school. Fourteen items, in order of appearance on the survey were: *Recommendation from others, Open Day, Interaction with school staff, School website, Social media, Advertising, Reputation of school in the community, Own or Spouses experience at the school, My School website, NAPLAN results, Academic reputation, Child's own choice, Closest school* and *Always intended to send my child to an Adventist School.* 610 parents completed every item in Section 4 of the survey and these responses were used for the analyses relating to school-choice information sources. For each item in Section 4 respondents were asked to indicate the level of importance they placed on the respective item on a four-point Likert scale from Not Important – 1, Somewhat Important – 2, Very Important – 3, Extremely Important – 4.

4.4.5.2 Comparison of Sources

Parents' evaluation of the respective importance of the various sources of information relating to their school-choice decision-making are presented in order of importance, from the source with the lowest mean response to the source with the highest mean response, in Table 4.15. The mean and standard deviation of parents' responses to the fourteen Section 4 survey items indicating parents' perception of the importance of the stated Sources of Information were calculated. Mean values above 2.5 indicate that the majority of parents rated the information source identified by the survey item as very important or extremely important.

Table 4. 15

Information Sources: Means & Standard Deviations

Information Source	Mean	Standard Deviation
Always intended to send my child to an Adventist school	1.6721	1.03504
Closest school	1.6770	.83379
Advertising	1.7180	.79973
My School website	1.7492	.91208
Social media	1.8541	.88038
Own or spouse's personal experience at the school	1.8994	1.16581
NAPLAN results	1.9574	1.03858
School website	2.2754	.93792
Open Day	2.2852	1.04447
Child's own choice	2.4410	1.04605
Academic reputation	2.7705	.97411
Recommendation from others	2.9918	.95632
Interaction with school staff	3.2016	.80861
Reputation of school in the community	3.4754	.71591

The lowest mean rating, being 1.6721 for *Always intended to send my child to an Adventist school*, indicated that most parents rated this item as not very important and the highest rating, being 3.4754 for *Reputation of school in the community*, indicated that this item was very important for almost all parents. Most items (10 out of the 14), however, had a mean response rating below 2.5000 which indicated that to these parents these items were of minimal importance in terms of information sources for their school choice decision-making. For a number of items (*Always intended to send my child to an Adventist school, Own or spouse's personal experience at the school, NAPLAN results, Open Day, Child's own choice*) the standard deviation is relatively large (greater than 1) which indicates that for these items there is a considerable polarisation among the parents of the importance of these as sources of information, with a large group of parents rating these items as very important while at the same time large group rated these items as not important.

Combined Schools Comparisons

The relative importance of each Information Source is illustrated in Figure 4.14. When parents from the four schools are considered as a unit there are only four sources of information that the majority of parents consider as very important or extremely important: *Academic reputation* (mean 2.7705), *Recommendation from others* (mean 2.9918), *Interaction with school staff* (mean 3.2016) and *Reputation of school in the community* (mean 3.4754). The least important sources of information, according to parents' survey responses are *Always intended to send my child to an Adventist school* (mean 1.6721), *Closest school* (mean 1.6770), *Advertising* (mean 1.7180), *My School website* (mean 1.7492), *Social media* (mean 1.8541), *Own or spouse's personal experience at the school* (mean 1.8994) and NAPLAN results (mean 1.9574). It seems that a *School's website* (mean 2.2754), *Open days* (mean 2.2852) and the *Child's own choice* (mean 2.4410) are somewhat influential in parental school choice decisions. Each Information Source title has been abbreviated in Figure 4.14 – Figure 4. 17 to ensure a graph of appropriate dimensions.

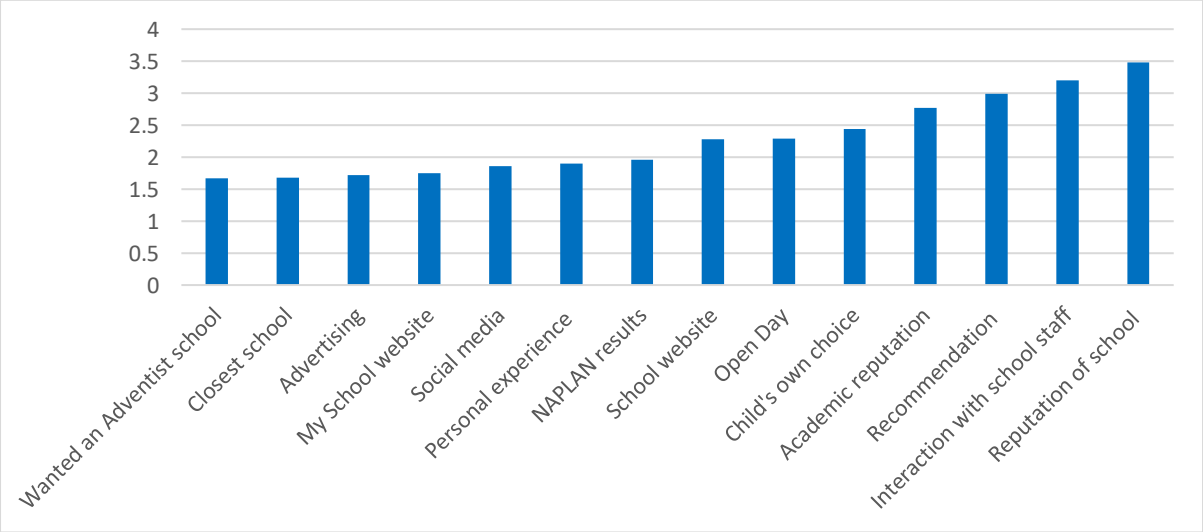


Figure 4. 14

Sources of Information: Combined Data, Mean of Responses

All Schools Comparisons

This research collected responses from parents at two urban schools and two rural schools. Parents' evaluation of the relative importance of the various sources of information relating to their school-choice decision-making are presented in Figure 4.15. The horizontal

axis retains the same order for consistent comparisons. Generally, a similar trend appears using the mean of responses, with a few outliers. For example, Rural School 1 and Rural School 2 rely less on *NAPLAN results* than both urban schools. Urban School 2 parents also tend to consider the *Academic reputation of the school* more than the other school parents. Rural School 2 parents consider *Interaction with school staff* less important than other school parents. Rural School 1 parents do not consider *Open Days* as important as other school parents. Urban School 1 and 2 consider *Academic reputation, Recommendation from others, Interaction with school staff and Reputation of school in the community* as very important or extremely important sources of information. Rural school 1 parents considered *Interaction with school staff* and *Reputation of school in the community* as very important or extremely important sources of information, whereas Rural School 2 parents considered *Recommendation from others* and *Reputation of school in the community* as very important or extremely important sources of information. This Urban/Rural school parental community comparison is now explored in more detail.

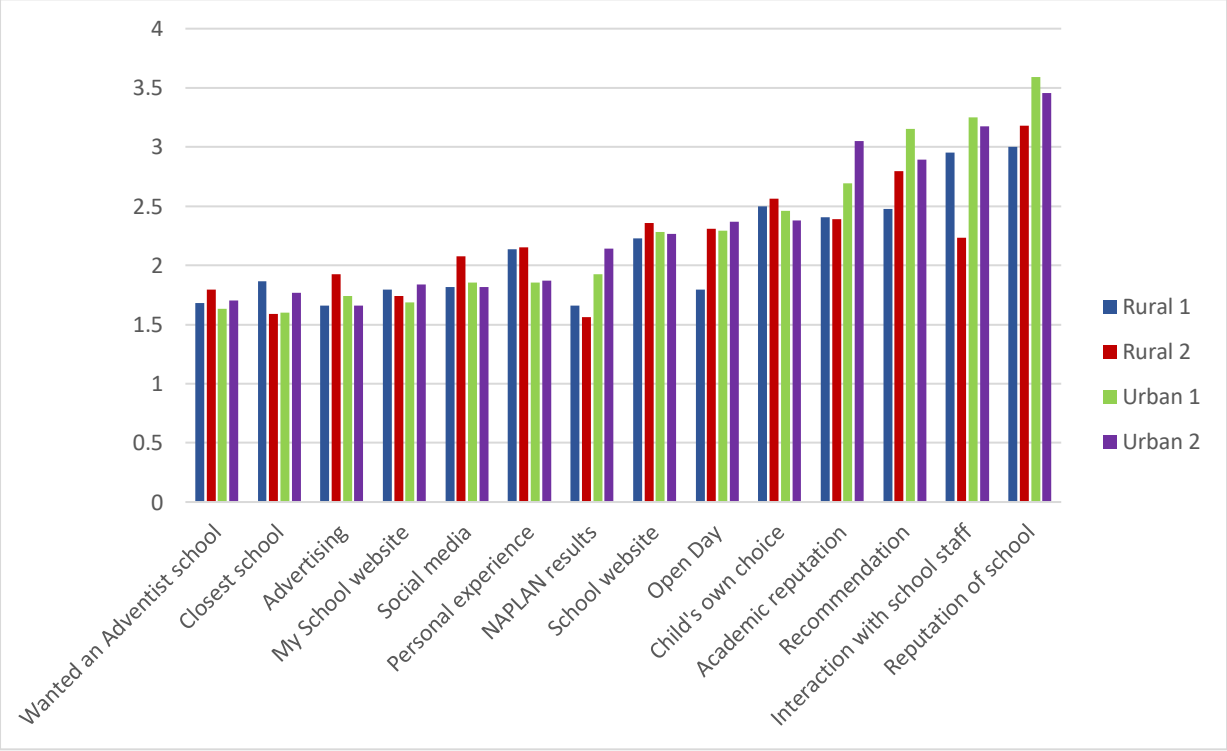


Figure 4. 15

Sources of Information: School Comparison Data, Mean of Responses

The Sources of Information data was further collated and data from both urban schools and both rural schools were combined. Figure 4.16 illustrates this school type (urban versus rural) data comparison. Parents from rural schools considered the first six factors, *Always intended to send my child to an Adventist school, Closest school, Advertising, My School website, Social media, Own or spouse's personal experience at the school*, even though they have relatively low means, more important than urban school parents. The *School website* and *Child's own choice* items were also more important sources of information for rural school parents than urban school parents. However, urban school parents relied more on *NAPLAN results, Open Days, Academic reputation, Recommendation from others, Interaction with school staff* and *Reputation of school in the community* more than rural school parents.

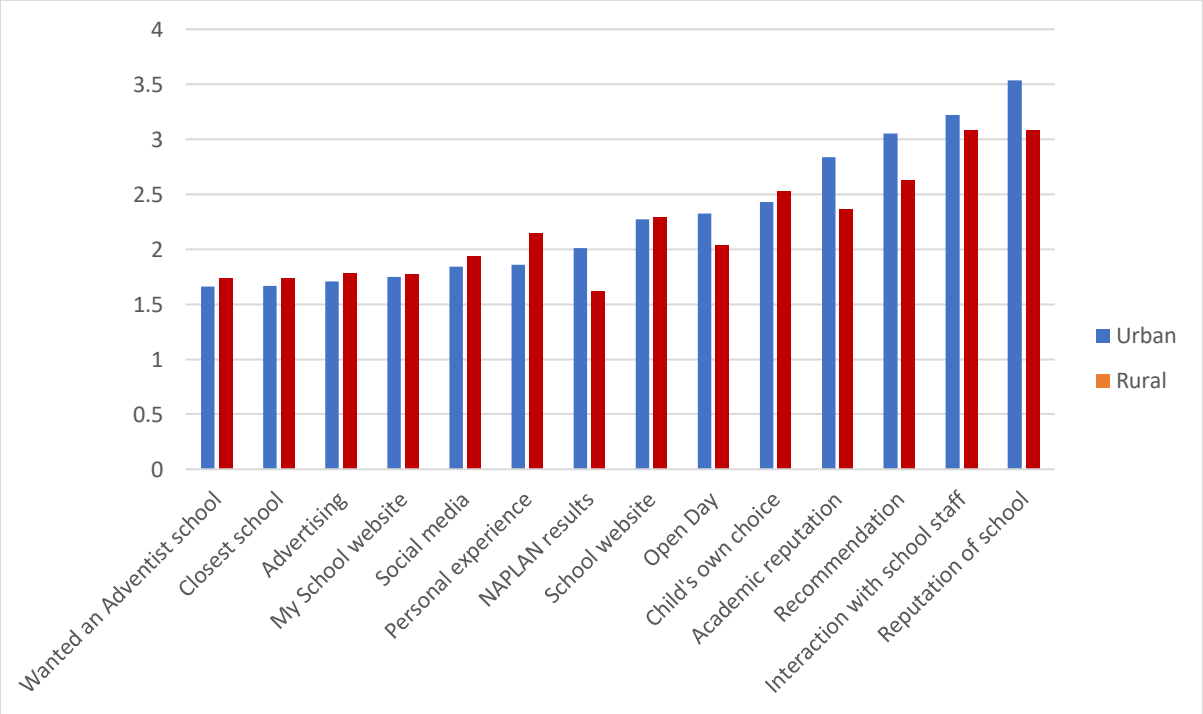


Figure 4. 16

Sources of Information: School Type Comparison Data, Mean of Responses

Parent Faith Affiliation Comparisons

Responses for sources of information were collated in faith affiliation groups (SDA faith affiliation, Other faith affiliation, Non-faith affiliation) and are presented in Figure 4.17.

Again, the same general trend is visible but with this comparison there were a number of significant differences identified. SDA faith affiliated parents rated *Always intended to send my child to an Adventist school* and *Own or spouse's personal experience at the school* significantly higher than did Other faith and Non-faith affiliated parents. This is not unusual as parents of a particular faith would generally support their own faith-based school system and many parents would be alumni of that faith-based school system. Interestingly, SDA faith-affiliated parents rank all other Sources of Information items lower than Other faith and Non-faith affiliated parents. The last four items, *Academic reputation, Recommendation from others, Interaction with school staff* and *Reputation of school in the community ranked highest,* following the same trend as the previous analyses.

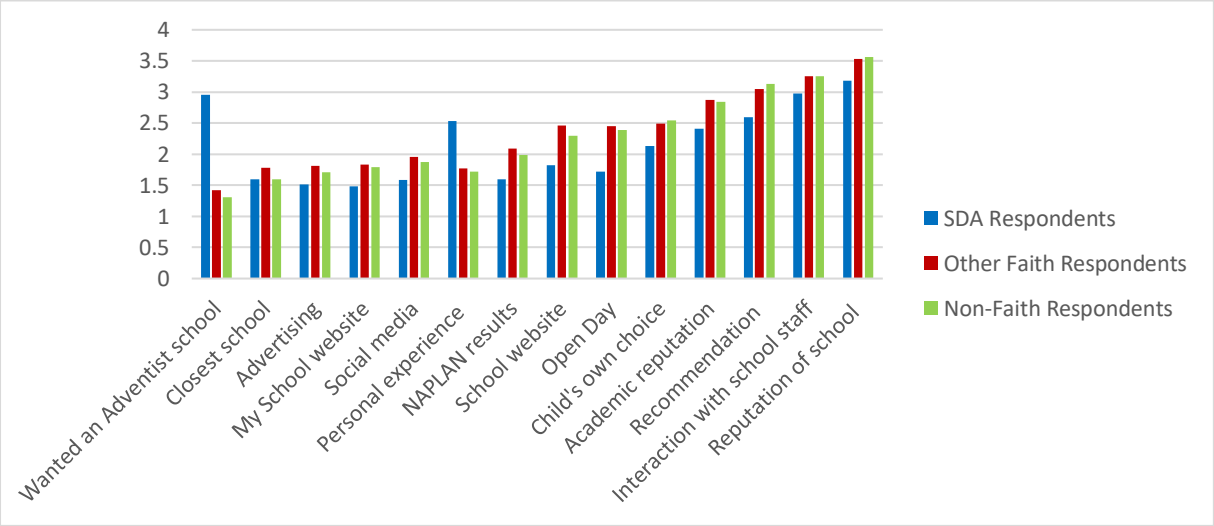


Figure 4. 17

Sources of Information: Parent Faith Affiliation Comparison Data, Mean of Responses

4.5.5.2 Summary of Sources of Information

Generally, for all comparisons, combined data, all schools combined, school types and faith affiliation, the trends outlining the importance of school information sources in the school decision-making process are similar following the lowest to highest means: *Always intended to send my child to an Adventist School, Closest school, Advertising, My School website, Social media, Own or Spouses experience at the school, NAPLAN results, School website, Open Day, Child's own choice, Academic reputation, Recommendation from others, Interaction with school staff* and *Reputation of school in the community.* However, the trend

revealed that only the last four sources of information generated a mean response greater than 2.5, indicating that the majority of parents perceived these sources to be very important or extremely important.

In relation to Urban and Rural school comparisons, urban school parents rated the NAPLAN results, Open Days, Academic reputation, Recommendation from others, Interaction with school staff and Reputation of school in the community higher than rural school parents when considering sources of information in their school decision-making process.

However, this trend, not unexpectedly, changed significantly for SDA parents who always intended to send their children to an Adventist school, followed closely by SDA parents' own or spouse's personal experience at the school, most likely as alumni. The ranking of the source *Always intended to send my child to an Adventist School* for the SDA parents was not the lowest ranked item as it was for the Other Faith and Non-faith affiliated parents but was as high as the last four sources, *Academic reputation, Recommendation from others, Interaction with school staff* and *Reputation of school in the community.* With a response mean greater than 2.5 this indicated that the majority of parents in the SDA faith community rated this as very important or extremely important. For the *Own or Spouses experience at the school* source the SDA parent community also rated this above the Other Faith and Non-faith affiliated parents generating a mean greater than 2.5, but less than the *Always intended to send my child to an Adventist School* source. Furthermore, the SDA parent community rated all information sources, apart from the two identified previously, lower than the Other Faith and Non-faith affiliated parents. For the majority of Sources of Information factors, Other Faith parents rate them higher than Non-faith parents.

4.5 Summary

This chapter provided an in-depth exploration of Phase One of this research: the quantitative data, results and analysis. Comprehensive analyses of numerical data were completed to present frequencies, the relationships between items and scales, and present variations between respondent groups and contexts. 33 school choice items from the survey were reduced to five conceptual school choice factors using Factor Analysis. These five school choice factors were: Context of School, Faith-based Characteristics, School Structure Characteristics, Academic Program/Profile, and Student Interaction.

Firstly, data, results and analysis were presented from the survey in relation to school choice decisions of parents when considering an ideal school. Secondly, data, results and analysis were presented in relation to parental school choice decisions of their current school. Thirdly, data comparisons were made between ideal school choice and current school choice. Data comparisons were also made between the different faith-affiliation of parents and their urban or rural location. Finally, data, results and analysis were presented in relation to the importance parents placed on the sources of information parents used that were influential in their decision to send their child to their current school. Detailed summaries of all the resultant research have been provided in the respective sections within this chapter.

The following chapter, Chapter 5: Qualitative Data, Results and Analysis, presents the detailed research findings from the interviews that were conducted with parents from the four SDA faith-based schools included in this study.

CHAPTER 5: QUALITATIVE DATA, RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

5.1 Introduction

Chapter 4 discussed the quantitative data, results and provided a detailed analysis. Chapter 5 will now discuss Phase Two, the qualitative component of this research exploring factors that influenced parents when choosing a faith-based school for their children. The data, results and analysis will be presented.

In the qualitative phase, the research explored the multiple perspectives of participants in their school choice decision-making process. The results from the semi-structured interviews were significant in addressing the research question as well as the sub-questions that stem from the overarching question. This chapter will outline principal themes which emerged from the categories identified from saturated lines of inquiry using the constant comparative approach (Creswell, 2007). Although this research subscribes to the general principles of grounded theory, the view of Ezzy (2002) is shared by this researcher noting that useful qualitative research does not depend on following strict processes but from an understanding of the perceptions of the participants:

> These traditions neither should be dismissed, nor should they confine completely what is possible. Rather, qualitative research continually builds and rebuilds its practice and theory in response to an engagement with the world, data, experience, or an attempt to hear the voice of the 'other'. (p. 28)

It is also important to acknowledge participant context. This acknowledgement allows the researcher to understand the action-reaction of parental choice within the participants' own context. It is accepted that each parent is an individual that operates within a family context which operates within a faith or non-faith community. Each faith or non-faith community operates within a local community, which in this research focused on the urban or rural characteristics of the community. Beyond the rural and urban considerations lies the larger community of NSW and Australia where this research is solely based. Each of these contexts are not mutually exclusive and clearly each factor influences the others (see Figure 5.1). Parents make school choice decisions within these complex and interacting contexts. Figure 5.1, adapted from Corbin and Strauss (2015, p. 94), is a visual matrix of these complex and interacting contexts where parents make school choice decisions.

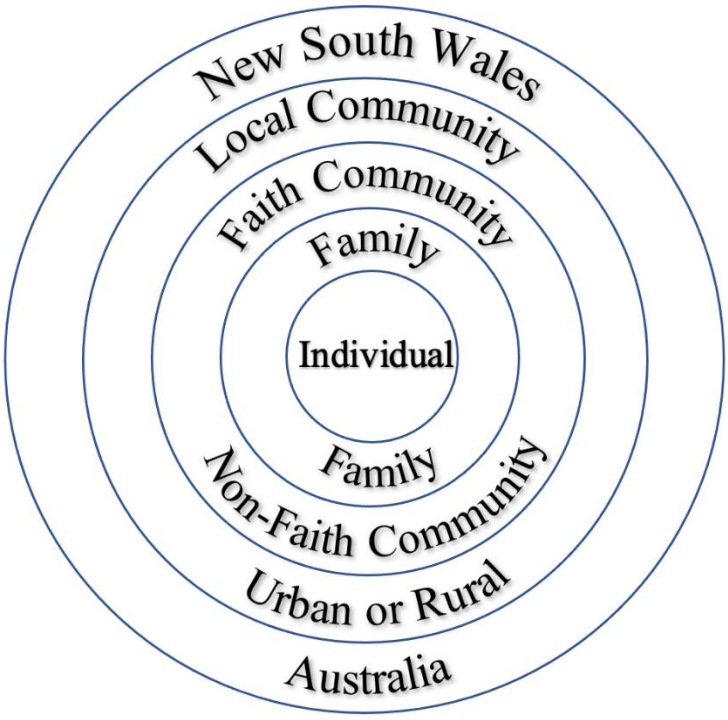


Figure 5. 1

Participant Context, adapted from Corbin and Strauss, 2015, p. 94

Apart from investigating the factors contributing to parental school choice this research also explored the sources of information that parents used to facilitate their school-choice decision.

5.2 Sample

This case study explored parental school choice within the context of Australian Seventh-day Adventist schools. The sample for this study consisted of four ASA schools situated within the NNSW Conference region. Two of the schools were located in urban centres, with approximately 800 - 1000 students each, and two were located in rural centres with approximately 200 - 550 students each.

During the Phase One survey parents were invited to participate in semi-structured interviews to discuss their school choice decisions. 196 survey participants indicated they were willing to participate in the interview process. This represented 25% of all survey respondents. Among the four schools represented in this study Urban School 1 contributed 58% of respondents who were willing to participate in the interview process which was the

highest of all schools. This relatively high interest rate could be related to the researcher's close connection with this school as a teacher as well as high student numbers. Urban School 2 contributed 34% of respondents who were willing to participate in the interview process, which could also be related to high student numbers. Rural School 1 and Rural School 2, schools with lower student numbers, contributed 3.5% and 4.5% respectively to the overall number of respondents willing to participate in the interview process.

The aim was to select approximately 5 parents from each school to participate in the interviews. Selection took place through purposeful sampling to ensure the desired characteristics of interviewees were represented. The researcher was able to select from the survey data parents from varied cultural backgrounds, genders, religions, and their children's year levels, see Table 5.1. Some participants had children in the primary or secondary school sector and others had children in both sectors. Five sets of parents were purposefully selected from each school to be interviewed with the exception of one school where six sets of parents were interviewed. The researcher selected up to three interviewees from each school that identified as SDA, at least one parent of another faith, Christian or other world religion, and at least one parent that identified as non-faith. Eight interviewees identified as members of the SDA church. Five interviewees who identified as 'other Christian' belonged to the Baptist, Anglican, Mormon, Christian and Protestant denominations. Three interviewees were from other world faiths, specifically Hindu, Muslim and Jewish. Five interviewees had a non-faith background. The combined total of twenty-one parent interviews were conducted which is an adequate sample for the qualitative stage of this research as qualitative investigations tend to generate a large amount of data (Bryman, 2012; Charmaz, 2006; Patton, 2002).

Table 5.1 outlines the respective characteristics of each set of parents from the four sample schools. These characteristics include the gender of the participant, the year level of their children, their faith affiliation and the pseudonym attributed to them. Parents have been given a pseudonym to protect their identity and ensure confidentiality yet the pseudonym would still provide personalised data.

Table 5. 1

Parent Characteristics

Parent Gender	Year Level	Faith Affiliation	Parent Pseudonym
Urban School 1			
Female	4, 7	Baptist	Amanda
Female	4, 6	Anglican	Jennifer
Female	6, 7	Non-faith	Susan
Male	8, 11	SDA	Andrew
Male	10	SDA	Bailey
Urban School 2			
Female	5, 8, 10	SDA	Kelly
Male	P-K	Non-faith	Shaun
Female	8, 10	Mormon	Julia
Female	P-K, 6, 9	Muslim	Amira
Female	8	Jewish	Naomi
Male	5, 7	SDA	James (Indigenous)
Rural School 1			
Female	K	Non-faith	Megan
Female	3, 5	Protestant	Abigail
Male	K	Hindu	Naveen
Male	6, 8, 10	SDA	Gavin
Female	4, 5, 6	Christian	Melanie (Indigenous)
Rural School 2			
Female	2	Non-faith	Amber
Female	5, 9, 10	Non-faith	Brianna
Female	8, 9	SDA	Sarah
Male & Female	6, 8	SDA	Stewart & Emma
Male (grandparent/familial link)	K-12	SDA	Brian (Indigenous)

5.3 Data Analysis Procedures

The interviews were conducted on-site at each of the four schools in a designated interview room. Covid-19 safe practices were stringently followed. These included: hand-sanitiser available for personal use, appropriate social distancing when conducting

interviews, the researcher sanitised pens for the use of each parent when signing consent forms and the table and chairs were sanitised with wipes between each interview. Each interview was recorded on the researcher's iPhone 10 and transcribed using the Word Dictate transcription facility. Each transcript was checked for accuracy against the audio recording and any errors were corrected. Each transcript was printed out and compiled into a folder with sections labelled Urban School 1, Urban School 2, Rural School 1 and Rural School 2. In the initial stages of qualitative analysis phase the researcher conducted open coding analysis. The researcher carefully read each transcript and created initial notes within the margins of each transcript. The tools of grounded theory were used to code data (Charmaz, 2006). Each line was coded manually and similarities were identified intra-transcript and inter-transcript. Line by line analysis enabled the identification of broad codes to emerge from the text.

Several computer programs are available to assist in analysing data which ease the mechanical task of writing codes. The NVivo 12 program was used in this research to assist in coding data. Each transcript was uploaded and stored in the NVivo 12 program. Bryman (2012) states that "the computer takes over the physical task of writing marginal codes… cutting out all chunks of text relating to a code, and pasting them together" (p. 591). The researcher still conducted the coding and categorising of the transcripts while the NVivo 12 program provided useful storage of data and ease of accessing codes (Creswell, 2007):

> NVivo helps analyze, manage, shape, and analyze qualitative data. Its streamlined look makes it easy to use. It provides security by storing the database and files together in a single file, it enables a researcher to use multiple languages, it has a merge function or team research, and it enables the researcher to easily manipulate the data and conduct searches. Further, it can display graphically the codes and categories. (p. 167)

The mind-mapping facility and word count query option of NVivo 12 were used to help identify codes from the data. Relationships between codes were identified and any codes that were deemed to be related were placed into categories. A number of themes emerged from the process of collating categories. Each of these themes provided a deeper and richer understanding of the complexity of reasons for parents choosing the sample SDA schools for their children.

After completing 21 semi-structured interviews and analysing the interviews in stages, the researcher was satisfied that no further information in relation to the codes and emerging themes appeared to be forthcoming. Therefore, the researcher deemed that

saturation had been reached on theoretical grounds based on the continuous collection and analysis of the data.

A number of dominant themes materialised from this process that related significantly to parents' decision-making process. These themes were repeatedly re-visited with reference to the data and explored in conjunction with observation and memos. The nature of and interrelatedness of these themes are expanded upon in Figure 2 Decision-making Model and Figure 3 Sources of Information model.

5.4 Decision-Making Model

During the interview process it became clear that parents carefully considered their school options and their reasons for the final choice of school were complex and based on many factors. The parent interviews identified several factors that interact with each other in various ways and finally contributed to the school choice decisions they made pertaining to the particular SDA school they had chosen for their child. The analysis of the parent interview data identified that school choice decisions for parents consisted of four distinct stages: Stage 1 – 'Parents decide they want a non-government school', Stage 2 – 'Parents consider Contextual School Factors'; Stage 3 – Parents consider Contextual Personal Factors' and the final synthesis stage, Stage 4 – Decision is made. Within the respective stages, however, there was considerable interaction between a number of the stage factors. Furthermore, there were complex interactions between the various stages. Figure 5.2 is a visual representation of the four-stage decision-making model highlighting a number of feedback and interacting loops that depict the dynamic nature of the decision-making process.

The foundation of this research is embedded in the understanding that the parents at the selected schools wanted a non-government school education for their child, as indicated in Stage 1 of the model, 'Parents want a non-government school'. The researcher identified three specific groups of parents that were interviewed: some wanted an SDA school for their child, some wanted a Christian school for their child, and others wanted a non-government school (irrespective of it being a faith-based school) for their child. Their school choice decision was made reflecting one of these options.

Stage 2 in the decision-making process is titled 'Parents consider Contextual School Factors'. These are factors that reflect the nature of the school. The data indicated that there were five Contextual School Factors identified by the interviewees as being important in their school choice decision-making process: School Location, School Educational Options,

School Leadership and Community, School Facilities and Fee Affordability. Parents indicated that there were a set of conditions, a threshold, within each of these factors that were required for the school to be considered an option for their child.

Stage 3 in the decision-making process, ‘Parents consider Contextual Personal Factors’, identifies parents as gatekeepers of specific considerations as they relate to their children. Parents strongly articulated that they saw themselves as gatekeepers of family values, of their child’s well-being and of their child’s educational potential. Then, if parents perceived the school was supporting their values, prioritised the well-being of their child and focused on enabling their child to reach their potential (whatever that may be) in the educational arena, the school was considered an option for their child.

Stage 4 is the final destination of the decision-making process where the parent decision is made to enrol their child into their school of choice. All these stages, however, feed back to each other and between each other in a series of interacting loops. From a synthesis of Stages 1 – 3 parents make their final decision.

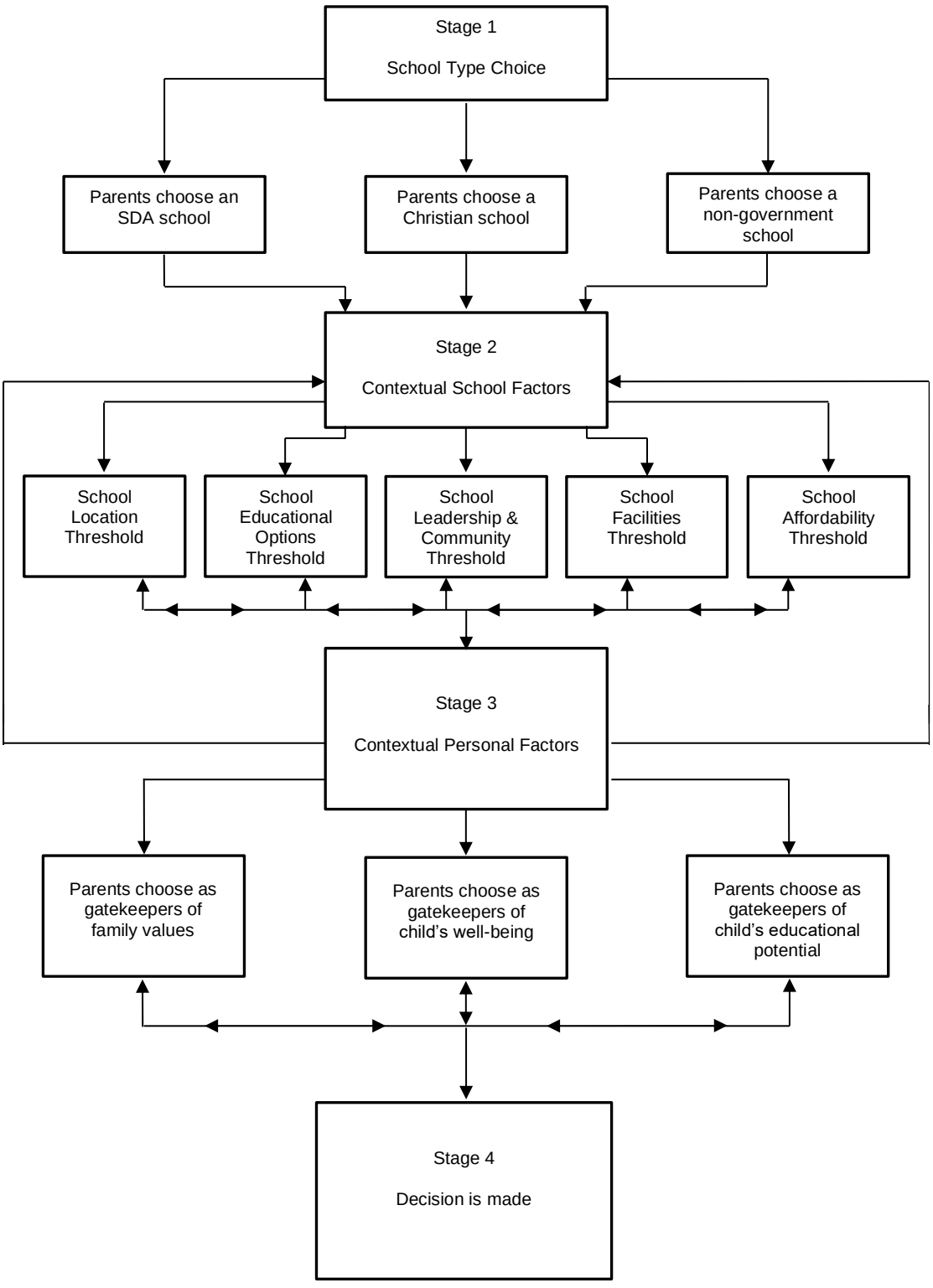


Figure 5. 2

School Choice Decision-Making Process

5.4.1 Stage 1 – School Type Choice

During the interview process it became apparent that parents chose the particular SDA school that they did because they wanted a non-government school for their child, as one parent stated, “I wanted him to go to a private school.” Some parents chose the school because of their affiliation with the SDA church; some chose it because they were familiar with Adventists or Adventist education even though they were not affiliated with the SDA church themselves. Some parents wanted a Christian school for their child because of their Christian faith affiliation and saw the SDA school as aligning well with their beliefs. Some parents wanted a non-government school as they were unhappy with the local government school and wanted a non-government school to educate their child.

5.4.1.1 Parents choose a Seventh-day Adventist school

Parents affiliated with the SDA church articulated that they specifically wanted an Adventist education for their child. Gavin, a parent with children at a rural school, had attended an Adventist school for his entire schooling, “I was brought up in the Adventist school system, both primary and high school.” However, his wife had attended government schools for her education. They had moved from a large capital city to a rural region for the lifestyle. Gavin and his wife always intended to send their children to an Adventist school and knew that there was an SDA school in the region. They did not want their children to attend public schools because of their reputation and whilst there were other non-government options available, they wanted to send their children to the local Adventist school,

> …we knew that some of the local schools, public schools, were not good places for kids to be. And… at that stage, there were a few options for private schooling. But we'd always looked at the Adventist system because we were Adventist.

Gavin, mentioned that one of the reasons for choosing an Adventist school was so that his sons would develop friendships with other Christian children, “So, we were hoping that Samuel would connect well and not only have a good school group, but also as good as a Christian group that he would find.” Sarah, at another rural school, moved from another large regional centre recently. Her children had attended an Adventist school there and she wanted her children to continue at an SDA school,

> … we used to live in [regional city] and we went to [Adventist school], which is the Adventist school there and we just loved everything about it. And so, when we were moving, we were moving where there was an Adventist school… But it's more important for me to be within this educational umbrella.

Sarah and her family ensured that wherever they moved to, there was an Adventist school. When asked in the interview whether they considered other schools in the area, Sarah stated emphatically that, “I probably would have home schooled” if none was available. Stewart and Emma both attended the interview at the same rural school as Sarah. They were members of the SDA church and had moved from an interstate capital city to this rural location. They too did not look at other school options and had always intended their children to attend the Adventist school, “We didn't look at any other schools here… Yeah, so no, we didn't, because I guess us being Adventists, we wanted there to be that, I guess, that Christian flavour in their schooling. “

Brian, an indigenous grandparent, who has a familial link to a number of the students, is also an SDA. He works at the school in the well-being space. He stated that many of his family attended the school in the past and his links to the school encouraged many of his extended family to attend. He explains,

> I’m a Dhanggati person… I’ve got an Adventist background way back to my grandmother, you know. So, I've been in the Adventist Church for a long time, you know… When I was asked to, to come work here, … it would encourage a lot of our folks to come here. And I know that there was a lot of my family line was here before I come in because, that's the way it is, you know. We Adventist, we claimed Adventist, so our family wanted to send their kids to an Adventist school. Which is still happening today. We got the family line, you know, my family history, our, our, it's, it's big. So, we got, we have second, third cousin, fourth cousin. But they're all brothers and sisters to us. You know we clan around brothers and sisters. So, if they see that identity there with somebody who, who they can recognise and look up to, they will simply send them into that school, you know.

The local Indigenous community sees a familial connection with Brian and therefore wants to send their children to the Adventist school with which he is affiliated.

Similar sentiments were expressed by Adventist parents at the two urban schools. Andrew, with two children at an urban school, reminisced that he attended government schools for much of his primary education, then an Adventist school for the rest of his schooling and all his wife’s education was in an Adventist school. He stated that, “I think for us it was always going to be an Adventist school.” He explained that it is important for a school to have the same belief system as themselves, “I think the Christian ethos and the Adventist ethos that I would like my kids being taught by teachers that have the same belief system as us, in the Adventist belief system.” Bailey, at the same urban school, mentioned that both he and his wife had attended Adventist schools. He stated that they too, had always

intended for their children to attend an Adventist school for their education, “I guess for us it was really there wasn't a lot of thought required because it was always going to be that way.”

Kelly, an alumnus of another urban school, has many memories of her school days and family connections with the school. Her father is also an alumnus of the school (at a previous campus) and was later closely involved with building the school on the new campus. She sees a very strong connection between herself and the school,

> So, it's a big part of who we are in our community… So, there was no question. We were just going to come here… I believe that being an Adventist and having an Adventist-based, um, education system that's also high quality. I mean, the two were just a no brainer.

Interestingly, James, an Adventist parent at the same school as Kelly, wasn’t completely sure that he would send his children to an Adventist school. His wife had home-schooled their children till they were in Grade 4. He explained that they wanted to be sure that they wanted an Adventist education for their sons, not because they were Adventists, but because Adventist education was the best option for their sons. He explained that they did not just want to follow their friends’ school choice,

> It was highly likely we were going to try and transition to an Adventist school, but it wasn't 100%. We really wanted to prove to ourselves that that was, it was, it was too easy to kind of almost just go into an Adventist school just because you’re Adventist yourself, and that's what, you know, a lot of your friends are doing… we should probably just make sure we're making the right decision for our children, not just you know, follow everybody else.

After much deliberation about the choice, James decided to send his children to the Adventist school.

Two non-SDA parents, one at each rural school, chose an SDA school because they were familiar with the Adventist community and therefore wanted their children to attend an Adventist school. Brianna, who has three children at a rural school, lived in a different urban region before moving to her current location. She was in contact with Adventists previously and liked their approach to Christianity and how they expressed their beliefs and wanted her children to be exposed to this in their education. She compared the modernity of Adventism to more traditional churches and schools,

> I have found… that my dealings with um, those that are Adventist or that identify as being Adventist that, aah, there’s um, it’s probably a bit more modern, perhaps some approach to being, um, to being Christian. And not saying it’s not strict or that there’s

> any um disrespect there but one of the concerns about going to perhaps a Catholic school, in particular, would be that there's a lot of um, pomp and fluff about set routines.

Abigail, at a different rural school, wanted to send her children to an Adventist school, as opposed to another non-government school, "I prefer the Adventist style of education." She knows about Adventism but does not explain how she knows about the faith, "I understand the faith, the Adventist space, which is quite good. So, it was fine for us, yeah." She was educated in the Catholic school system and did not want the same experience for her children. She discussed her school experience in the context of rigidity and conformity,

> I think with the Catholic system at the time there were lots of good teachers, but I found it quite rigid and it was sort of if you didn't conform to this certain style of learning, you just missed out. It doesn't matter if you caught up or not, you were just, it was just, we've finish that now. Now we're moving on. So, if someone didn't learn it you would just, you just missed out. So, I think that that was, at the time, it was more of that number system. You're just a number, you're not, we're not taking the time to actually get you to learn it to the best of your ability and then move on. So, that was my takeaway from those schools.

In summary, for Adventist parents, choosing an Adventist school for their children's education was an easy decision and one that many of them had committed to because of their faith affiliation to the Adventist church. However, there were non-SDA parents at the rural schools that specifically wanted an SDA school because of their familiarity with the Adventist community and not being content with other school options. This could be a rural school phenomenon because there may be greater opportunity for non-SDA parents to have significant interaction with SDA parents in a social context.

5.4.1.2 Parents choose a Christian school

A few parents discussed the fact that they wanted a Christian school for their children. Some parents chose the SDA school because many of the beliefs of the SDA church aligned with their own Christian beliefs. Others chose the school because of the school's ethos and values aligning with the parent's values, irrespective of the parent's religious affiliation.

Amanda, a parent with two children at one of the urban schools, is a practising Christian and was looking for a Christian school whose beliefs aligned with her family's beliefs and values. When asked if she was looking for a Christian school specifically and not just any non-government school, she emphatically replied, "Yeah!". She related the family

interview with the principal and how they made their priorities clear and how the school met their requirements by aligning with their Christian beliefs,

> … we talked about the fact that our faith is important to us and honouring God's important to us and that as Christians we believed that His Word is the ultimate way to inform our lives and guide us and that our salvation is in Jesus. And so, we felt like what the school believed, upheld those truths and that the teachers would honour that.

For Amanda it was even important to know the faith background of the teachers as she believed this would permeate through the whole school,

> And I asked him that question directly. Where do your staff come from and what are their faiths? And yeah, he said predominately first from the Seventh-day Adventist Church, then from a Christian background and then if we couldn't find someone they'd be from someone who was a non-faith background. But really it was that was the priority and so. And yeah, that was a good testimony for us that it was faith in action at school. Amongst the staff, yeah.

It was important for Amanda that most staff had a Christian background so that these values would inform the school's pastoral care and ultimately how her children would be cared for.

Jennifer, at the same urban school, is a nominal Christian and recently moved her two children from another Christian school to this school. She also articulated that they were looking for a Christian school in particular, not a non-government school, “And our daughter is quite passionate about her Christian faith, so therefore she was keen to continue to go to school where that was able to be.”

Susan, who has two children in the same urban school as Amanda and Jennifer, comes from non-faith background. She moved from a large capital city and wanted a Christian school for her children rather than a large corporate non-government school. She recognises that Western society is based on Christian principles and wanted her children to understand these underpinnings of society. She believes that if her children understand Christianity and its values, then they will be better informed citizens and this will benefit them in life,

> I think the faith element helped guide the values and the principles in the community. But it was more those outcomes that I liked rather than the Christianity itself or the Adventist faith itself. I haven’t bought my children up to, you know, prescribe to a particular faith. They can choose their own faith that they believe in whatever time that they wish. But I believe it’s important that they learn about other people’s faiths, and even if it’s not their own and that if they, if they choose Adventist and if they, they chose Christianity, then that is totally their decision. So, but they need to be exposed to it. You know, I want them to learn about it. I think so much of world and

> you know, like you see our politicians, they use Christian values to help guide them around the decisions that they make. You know you see people, quoting the Bible and sorts of things in all sorts of literary texts and forms and so, if you haven't ever been exposed to that you're really kind of locked out of a lot of information and you know,

Shaun, at another urban school, was brought up in a Christian denomination but admitted to having no faith now. He wanted a Christian school for his son not for the teaching of Christian beliefs but for the principles that come from these beliefs,

> I was brought up in a Church of England family. However, I don't practice faith now. The things we were looking for were mostly the not the beliefs, but the ethos around, you know, being kind, looking after people, love thy neighbour. All those kind of things for us were the reasons we chose a faith-based school, even though we weren't faith-based, uumm, because we knew those would be taught. So, the principles of what we wanted our kids to grow up as…

Naveen, who is Hindu, has a daughter in Kindy at a rural school. He was unaware of the SDA faith and could not remember the church's name during the interview. He was interested in a school that would teach his daughter about God,

> As far as the religion is concerned, like we, we were not even aware of what it is. In India we only are aware of Hindus, Christian and you know other religions. What I do know how it is, like I said, like I don't even know the name of that one that you just said… Seventh-day Adventist. So, that I was not even aware of that, but like that doesn't make a big difference to us like as Hindus. We're very liberal, as long as she's at [a Christian school], at least she's learning about the God…

Amber, at another rural school, was brought up in a Christian faith, attended a Christian school but now identifies as non-faith. However, her daughter in Grade 2 attends church with her grandparents and enjoys going, "She also goes to church along with my parents sometimes and she's really involved in that and loves being involved in the church…" Amber's school choice decision revolved around her own Christian upbringing and wanting a supportive Christian school environment for her daughter who has been impacted by her parent's divorce,

> I think a big thing for my daughter is, at the moment, is the Christian faith is really supporting her mentally. When her father and I split it was quite a tumultuous time for her and she went through quite a lot of trauma… Um, she has a lot of anxiety and that kind of thing. Um, and so, because she was so comfortable going to church and she felt really supported going to church and everything, I thought it was a really good opportunity to send her to another really supportive environment, especially of a faith she really believes in, feels comfortable in, feels like she's nurtured here.

In summary, it was perceived by the parents who chose their respective SDA school because it was a Christian school that ensured that the staff had a Christian orientation and Christian beliefs and values were promoted.

5.4.1.3 Parents choose a non-government school

A number of parents were looking for a non-government school for their children for a variety of reasons. Some wanted to avoid government schools and their perceived issues, some wanted a quality education that they believed could not be found in government schools. Some parents did not articulate reasons why, only that they were looking at other non-government schools.

Naomi, who has a daughter in an urban school, who subscribes to another world faith, considered both their local government school and a number of other non-government schools. After some research, they moved away from the local government high school as a school option,

> But the more we learned about that school, the more we decided that we could find something better for our children. So, we were, the more, the more research we did, the more likely we turned away from [the local] High school. So, we're pleased with how it all worked out in the end because… the more research we did, we realised that we didn't think that was the right fit for our family.

Naomi provided three reasons why she did not think the local government school was not suitable: low academic standard, low care or support of students and the school's lack of upkeep,

> So, from a scholastic point of view as well, we weren't very impressed. So, it was not only scholastic, it was not only care factor and it was also the, they didn't seem like a very well-kept school. All three of those combined put us off a little bit.

Their school choice process expanded to non-government schools, "Then we decided the public system isn't for us" and other schools were considered, "So, then we started looking at the private schools. We researched, I think, about three or four different private schools. And we did go on two other private school visits." The family then settled on this urban SDA school.

Julia, at the same urban school, is affiliated with another Christian denomination and was not necessarily looking for an Adventist school but was not happy with the non-government school her son was at. Her son, suffering from Depression, was struggling at the

government school he was attending and eventually the family withdrew him and looked for non-government options. They considered the local Catholic school as well as the region's Grammar School. Neither of these options seemed appropriate, they "didn't feel right". However, when a church friend mentioned this urban school and how happy she was with their decision to send their children here, Julia decided to investigate it and after interviews with the principal both of her sons now attend the school,

> Well, another friend came here and she was really happy so I said I'll try… I researched it first and I really liked what the culture was. And I know a little bit of Seventh-day Adventism and lovely. They believe in God and … I thought I'll give it ago.

Amira's children attended the local Grammar School and she had not intended to change schools. However, she was impressed with the principal's response to the local Muslim community after the Christchurch mosque massacre. Her three children now attend the same urban school as Naomi and Julia after the inclusiveness shown to the Muslim community.

Two parents from the same rural school made their school choice decision based on the desire for their children to attend a non-government school. Megan, a non-faith parent, was not against a government school, per se, but didn't want the negative elements of a government school, "I'm not opposed to government schools in any way. What I didn't want is the bullying and I didn't want him getting lost in a nameless system…" At that point she decided to search for a non-government school that would provide her son with the type of education she wanted for him, "I wanted him to go to a private school but I wasn't, I didn't know if there was one that was the right match in town." She chose this school when they moved into the area and the school was at the end of the street,

> So, the primary reason I chose this school, wasn't even on my radar, was we bought a house two doors down… yeah, so we'd never heard of [this school]. This is exactly the kind of school that I'm looking for. How lucky we are that we found it when we moved here.

Melanie, an Indigenous foster parent, needed a school that offered after-school care. The local government school lost it's after-school care facility where her children were enrolled. Melanie needed the availability of after-school care to continue working full-time. She looked at other government schools but was unable to enrol her children as they were not zoned for these schools. Melanie's only solution was finding a non-government school that

offered this service. Weighing up all her options and needs, Melanie chose this rural SDA school to educate all her children,

> So, I've been looking at [this school] for a long time wondering if it was a really good fit for him for high school anyway… and so I decided that given I had, I had almost in my mind cemented that I wanted to bring, use this as a high school, I decided I would bring all the children here.

In summary, parents chose their respective school because it was a non-government school and they perceived that the SDA school offered, when compared to alternate schools, quality education, higher academic standards, greater care and support and superior physical environments. Further, parents from other world faiths chose the school because they felt it was inclusive and promoted universal values that resonated with their values.

5.4.1.4 Stage 1 Summation

The data relating to Stage 1 highlights that the faith affiliation of parents could have an influence on the initial steps in the decision-making process. The SDA parent community mostly chose the SDA school because it was an Adventist school and culturally it supported their belief system. Parents with a Christian faith affiliation mostly chose the SDA school because it aligned with many of their own Christian beliefs and values. Parents with other world faith affiliations chose the respective SDA school because of its acceptance of other faith traditions and underpinned many values related to their own worldview. Parents who did not identify with any faith group chose their respective SDA school because of its perceived emphasis on quality education. It appears that the rural environment provided greater opportunity for SDA parents to interact with the broader community, resulting in familiarity with the SDA school system. This familiarity was a factor in some rural parents choosing the respective SDA school. This did not appear to be a factor of urban school parents in their school choice.

5.4.2 Stage 2 – Contextual School Factors

For parents there was a clear threshold for the respective ‘Contextual School Factors’ that would affect whether their child attended that school or not. Parents searched for certain educational factors that they deemed necessary or preferable. These factors consisted of: School Location Threshold, School Educational Options Threshold, School Leadership & Community Threshold, School Facilities Threshold and School Affordability Threshold. The data, however, show that the threshold for these factors was fluid and dynamic, and the

perception of the quality of a factor would often impact the determination of the threshold of the other factors. These factors are now considered individually in detail.

5.4.2.1 School Location Threshold

During the interview process parents mentioned location and others mentioned proximity. It became evident that parents used these terms interchangeably and generally in the context of the school's distance from home. Many parents reported that the location of the school was an important factor in their decision. For many parents being close to the school was a priority and numerous parents commented on the convenience of a quick commute to and from school.

Amira, a parent with three children in primary and secondary school, noted that the close proximity of school to home was valued, "…it's the proximity to where we live… It's, it's very close. It's 10 minutes from here." Shaun, who has a son in Kindy, chose the school because it was close to home, "We live not too far away from here, so the convenience was, was one thing [for choosing the school] …"

Susan also shared that the family moved from a state capital city to another urban area. She was very clear that they had chosen the school first and then bought the house because of its close proximity to the school,

> So, I knew that that was going to be the school and then I was like, you know what? There's this great house over in [suburb] where they're going to want me to come and pick them up all the time. They're gonna have to catch the bus late, because I need them to be independent, so. Or I can pick this house, and they could just walk 10 minutes to school and 10 minutes back and I don't have to worry about it and that freedom and that autonomy that comes from being able to do that was a real selling point for us… So, we worked out that just for convenience that we should be buying a house close to the school that we'd already picked.

The actual distance which was considered to be an appropriate distance (threshold) was dependent upon a number of variables: age of child, the nature of the community (rural/urban) and the faith affiliation of the parents.

For those parents whose children were in primary school, particularly Kindy, this threshold was significantly less than for parents with secondary school-aged children. For parents with younger children the preferred commute from home to school was around 15 minutes. For parents of secondary school students, however, a 30-minute commute was deemed appropriate. Megan, with a daughter in Kindy, chose the school because it was only a

few doors down from their house. When they purchased their house they did not know that the school was there,

> So, the primary reason I chose this school, it wasn't even on my radar, was we bought a house two doors down… And he can walk to school every day and that really, you know, if he's got after school activities, it's never going to be, No, I can't take you. We've got a blended family of four children. It was never going to be limitations on what he could get involved with at school. So, location was huge.

Naveen, whose daughter is in Kindy, values the school's close proximity to their home, "…it is very close to our home. It's only 800 metres from home, so it is easy for us…That was the main thing, is like, close to home." For Jennifer, who has two children in primary, being close to the school was also important, "…proximity to home was another key feature". Proximity was also a positive factor for Kelly, with three children in both the primary and secondary sectors, "So, to come here and… have it in close proximity so you didn't have to drive ages to get there… it was just so much easier."

Andrew, who has two children in secondary school shared that their family toys with the idea of moving houses but has resisted because of the location of the school. He also implied that his threshold value is less than 20 or 30 minutes, but notes that other parents are willing to commute up to half an hour to school,

> It's just and we've, we've sort of, we keep looking all the time. We all like looking at houses but we've never found anything that we would move to from… We're a kilometre from the school. And I think that's probably been a major reason why we haven't moved is because of the location. So, for us, we've got friends that are 20, 30 minutes away and it just wouldn't work for us, having our kids, how they are, forgetting things, that sort of thing.

Susan, who has children in upper primary school and the secondary school, bought their house to be in close proximity but with the future in mind, to give her children the autonomy of walking to school on their own when they are older, "I think that as you get older and as teenagers grow, to be able to give them that autonomy, to be able to go to the shops after school and meet with their friends." Further in the interview she added that extra-curricular activities would be more accessible if they lived near the school and her children are not reliant on her driving them to activities,

> So, I work full time, got a baby. You know, I've got two kids who are soon to be teenagers. I'm, and we know that with teenagers comes after-school activities and sports and friends, like that stuff. And quite frankly, I don't want to be mum's taxi for the rest of my life, and I want them to have freedom and autonomy.

Parents from both urban and rural schools mentioned location and important factors in school choice. It is interesting to note that rural parents were generally willing to increase the commute time compared to urban parents. This is most likely due to limited non-government school options in rural areas. Sarah lives in a rural region which is about one hour bus drive from the school she chose for her two secondary school-aged children. She does imply that one hour is close to her threshold,

> The boys actually go on the bus… It's about an hour. They do a full-time job kind of thing. They get off the bus at ten to five… I don't like the distance and I don't like how much they are traveling and how much they're on the bus.

Stewart and Emma, parents of two children in a rural school, had limited choices of schools in their area but still had a commute threshold of just under one hour. Emma stated, "We live 15 minutes inland… We didn't think to do [alternate school] because, you know, 15 minutes here or take nearly an hour for them traveling and stuff to go to [alternate school]."

The data also indicated that parents with different faith affiliations had varying proximity thresholds. Seventh-day Adventist parents were willing to extend the commute threshold to ensure that their children attended an Adventist school. Sarah, an Adventist parent, does not particularly like the long commute for her children but is willing to travel the distance so her secondary school-aged children have an Adventist education and feel a part of that community,

> I don't like the distance and I don't like how much they are traveling and how much they're on the bus. But it's more important for me to be within this educational umbrella, what Adventist education and community offers as a whole.

It is interesting to note that Sarah found the distance to school difficult because of her desire to link with the school community. She lamented that the distance from home limits her involvement at school,

> And I think that's where my struggle is, with the distances, because I'm used to being in the Home and School, being in the canteen, being very involved, and because I'm like in a new place not involved and I've lost my control a little bit maybe. And I'm just going, OK, see you later and I just trust that everything's OK…

Gavin, an Adventist parent who made a conscious choice to move to a rural area from an urban location also chose to live close to the school to ensure that his three children in the primary and secondary sector, avoided a long commute that he experienced when he went to school. Gavin inferred that his threshold for location is much less than 40 minutes,

> When I went to a private school I actually went from where I lived and it was, when I was in Years 11 and 12, it was a 40-minute travel, 40 plus minute travel by train to get to school. They [his children] haven't had that problem here… If you've got that long, um, travel time before and. After school you're taking away from… the kids, or the child's development in relation to being able to do their homework and do extra study and … how tired they would be after they got to school. Or like when they have to leave to go to school in the morning… So, when we moved up here, we specifically moved so that we weren't that far away from this school.

In summary, it is evident that school location was an important factor in choosing a school for their children, but the threshold was not consistent among the parents interviewed. Some families were fortunate to live close to the school, up to 15 minutes' drive, and the commute was below their perceived threshold. It is noted that the magnitude of the threshold was influenced by the age of the child, whether the school was in an urban or rural region and the faith affiliation of the parent. In general, the younger the child the shorter the preferred commute; usually less than 20 minutes for primary-aged students and around 30 minutes for secondary students. The rural parents were willing to extend the commute time and distance. Adventist parents either bought a home close to an Adventist school or were willing to extend the commute further to ensure their children experienced an Adventist education.

5.4.2.2 School Educational Options Threshold

Many parents interviewed referred to a number of educational options in order for the school to be considered in the choice process. Parents looked for certain educational options and if the school offered these options to an appropriate level, that is, it was above the threshold, the school was considered. For some parents important features that convinced them of their school of choice were: that it offered a pre-Kindy option, K to Year 12 school, a co-educational school and the size of the school also had a bearing. For other parents, aspects of the school such as an appropriate sport program, small class sizes, a sufficient range of subjects offered, inclusion of project-based learning, and camps were all part of the school educational options components that generate a reasonable threshold.

Pre-Kindy – Year 12

A number of parents wanted a school that catered to the idea that their children would stay at the same school for their entire education, from Pre-Kindy or Kindy to Year 12. For Susan, who had recently moved to the area with her family, this factor was particularly appealing to her two children and the family chose their school based on this threshold value,

> They really liked the continuing from Kindergarten right the way through, that they wouldn't have to go through a change a second time. So that was the real, the real seller for the kids.

It was clear that her children did not want to change schools again, as they had recently moved from a state capital city to another urban location. Another parent, Sarah, who has two children at a rural school clearly articulated that K-12 was a priority, "We just wanted a school that went all the way through from Pre–Kindy to Year 12." Abigail, who has two children in the primary years of a rural school stated, "Yeah, that's [K-12] important. Especially the Pre-Kindy, that was another element that, like because we want them all to be in the same school from an early age." Megan associated the K-12 continuum of the rural school her son attends as contributing to his sense of belonging, "K to 12, I really liked the K to 12 aspect. I liked that this would be where he would feel that he belonged. Forever."

Co-educational School

The desire for a co-educational school was an important school offering for one parent, Susan, who was intent that the urban school her children attend is a co-educational school. The importance of this Contextual School Factor was evident in Susan's interview as she strongly articulated why this had a threshold value. For Susan, it was about avoiding gender stereotypes that she believes are perpetuated in all girls' schools or all boys' schools,

> One of my prerequisites was co-ed. You know, it had to be co-ed education. The world is co-ed... you know feminism and toxic masculinity and all that sort of stuff, so much of it is reinforced through the split in the genders and having male schools and female schools is driving gendered stereotypes. So, we really didn't want to have kids to be in that. So that's why co-ed was super-duper important.

Size of the School

The size of the school was another factor identified by parents. Megan, who has a son in Kindy "liked that it's small". Abigail, at the same rural school, recognised that although being a small school, her children who are currently in primary school, would not be disadvantaged at a small school in their senior years,

> Um, I think even though it was a smaller school, it didn't mean you would miss out. So, when you're in Year 11 and if you wanted to study certain subjects, they would… collaborate with other schools … so even now you still benefit from the small [school size] … but you don't miss out on other things. That's good.

Sarah has two sons in high school and two daughters in primary school. Sarah and her family relocated to their current rural region from another rural region but attend a different

rural school to Megan and Abigail. However, the rural school they came from was much smaller than her current school and she explained that when they arrived at this school her daughters, both with anxiety, found this school too large,

> Even though this is a small school, we came from the school of about 150 kids from Pre-Kindy to Year 12 and the girls, it was too, even this size, was too much for them to cope with… It was purely the size. They, with their anxiety and stuff the group and crowds of people here were not a good fit for them.

Sarah's daughters attend a much smaller rural school while her sons attend this school. Naveen, a parent of a different rural school to Sarah, commented on the negative aspect of a small school, particularly in high school, and its impact on the range of subjects offered, "The only thing is … they have got less range of subjects … Of course, it's a smaller school."

Sport Program

As illustrated by Jennifer's interview response, the sport program can be an important feature that contributes to school choice. Jennifer, whose son attends an urban school, discussed the importance of sport to her son and how another school that they had considered did not meet their threshold level. She also mentions how difficult the COVID-19 year had been because sport had been cancelled for many months,

> we could start to see the sporting opportunities for [our son] so all the different teams that went out and played with other schools. So, they didn't seem to have that set up or not well enough at the other school. And yes, sport drives [our son] a lot so this year's been tough.

Small Class Sizes

Several parents discussed the value they placed on small class sizes. Susan, mentions that class sizes were an important consideration in their family school choice decisions, "smaller class sizes were important." Small class sizes were also seen as contributing to better educational outcomes. Susan, believes that large class sizes contribute to teachers not being able to provide quality teaching,

> The class sizes are so big and the demands are so large that the teachers can't possibly meet them. I think that we spend so much time judging poor teacher quality and teachers, as though it's their fault when it's purely environmental.

Abigail, a parent of two primary school-aged children mentions the benefits of small class sizes but doesn't provide any details about what these benefits include, "you still benefit from the small, small class sizes um, but you don't miss out on other things". Naveen, who

has a daughter in Kindy, commented on the small class size his daughter is in and how the teacher is able to manage students better than large class sizes,

> It's not too big. I think, they take a maximum of 20 students in one class, which is good. Like it is not overloaded to like 35 or 40 in one class. So, teachers personally know what the kids are doing.

However, Kelly, who had lived in the United States of America, compared USA non-government school class sizes to that of the urban school her son attends. She claimed that in their current school the class sizes are too large for a non-government school, "I do believe that teaching the class sizes, the amount of kids, are much too high." She implied that her commitment to Adventist education has adjusted her threshold of this Contextual School Factor and she is willing to accept class sizes that she deems too large,

> If I wasn't an Adventist and I didn't believe in the teachers so much, I would feel like the class sizes were way over the size that they should be. Because in the States private schools would have 20 or less and the class sizes are way too big.

Range of Subjects

Two parents considered the range of subjects as an important Contextual School Factor for their children. For Susan, this was clearly important and had a threshold value, especially for her son. She wanted subject outside of general academic subjects to cater for his needs and interests,

> With [son] it was more like subject choices, so it was, you know, great woodworking facilities and art facilities and music facilities and computing facilities, outside of your core sort of English, maths and science stuff, and I think that's the kind of stuff that he'll really get into when he's older. So, having that exposure that broader range of subjects for him. That was what I was looking for, for him.

Naveen, whose daughter is in Kindy at a rural school, understands that as a smaller school there are limited range of subjects available. This fact does not concern him while she is in primary school but he suggested that, depending on his daughter's interests and strengths later in secondary school, they may rethink their school choice,

> The only thing is like other subjects because they have got less range of subjects. Yeah, I'm not even sure as yet because only the kids those are studying in the higher classes. The parents have basically told us that the choice of subjects is a little bit less because the teachers are less. Of course, it's a smaller school.

For Naveen, the range of subjects clearly has a threshold limit for his daughter's future schooling and a further school choice decision will be made later in his daughter's education,

> We want them to introduce more teachers so that we have got a lot more choice of subjects and we don't have to change schools in the future. At the moment she is going good but I'm not sure what she's going to choose. And … when she needs to choose subjects, we want that she's got everything there available.

Project-based Learning

Project-based Learning is an element of Contextual School Factors that three parents of one particular rural school stated as an important aspect of their school choice. Amber, with a daughter in Grade 2 commented positively on the farm program her daughter is involved in,

> Last term they did Project-Based Learning and they did farm work which was really, really good and I think it's important that kids understand the process and you know, this is where eggs come from, this is where chickens come from, this is how we have to look after these animals so that they well. So yeah, I thought that was really cool.

Sarah, who has two sons at the same rural school as Amber, values the hands-on learning hubs that one of her secondary school-aged sons participates in,

> For me, in particular was the hands-on learning. Um, my oldest son has autism, like high functioning autism. My second son has what used to be called Asperger's, my older one in particular, is very hands on, is not built for the classroom. Really bright, really bored sitting down. So, being able to go and build things and try things and investigate things. It just was perfect for him, is perfect for him and coming to look at the grounds, it was set up so, almost like a really modern kind of University or TAFE, because you had your hubs everywhere, different learning hubs and it made me feel excited, made the kids feel excited to learn and that really made, yep, this is exactly where our kids need to be.

For Sarah especially, Project-based Learning is clearly important and has a threshold value where she articulates that “this is exactly where our kids need to be”.

Emma mentioned that robotics, usually a part of a project-based learning program, was a drawcard for her son, “robotics, which my son particularly enjoys. So yeah, that was a bit of a draw card for him.”

Naomi, at an urban school focused on the availability of the STEM program, a project-based learning approach specifically in the areas of science, technology, engineering and mathematics. This clearly had a threshold value for her school choice decision,

> Superior, that's why, that's probably the main reason we really were impressed when we went on the tour and we saw the Stem, the Stem area, which our daughter had an interest in STEM at the time. We were pretty impressed with that.

Camps

Amanda, with a daughter in primary school and a son in high school, focussed on the importance of the camps that were organised in the high school. The camps are run at the beginning of the school year to facilitate cohesiveness in the year group but also set a spiritual tone, which she valued,

> And the way the camps worked even, you know their camps are there at the beginning of the year to set the tone for Year 7 and to be strongly spiritual but to also see these as our expectations as a school.

In summary, the data analysis identified eight educational options that are clearly important to parents: a Pre-Kindy option, K to Year 12 school, a co-educational school, size of the school, appropriate sport program, small class sizes, a sufficient range of subjects offered, inclusion of project-based learning, and camps. Parents articulate that these factors have a threshold, but this threshold varied from parent to parent. There was some distinction between rural and urban parents in some school educational options. Rural parents articulated that they valued a smaller school for their children. Both rural and urban parents commented on the benefits of a small class size for learning outcomes. It seems that parents with children in both urban and rural schools valued the convenience of a school that catered for their child's entire schooling, from Pre-Kindy to Year 12. Only one parent from an urban school highlighted the importance for her family of a co-educational school; other parents were conspicuously silent about this factor. Some rural parents were very vocal about the size of the school their children attended and valued a smaller school. Both rural and urban parents commented on the benefits of a small class size for positive learning outcomes. The range of subjects and project-based learning was a focus for some parents but there was no significant distinction between parents of urban and rural schools. The availability of camps was a consideration raised by a parent in their school choice decision. There was no clear difference between parents with a faith affiliation and parents with no faith affiliation in any of the school educational options.

5.4.2.3 School Leadership and Community Threshold Level

A few parents identified positive school leadership as an important aspect of their school choice decision. Some parents discussed this leadership in terms of its strength, others noted the value of leaders who had vision for the future. A number of parents also valued a caring and inclusive school community, and they indicated that perceived school community

influenced their school choice decision. Some articulated the sense of community in broad terms such as the community 'feel' of the school, others valued parent involvement within the school community and the school's interaction with the wider community. Several parents commented on the cultural diversity that was evident in their school, others commented positively on the inclusiveness of students from all faiths and a few mentioned the inclusion and acknowledgement of the indigenous community.

Leadership

Parents commented on strong leadership that was evident at their choice of school and its influence on their decision-making. Jennifer, who has two children in an urban primary school, mentioned the leadership structure, its visibility and ability to guide the school in the future. This was an initial impression and it is implied that this supported her decision to send her children to the school,

> And so, when we came to [this] Adventist [school], I guess initially when we did the interview, we were quite happy with the strong leadership structure that they had. And a very visible leadership structure. And, yeah, so mainly that was our first impression. We wanted the school to have a really clear direction and that to be evident in, in the classroom as well.

Susan, at the same school, with a son in the high school and a daughter in the primary school, notes the school's strong leadership and that the school was strongly future-focused. She perceives that a non-government school has more autonomy in its goal-setting than a government school has and this flows on to a better learning environment for teachers and students,

> Well, you know, I work in strategy, like in building organisational strategy, and having that future focus for where the school is going to go was probably something that I think I picked up on and I think you don't get that in a public school. At the public school they just kind of get, they kinda know where they have to go and they do what they can with what they've got. Whereas that independence that the Adventist [school] has, where they can actually set where they want to go. They can set their future. They can manage their fiscal budget the way that they need to. I think that that probably yields a much better, probably a better working environment for the teachers.

Kelly, at another urban school, was very happy with the leadership and recognises that strong leadership provides the unifying factor in a complex school system, "…there needs to be somebody or some something, somebody pulling all those pieces together and I feel, I think the leadership at this school is so good…" Shaun, at the same school, appreciates

that strong leadership provides the necessary structure to a school, especially when there are problems, although he does not expand on what he means by problems,

> But there was this still, this understanding that they knew that there was a leadership team that sat above those teachers that they could go to with their concerns, umm, where things got fixed and that was probably one of the other key things as well, was that not everything is going to be perfect all the time, and I know that, and I think everyone knows that. But when you know that when it's not perfect you've got an outlet to explain how I don't think it's perfect because of XYZ and you know that they're going to listen to it. Then that was, that was good to know that there's a leadership structure that sits above, above the teachers, that does that.

It is interesting to note that no parents at any of the rural schools mentioned strong leadership as a factor that led them to choose their school.

Some parents connected good leadership with the school's vision for the future, which was appreciated in terms of the benefit this would have for their child's future education. Susan, with two children at an urban school, articulated that having a future vision, a plan, was a factor that contributed to her school choice decision, "the fact that there was a vision for the future and a and a plan for the school moving into the future. So those are sort of the indicators for me". For Shaun, at another urban school, planning for the future and delivering those plans in a timely manner was an indicator of the school's financial stability and important to him in the family's school choice decision. He compared the current school delivering the future plans to a previous school his son had attended where they did not see the promised plans come to fruition,

> It's obvious that the school is very financially savvy with the way that they run their books and you can see they spend well and that was big for me to know that James wasn't going to be in dilapidated, you know, whatever, you know, demountable school that he had been there for three years with the promise that there's a new building coming or whatever it might be. That was big for us to know that there was a financially, it seemed like a financially stable school.

During a school tour, Brianna was impressed with the principal's transparency in showing her the rural school's vision for the future. She noted that her children would benefit from these plans as they progressed through primary school into high school,

> He took us and the four kids for a walk around the school, talked about the future plan for the school. Like yes, we might only have these facilities now, but this is what we're working towards. He had shown us some plans and as I said, he's walking around the school saying that we'd like to do this and we'd like to do that… yes, there was lots of infrastructure that was coming but, and that was really great and that was

> something that we see this school working towards and as the kids would get into high school that more of those things would become available to them.

Community

An important factor in parental school choice decisions is the community feel of the school they are considering. Some parents attempted to articulate what 'community feel' meant to them or how they experienced it but had difficulty in clearly expressing their thoughts. Some parents mentioned community in the context of a Christian and Adventist community.

Jennifer, at urban school, expressed community feel in terms of parents gathering in the playground and the sense of community this generates. She also spoke of community feel in terms of her children being welcomed and encouraged to participate in activity days,

> I feel like there's more of a sense of community. I really like that you can gather in the playground after school and people seem to hang out there quite a lot. Um, and a lot more encouragement for kids to be involved in like sports days and swimming carnivals, and just in, generally, a more welcoming approach.

Susan, at the same urban school, described the school as "a nice community. You know, it just had a nice community." Bailey, also at the same urban school, noted that even though the school is larger than when his children started it still maintains a community feel, "A lot of kids there now, but there's still balancing that small community feel with a lot of kids." He also appreciated that the school prays for each family of the school during the year and that as a result he feels the school is closely connected with the family and maintains the small community feel,

> I love [how] every now and again I get this letter from the teachers saying, We're praying for your family this week, let us know if there's something on your heart that you would like to share. You wouldn't get that in another, you know, obviously a non-Christian School, so that's a nice touch. It's a nice way to be connected with the family and to have that small community feel.

Julia, at a different urban school, defined this sense of community in its friendliness, "everyone was friendly." Sarah, an Adventist parent at a rural school, glowed in her interview when elaborating on the school community and compared it to her previous experience with a non-government school,

> I have never felt so like I've belonged somewhere with a community of people, and I saw that with my kids as well. We had previously been in the local public school in Albury and just the disconnect and I actually, really can't put it into words. I've seen

> my children all feel like they finally fit somewhere. It's just priceless to me and I've felt like I finally fit in somewhere and I don't want to let that go.

She is also new to the Adventist church and revealed how she wanted to maintain that strong sense of community when they moved from another rural region to their current rural school. She also connected the concept of community with the notion of it being an Adventist community, "… the love that you get from an Adventist community, not coming from an Adventist background, we didn't want to lose that either" implying that this desire for a community drove her school choice decision.

Some parents indicated one characteristic of a great school community was the potential for parental involvement in school activities. Gavin explained how he and his wife could be involved with the school by accompanying students and parents on excursions. He saw this type of involvement as an important way to stay connected and both he and his wife enjoyed the experience,

> Oh, one of the things we did like about this school was um, … that parents can be involved… One of the other things I found really good and Liz found really good, was if they're going on excursions parents could come. So, parents could come along and help supervise the children.

Some parents describe a great school community as one that saw itself as part of, and contributing to, the wider community. Three parents from the same urban school articulated that they viewed the annual walk-through nativity dramatization open to the local community, Road to Bethlehem, as a positive example of school reaching out to the wider community. It is a free event for the public to journey through elaborate scenes and interact with the actors. Amanda saw the program as an extension of the school's Christian community reaching the wider community,

> Oh, we really like the Christmas experience. You know the [Road to Bethlehem]. Yeah, so it seemed like this is a school that's mission-minded, that they're actually outreaching to their community. And it was really evident that part of their goal is not just living Christian lives and loving, but actually helping kids come to a personal faith, but that that extended to the community so that we valued as well, too.

When asked what factors influenced Jennifer's decision to choose this school she implied that seeing the school during the walk-through nativity dramatisation helped cement their school choice decision,

> I guess, that [Road to Bethlehem] showcases the school grounds in itself. And I guess, as an outsider, we didn't particularly know that that was specific more so to the

> church. And so, I guess we felt that it was still a good representation of the school. And maybe, have a school that does work in partnership with the, with the church and to deliver something which is pretty incredible, and so that experience yeah, to us, was fairly amazing. And then the kids were straight away, like, we're going to be in Road to Bethlehem and they had that opportunity last year. So that was good.

Bailey concurs that Road to Bethlehem is an example of the school providing a program designed not just for the school community, to showcase the school, but provide something for the community at large, "I think Road To Bethlehem's been a good thing as well. That's been good for the community as being for people that don't know the school."

Gavin, a father of three boys at a rural school, comments positively on the school involvement in the wider community. He portrays the school as being intimately involved by helping and supporting the local community,

> Some of the things, the activities, they are not just happening for the school or by the students but for the community as well. So, whether it's some Carols by Candlelight at Christmas or it's Mother's Day or whatever, and they do other things like that… they're not isolating themselves, in a community that needs assistance, so they go out to, to retirement villages and things like that as well… They do Carols by Candlelight here at school and they invite the whole community to come along and … participate and the students … were able to perform for not only parents and teachers, but also for the community…

Parents also commented on how important seeing diversity was for their school choice process. Kelly, who has a blended family at an urban school, commented on the positive influence cultural diversity has on her young son's educational outcomes,

> The cultures that, aah, come in are motivated, hardworking. They know what it means to not have things, to have opportunities, and so when my son spends time with those kids, and he's friends with most of them, um, usually he makes friends with the kids that are from those diverse backgrounds, because just like them, he's a new person to this country. Those kids don't, they aren't allowed to have access to social media. They're made to study, they're made to embrace opportunities wherever they are, and they're enthusiastic to do it.

Shaun has a young son in Pre-Kindy at the same urban school as Kelly. He also has a younger adopted daughter, from overseas, who is not yet at school. During the interview he discussed the importance of cultural diversity at the school his daughter would attend, so that she would not be the only child from a different culture,

> Our daughter is adopted. So, we adopted her from Singapore. She's Chinese Malay. … Knowing that was actually my first question, was what's the, what's the cultural diversity in the group? Because we knew that we were going to send James to

> different school to Mia. Mia's, well, she's different, different skin colour, but yeah, but everything else is the same. The values are the same. All those kinds of things are the same… But knowing that she wouldn't be the only one here that was of different skin colour, different ethnicity, that was super important. Super, super important.

He further commented that he had seen evidence of segregation among students from varying cultures at a different school that he had considered. However, when his family had a school tour of the school he eventually selected for his children, he noticed that students of varying cultures and backgrounds were integrated,

> …at the other school there was segregation. You'd see kids of the same ethnicity going into little pockets and pockets and pockets, and that wasn't good enough. And when we came here there were kids of all different religions. Or I'm assuming religions but all different ethnicity playing together, running around together, right up to the seniors. So, I think there's a certain point in time where kids start, and unfortunately naturally make their own mind up about what is culturally important to them, whether it's in the good way towards non-racism or in a bad way towards racism. And to know when to see these kids in Years 10, 11 and 12 mixing very diversely here was huge.

For this parent, cultural diversity was a condition that had a threshold limit and because this school had a student body from diverse cultures it was chosen for his son and his daughter's future attendance. James, with two children at the same urban school, sees the cultural diversity of the school as a genuine representation of the region's wider community, "there is, representation, particularly in terms of different religions and obviously nationalities, obviously as well, which is wonderful. It's representative of, you know, who we are in real life."

Amber, at a rural school, also sees the positives of a culturally diverse school. She has a blended family with varied cultural backgrounds. She appreciated the cultural diversity of the school and its openness to families from diverse backgrounds, viewing it as positive that children experience different cultural traditions,

> I think having, um, different ethnicities within a school is really, really good. Culturally it opens kids up to different cultures, different traditions, you know, things like that. My, I have a son and his dad is Chinese Filipino and so my daughter doesn't really see a difference between her and her brother. That's her brother. That's not her half-brother. That's her brother. And you know she doesn't see any difference between her and him. I think it's good that this school supports a lot of kids from difficult backgrounds.

Brianna, at the same rural school as Amber, also values the diversity that is evident at their school. She observed, with interest, that parents from a vast range of backgrounds and experiences have chosen to send their children to this school,

> I was sitting there at one of the school fetes, probably about four or five years ago, and sitting there and looking around and going, there's people with tattoos and piercings. There's people that have got their shoulders covered and yeah, women who've got only their dress, goes to below their knees. There's people who've got lovely makeup on and then there's people here with dreadlocks. And looking around at the families and the kids, and it seemed, oh, I just remember really, like sitting there and going to my husband and in our discussion that you look around everyone here. It is so diverse, but the, the sense was every parent or guardian that is sending the kid here or children here want something better, that wants an education and more.

Several parents from both urban and rural schools mentioned that they were impressed with the school's inclusiveness of students from all faiths, even though it was clearly a Seventh-day Adventist Christian school. This factor cemented some parents' school choice decision, especially those from different faith backgrounds. Susan, at an urban school, expressed how inclusiveness was something that she was looking for in a school and not something she was willing to compromise on. Although she is non-faith-based now, she mentioned how she experienced her own religious background and how people were excluded on the basis of faith,

> I remember when I met with the principal and I had to, full disclosure, let him know what he was getting himself into by having our family being part of the community. You know, I work in diversity. You know that's my profession and it's about all religions, all races, all cultures. And you know, obviously not prescribing to anything and staying quite neutral in that space. But coming at it from a lens of inclusion and conscious inclusion, and I just really wanted to make sure 'cause I came from a Catholic background and I've experienced a lot of conscious exclusion through faith, through faith-based logic, which I abhorrently disagree with and so I just really wanted to check that when I came to the school… These are my absolute-like lock down tombstones that I just cannot budge on and he was like… we feel the same way and we welcome people of all faiths. We welcome people of all religions…

Julia, who has two boys at another urban high school also spoke highly of the religious inclusiveness of the school, "one thing that I like is that even though it's a Seventh-day Adventist school, they don't expect you to, like, they're open to other religions". As a practising Mormon, she appreciated this aspect of the school and feels accepted. She also valued that world faiths are taught at the school, "And I love that … they study a variety of religions, which I'm really happy about it, which is nice to know all the other religions."

Amira, at the same urban school as Julia, discussed, at length, how her Muslim community was included and accommodated at the school. She shared her personal experience of the respect and provisions made for her son and other Muslim students at the school, which contributed to their school choice,

> What we have found before was the respect and appreciation to the Muslim faith and the Muslim community. Respect to my son on the personal level, providing a prayer room for him allowing him to pray in the middle of the day. Respecting his family during, you know, the family nights or family meetings that has been done by [the school]. They always, there's a provided place for us too, if you want to pray or something like that. So, appreciation and respect was, is, the main issue for us.

She discussed how she originally only had one son at the school and the other was left at another school because of his strong friendship group. However, after the Christchurch, New Zealand, mosque massacre, she moved that son to this school. She compared the response of both principals to the event and then chose to send her second son the current urban school after the positive interaction by the principal of this school with the Muslim community after the massacre,

> But after the incidents of Christchurch [the principal] has shown us a lot of consideration and respect. He came to us in the mosque and he just mentioned that our kids, he just said in his own words that we're here for our kids, to support them and to support our family and to be honest that touched us a lot. Definitely. So, I felt like, that's the place I want my boys to be raised in, to feel that they are respected, faith is respected. Um, so I moved my other boy. On the other side, the other school didn't mention anything. The principal didn't mention anything. He almost wanted to cover up the incident. No one talked about it and, which was, you know, like two different stories. So, that has been, we were very affected by this, by his, by this move. So, I moved my other boy.

She continued to explain how the Muslim faith of the students is also respected in providing uniform options, especially for the modesty of the girls,

> …they respect the Muslim faith. One of our friends, she's wearing the hijab. So, they let her wear the hijab but not only let her, they made a special order for her on uniform shop so that she can get a long sleeve. So, there, this is really very appreciated. We really appreciate that.

The data indicated that parents also saw a school that acknowledged and included the Indigenous community as a school that had an appropriate inclusive school community. Three parents interviewed identified themselves as members of the Indigenous community. One parent was from an urban school and the other two parents were from two rural schools.

They all mentioned different aspects of how the respective school included and acknowledged the Indigenous community.

James, from an urban school, is from the Yuin clan. When he was considering the school for his son, he asked about the inclusion and acknowledgement of Indigenous students and their community. He was impressed with the honest response from the school that they haven't always done things well and are working towards a better relationship with the Indigenous community,

> I think, it was something that we made very clear when we, when we put our application in for the school and we did ask what that, what that meant and what would be, I suppose, what language was being used and, and I think that was an encouraging conversation because there was an honest answer to it… It was like, well, actually we could do better in that area. And particularly, the principal… who had come from [a rural school with a high Indigenous student enrolment], he had, was honest as well, and said look, I came from [that school]. I wish I did things a lot differently. We did a lot of good things. We're endeavouring to really delve into that much better and be much better.

James was also encouraged that he was invited to participate with other Indigenous parents at the school to provide feedback to the school on various issues, "We'd love to hear, you know, some feedback from your family on how we could do this better." James saw the positive outcome of this inclusiveness, which certainly impacted his positive decision about the school "I think that's probably the best thing that an Adventist school can be is a place of belonging for everybody, no matter who you are…"

Melanie, from a rural school, identifies her family as belonging to an Indigenous community. She is also a foster parent to four Indigenous children and stated that she was impressed with the number of Indigenous children at the school, and that they were clearly included and acknowledged. She opened up about the learning difficulties three of her foster children experience and she was explicitly looking for a school that was accepting of differences. She stated that this school met all the criteria she had for a school to accept her Indigenous foster children,

> So, the reason I brought the children here, they were going to our local public school, which was quite good, but I've been looking at this school for a long term, time anyway, because three of my children have foetal alcohol syndrome. And my oldest boy is due to go to high school and because he has problems with um, perhaps conceptualising things and with learning… I wanted a school that, that had strong belief systems in being kind and accepting of different people. Because I thought if that was the whole basis and leadership of the school, then he would be accepted for the good qualities that he has rather than people pick on him for things he can't do.

In summary, when choosing a school for their children, parents clearly appreciate strong leadership and a vision for the future of the school. Strong leadership was a particular focus of parents from urban schools. Parents see that this positive leadership will benefit their child over the years that the child is at the school. Many parents made their school choice decision based on the community feel of the school and parents with a faith affiliation noted their desire for a Christian or Adventist school community. A particularly salient discovery of the interviews was the school's desire and appreciation of cultural diversity. Parents from both urban and rural schools identified this as a positive aspect. Similarly, the inclusiveness of all faiths was a factor that many parents appreciated in their children's schools, especially as all schools within this study are of an SDA Christian faith. Further, the inclusion and acknowledgement of the Indigenous community in the schools was appreciated particularly by parents who identified as members of Indigenous Australians.

It should be noted that the perceptions of school leadership and school community were primarily formed from the interaction with the school principal and/or other senior administrators. For these parents school leadership and school community are significantly linked.

5.4.2.4 School Facilities Threshold Level

Many parents identified a threshold value that related to school facilities and resources. The interview process revealed that parents were looking for specific school facilities and resources that would validate their school choice. Some parents identified specific facilities, such as Home Economics kitchen, art facilities, science laboratories, sporting facilities, canteen, etc. Other parents used the term facilities and resources generically without identifying any specific aspect of the school. Some parents mentioned the canteen at their particular school in a favourable light and others mentioned the attractive school setting as a positive factor of school choice. There was a noticeable difference between parents of urban and rural schools in their discussion of facilities. Generally, parents whose children attended urban schools commented on the attractiveness of the buildings or layout of the school and well-maintained grounds while parents whose children attended rural schools often focused on the natural bush setting of the school.

Facilities & Resources

Amanda has two children in an urban school, one in the primary school and one in the high school. Amanda had a list of factors that influenced her in her school choice decision

and she chose the current school rather than another school because of the superior facilities and resources,

> We loved the resources that the school had on offer… So, we looked at another Christian School which was really rundown and we thought, well, what does that say about what, where the school's at? And how are they managing? Um, and yeah so, we liked what was on offer in terms of the physical space, the subject choices, the classroom, how well equipped each classroom was.

Jennifer, at the same urban school, was also impressed with the facilities and spoke highly of the sporting facilities, which suited her sporty son. When asked what influenced her to choose the school she stated, "…obviously seeing the facilities… once you get there and you see the facilities, particularly the Sports Complex because, then, considering that our son loves sport…"

Susan, who is also at the same school, focused on classroom facilities as being an important part of the decision process. During the family's school tour her two primary school-aged children were closely involved in the decision-making process,

> But then there's also like things like facilities, like access to facilities… Air conditioning, they [her children] were, like, if I can't see any air-conditioning, then I'm not going. They were just like, the comfort… So it was, you know, great woodworking facilities and art facilities and music facilities and computing facilities… [Daughter] walked in and she saw the art facilities, and she just walked out and she was like where do I sign. She was just like, this is it for me. She was done as soon as she saw those art rooms.

Susan also mentioned that her children focused on the facilities during their school tour. The children were looking for comforts such as air conditioning and for her children this was the threshold to attend the school or not, "Air conditioning, they were like if I can't see an air-conditioner, then I'm not going."

Shaun was impressed with the facilities at the urban school he chose for his young son. He saw the facilities and resources as evidence that his fees were being spent well and that his son would benefit from these facilities,

> You know, even being here, there's the brand new playground being built down here… It's obvious that the school is very financially savvy… and you can see they spend well and that was big for me to know that [James] wasn't going to be in a dilapidated, you know, demountable school… That was big for us to know that there was a financially stable school.

Julia, who has two sons at the same urban school as Shaun, was visibly excited during the interview when she mentioned the school's facilities and how they would benefit her sons and their future career choices,

> The facilities are incredible. [My son] loves cooking. We went to the kitchen and he was like, wow! All the facilities are so great. Like, kids don't only have to learn the normal school stuff. [The teacher] took them downstairs, where they were fixing a boat, a race car, things that kids can learn and do manually because in the real world these people are going to be mechanics. They're people who are going to be computer savvy, work in I-Tech.

Amira has three children at the same urban school as Shaun and Julia. Two of her children are in the primary sector of the school, and the other is in the secondary sector. She focused on the design of the school and the ease of locating the facilities, "I love the, we can say, the layout of the classroom, canteen, the library and all the facilities being designed and organised next to each other in an easy and simple way."

Naomi, also from the same urban school, mentioned how impressed she had been with the school's facilities. The family had compared the facilities with other schools and acknowledged that the facilities at their school of choice were superior. Clearly, their threshold for superior facilities was reached, which was a cementing factor in choosing the school for her daughter,

> I think… for us, when we came, when we, when we did our [school] visit, we were really impressed with the standard of facilities more so than the other two schools… Superior, that's why, that's probably the main reason we really were impressed when we went on the tour and we saw the Stem, the Stem area, which our daughter had an interest in STEM at the time. We were pretty impressed with that. The kitchen areas where they do their cooking. We were just thoroughly impressed with the whole, with everything that was on offer. So, the other private schools that we went to had similar setups. Similar, but I would say not on, not on the level of [the other] College. So that was a deciding factor for us.

Naomi has a younger son enrolled in a different local public school. He will attend the same school as his sister when he begins Year 7. After a school tour he was very impressed with the Science and Technology laboratories and the sports gym centre,

> Oh, the science. He loves the idea of that the Science and Technology lab as well, both of them are quite into that. The sports, you know, the gym that's opened. When that gym opened and the kids started going there, he could not stop talking about it … he was super excited that the school could offer a gym.

Parents in the rural sector also appreciated the facilities at their school of choice and discussed these positively. Abigail, with children in the primary sector, commented on the facilities in the high school where her children would eventually go, "…seeing opportunities with the woodwork room and the kitchen, the hospitality is just quite, it's really good." Melanie, a parent also at the same school, agreed with Abigail. She felt at ease that there was less academic pressure at the school. She is grateful for the woodwork and kitchen facilities. She acknowledged that her children, with learning difficulties, can't cope with academic subjects well, but they can develop their practical skills,

> There were all sorts of other options for them as they grow up. So because I know they're not going to be academics, and so the fact that there was the ability, ability to for them to be able to do woodwork, and there was a really good woodwork section and, and the cooking and the textile so that they had other options to be able to excel at something rather than having to be just academic.

Sarah, at another rural school, was impressed with the facilities particularly for her boys, "… the facilities it had to offer were just amazing for our boys in particular… the facilities and what they offered here were perfect. Just outstanding."

Healthy Canteen

Many parents appreciated a healthy and healthy canteen catered to their children's dietary requirements. Amira, a Muslim, has children at an urban school in both the primary and secondary sectors. She is appreciative that the school's canteen only serves vegetarian food. Even though the food is not specifically halal, not serving meat at the canteen eliminates any stress in her children eating meat that is not halal,

> … they are vegetarian so they don't provide, they don't provide halal food, but they don't provide the meat at all or you know they are vegetarian, which is, you know like very stress-relieving. You know my son is having a lunch order today which is his favourite, on Tuesdays.

Megan, whose son is in Kindy, is also appreciative of the vegetarian canteen, although she would prefer a vegan canteen at her rural school. Her family are vegan on compassionate grounds and she states, "I mean we are vegan and, and we really liked that the school was at least vegetarian and the compassion that was in that. I guess I hoped that there would be a little bit more vegan." Amber, who has a daughter in Grade 2 at a different rural school to Megan, commented positively on the healthy aspect of the school's canteen,

> The canteen, they have quite a number of healthy options. And I like to make sure we're eating rather healthy. My daughter's also, we suspect that she's celiac. So, having options for her at the canteen is really important. You know, she feels like she's getting a treat at the canteen and I know she's getting something that's gluten free. So that's really, really good. Um, there are a number of schools that do do gluten free now. I like the really, really healthy options they've got at the canteen at this school.

It seems that parents at both urban and rural schools appreciate the healthy vegetarian canteen at their school. The vegetarian canteen is, however, an important factor for one Muslim family at an urban school and important for another family that is vegan and another family whose daughter has health issues. Although it was not stated by any of the SDA parents, many SDA families adopt a vegetarian lifestyle and a vegetarian canteen would be appreciated by these families.

Attractive School Setting

Another aspect relating to facilities is an attractive school setting. An attractive school setting is interpreted differently by parents; for some parents this meant an attractive appearance to the school, the buildings and the layout of the schools. For other parents it meant a bush setting or attractive grounds. Parents of children attending urban schools generally commented on the attractiveness of the buildings or layout of the school and well-maintained grounds; parents of children attending rural schools often focused on the natural bush setting of the school.

Amanda, with two children at an urban school, liked "the way the grounds were kept". Bailey, with a son in Year 10 at the same urban school as Amanda, commented positively on the layout of the school and likes how it is set up,

> And when they walk through it, they might think, well, this is actually, looks like a pretty nice school. And I think the school has done, they've done a good job in terms of the layout over the years.

Three parents from another urban school commented on the layout of the school, which has all buildings surrounding a central large open oval. For these parents the layout of the school around the oval was a positive binding element. Shaun with a son in Kindy loves the centrality of the oval,

> What's not to love about the school, right? Yeah, the oval in the middle to be honest. The way that the school is structured from Years 1, Kindergarten through to Year 12 around the circle. That it's all hugged by the oval. Yeah, for me that created, and I

> don't know whether the kids have their breaks at the same time, but the fact that the whole school, umm, kind of the glue of the school is the oval.

For Julia, with two high school-aged sons at the same school as Shaun, tried to articulate how the layout of the oval made her feel,

> Even the environment, the way the school is set up. You know, just this big green grass. You just come here and you just feel happy. That was my first impression. A big sigh of relief. I don't know. I don't know how to explain it, but that's how I felt.

Naomi recounted her initial impressions of the school and she reflects on the open space in the middle of the school and the uncluttered feel of the school. She also mentioned fresh air as an attraction,

> Impression? Well, first of all, a lot of the middle, of open air. OK, I love, I love that. I love that my boys can breathe, having a good source of fresh air and that matters to me. So, I love that. I love they're not being surrounded by many buildings around or many houses and so, so I love the freshness of the air.

Parents who had children at rural schools mentioned the rural, bush setting of the school grounds and the positive effect this had on their children and their learning. Megan discussed the natural setting of the school where her son, in Kindy, can enjoy gardening and playing in an open space,

> I liked the grounds. I loved how open it is and like the the, the ability to get outside. I think that's super important, just little things like veggie gardens, having a decent play area. I liked the location as well in terms of it wasn't a main road.

Naveen has a daughter in Kindy and commented on how much she enjoys the school's natural environment. He also discussed the benefits of a natural environment in providing a positive atmosphere for study,

> But in here like we felt like this is a better choice, because … it is more open and it is in the middle of nature. Like, we have a lot of nature around it … So, for the kid's growth it is very important that she is in the nature and like she tells us she goes for a bushwalk and everything... They might take them, take them outside somewhere ... So yeah, more natural. Kids need to like the environment first, only then they can concentrate on studies because they need to enjoy, and only then they're learning.

Melanie, who has children at the same rural school as Naveen, compared the school with other schools in her area, and focused on the open and natural environment of this school where her children could play,

> Um, so we went around to other schools and I felt from just the environment. So, the fact that it was um, an open environment with lots of trees. There's lots of space to play. There were lots of natural areas that the children could play in.

Sarah, at a different rural school, excitedly discussed how, when her husband and children had a tour of the school without her, the children did not want to go to any other school especially because of the natural beauty of the school's bush setting,

> My husband had a tour first. He came up with a couple of the kids 'cause I was going on a camp with one of my other kids and they had a look and the kids like, "We're not moving. We're not changing schools" … And apparently when they walked into the ground they looked around, they said, "Oh - my - goodness, this is amazing. And the setting's so beautiful, natural." So even though we've got these really modern hubs around everywhere, it's still got the backdrop of our earth, like the trees, animals and all those natural things. So, it's yeah, it's a really beautiful setting.

In summary, it is evident that facilities, resources, a healthy canteen and an attractive school setting were important factors for many parents in choosing a school for their children. For some parents these considerations had a threshold but this was not consistent among all parents interviewed. Typically, parents of children attending urban schools commented on the attractiveness of the buildings or layout of the school and well-maintained grounds while parents of children attending rural schools often focused on the natural bush setting of the school. Parental faith affiliation did not seem to have a clear impact on the school facilities Contextual School Factor.

5.4.2.5 School Affordability Threshold Level

A number of parents discussed the affordability of fees and some identified a threshold that would affect their school choice decision. Parents of children at urban schools noted that the fees were comparable or cheaper than other urban non-government schools. Some parents noted that the school was at their threshold of affordability. Other parents expressed that as their primary-aged child progressed to high school they would need to reconsider their ability to stay at the school, as the fees became progressively more expensive in high school. Others still, noted that they would pay whatever it took because they were so impressed with the school, for a variety of reasons.

Parents at the rural schools were not in agreement regarding the affordability of school fees. Some stated that the fees were very reasonable, others had reached their threshold and some even had to avail themselves of fee help from the school for their children to be able to attend.

However, it is evident that for Christian parents, particularly Seventh-day Adventist parents, there was a commitment to their children attending a Christian or Adventist school. As such, they were willing to pay the fees to ensure their children had an Adventist education, even when it had reached their initial threshold.

Amanda and her husband were looking for a Christian school compatible with their beliefs. They even gave up an offer of a scholarship at another Christian school because they felt it was not the right school for their child, "We even got offered a scholarship, a full scholarship at a different Christian School, which we could have taken a few years ago, but we just went, it's not the right school." She stated that the urban school they chose was more expensive than other schools but the cheapest was not the priority in their school choice decision. The school they chose was also at their threshold of affordability,

> So, this is at the top of our budget, like we're a one person wage family at the moment, and so we're stretched to be honest, um, yeah, but trusting God with that. And yeah, this, this isn't by any like the cheapest Christian school on the Coast, but that wasn't a priority. The cheapest wasn't the priority was actually that it supported what we believed as Christians.

Jennifer at the same urban school has two children in the primary school. When asked if the fees were a consideration for sending her children here, she said that it was not at that point, but implied that it may be a consideration as the children progress into high school, "It wasn't a consideration then but looking into high school, yeah. Yes, the fees do change considerably." She goes on to say that even with the increase of school fees in high school she isn't intending to remove her children from the school, "So, it's more of a consideration, but it's not going to prevent us from sending them there, but I have noted that their fees are quite a lot more than some other options." When pressed further by the researcher as to why she would pay higher fees, she replied, "It sounds so silly, but our children's happiness." Jennifer's interview implies that their fee threshold has not been reached and won't be reached even with the increase of fees in high school. Susan, also at the same urban school, indicated that the fees are high but is willing to pay the fees to get a better education, "It's obviously high in fees, so I think you know, actually having students you know paying for fees obviously leads to a better kind of [school], who actually have your money rather than it being government funded."

Andrew, also at the same urban school, is an Adventist parent and has two children in the high school. Both of their children had attended the school since Kindy. Initially, they

debated whether paying fees for a primary school education was necessary but were committed to an Adventist school education for the high school years. “I suppose fees did come into it and whether having, paying all that money for a primary education was needed. But we made that decision that yes, it was…” Bailey, also an Adventist parent at the school believes the fees provide value for money,

> When you can compare it to um, other private schools. I think it's, it's probably on par or probably better than many private schools. You know, I know in Sydney they charge a lot more than what our school does, so I think in terms of economic value it’s good.

Kelly, who had lived for several years in the United States, commented on how she did not consider their urban school was very affordable in comparison to non-government schools in the United States,

> And we had originally been living in the States and then so when we came over here, I wanted to, I knew what it was like to not be in an education system that didn't have that. And I knew how difficult it, how expensive it was to be in a quality education system. So, to come here and have it not as expensive…

The school clearly had not reached the family’s threshold for fees, making school choice easier for them.

Julia is a Christian mother with two boys in the high school at another urban school. She clearly articulates that the fee schedule at the school did not reach her threshold, but she states clearly that she was so impressed with the school that she was willing to pay anything for her boys to attend,

> I was willing to do whatever. I was so impressed with the school. I didn't care anything. Obviously, we are in the position of doing it, but even if I wasn't I would have found money. Because it's worth it. I came from one type of school to this and I can see the difference. Incredible difference. And that money, if that gives my kids all this, that's worth it.

James, an Indigenous Adventist parent, wanted his two children to have an Adventist education. His wife had home-schooled their children for many years, but they had decided to send their children to an Adventist school. He implied that the fees are at the upper end of affordability, close to their threshold. He pragmatically concluded that he will work more and that his wife can now enter the workforce to help pay fees,

> I’d like it if it was a little bit more affordable, definitely. Um. But, I suppose, yeah, it probably wasn't a factor at the end of the day. It was more along the lines of well, I'll

> just work harder. And also, that freed up my wife too. She was obviously working still teaching my children at home, but in terms of generating money, she was able to go and actually teach, as she is teacher as well.

Many parents of rural schools, but not all, mention the affordability of school fees. Megan, with a son in Kindy, felt the fees were very affordable, “I felt they were incredibly reasonable for a private school that offers what this school offers. I feel it's very reasonable…” She implied how she is pleasantly surprised with the high standards, “I wasn't expecting them to have high private school standards”. She also noted that the fees don’t exclude children of average wage-earning families, “It, it seems affordable for most people that are on the average wage, but not exclusionary.” Abigail, at the same rural school as Megan, has two children in the primary school and has a Christian background. The family had lived in Hong Kong and attended a non-government international school, where fees were extremely high. She compared the two schools and concluded that the fees here are very reasonable. She also implied that there isn’t much difference in the quality of education,

> I really like the fees here. They are very good value for what you get. Definitely, after experiencing um, obviously the Hong Kong fees are extremely high. And Pre-Kindy over there are even, just extremely high. Even comparing that, the only difference is the bilingual teachers. So, you’d have one English, one Chinese, so that was great. I’d say the fees are very, very good for what you are getting.

Melanie, an Indigenous foster parent, is very pragmatic about the school fees and stated that the fees are worth paying when her children are happy at school,

> Of course, the finances come into things 'cause I'm not hoarding money and we struggle to pay all the bills like everybody in the world does. Um, I think our bills are proportionate to our, our income, actually. Income goes up, bills go up. So, I also didn't want to be paying an excessive amount of money. But I also wanted the children to be comfortable, so they needed to be happy and they love coming here…

Naveen, with a daughter in Kindy, noted that fees were a consideration but realised that they were not as expensive as they thought. He continued by describing the aspects of the school that provide a quality education for his daughter for a reasonable cost,

> That’s another thing, that it is very affordable school according to the status of the school, because smaller classes, good teachers, good infrastructure and I think the fees was very general… The fees were always the first thing, which was always good, so we didn't even have to think about this so we could concentrate on the quality only. So that's why the fees were alright.

Two parents at another rural school mention that the fees have reached their affordability threshold. Amber, with a daughter in Grade 2, discussed how the school fees was above her affordability threshold. She is only able to send her daughter to the school because of a reduction in fees. She believes that this fee help is available to other parents and that this is the only way these parents would be able to send their children to the school and to get a quality education,

> I'm not in the best financial situation, and so the only way I'm able to actually send my daughter to this school is I'm on a payment plan and you know they've reduced the price for me. I had to apply for it. But they've reduced the price for me, so that I can send my daughter here. And so, I think they've done that with quite a number of families, and I think that's brilliant. You know, it definitely helps a lot of the families that are wanting to send their children to good schools to be able to do that and support them education wise, which I think is really, really important.

Sarah, at the same school, has an Adventist background and was looking for an Adventist school after relocating from another rural region. She has four children at school, two are at this rural school and two are at a different Adventist school. She implies that the fees are at her threshold because of her large family. However, she recognises that the fees for educating all her children at an Adventist school is less than her parents paid for her education at a different non-government school,

> I'd like to say I would have sent them here irrespectively, but of course with [four] kids you gotta, you gotta take money into consideration. Um, it just is good that they're on, especially on the scale of private education, I find, I feel quite affordable. I'm from Canberra and Queensland, that's where I did my growing up. I went to private schools and what I pay for all four of my children is less than what my mum paid for just me. So, if you comparatively, it's very affordable.

In summary, it is obvious that various factors influenced the fees affordability threshold for parents. Generally, for urban parents the fees were considered high but comparable with other non-government school choices; for rural parents the fees were generally considered reasonable in light of the quality facilities and quality education on offer. It was also evident that for Christian parents, particularly Seventh-day Adventist parents, there was a commitment to their children attending an Adventist school and they willing to pay the fees to ensure their children had an Adventist education, even when it had reached their threshold.

Rural and urban parents also presented views on fee affordability that had striking similarities. This was not predicted as the fees for the urban schools were three to four times

the cost of rural school fees. The data suggests that fee affordability threshold responses were based on comparisons with other schools in their local area and costs relative to income. This highlights the need to respect context when analysing the data.

5.4.2.5 Stage 2 Summation

When a parent had decided on a non-government school for their child and indeed when considering an SDA school a number of Contextual School Factors were considered in their decision-making process. Contextual School Factors such as the school location, school educational options, school leadership and community, school facilities and school affordability were evaluated. It is also evident that parents have a threshold when considering these factors.

School Location was an important school choice factor for many parents, but the threshold varied. The data showed that parental faith affiliation impacted the school location threshold. Parents with an SDA church affiliation purchased a home close to their school of choice or were willing to accept a longer commute to attend their school. Also, it was evident that parents of young children preferred a shorter school commute. Rural parents were generally willing to accept a longer commute time to attend their school of choice.

The eight aspects within the School Educational Options identified are clearly important to parents and many parents articulated that these factors have a threshold, which typically varied parent to parent. There was some distinction between rural and urban parents in respect to some school educational options. Many parents were keen for a school that could cater for their child's entire education, from Pre-Kindy to Year 12. Few parents discussed their desire for a co-educational school and rural parents particularly articulated that they valued a smaller school for their children. Both rural and urban parents valued small class sizes for enhancing positive learning outcomes. A number of parents expressed that the range of subjects offered at the school was an important consideration for their school choice decisions as was the availability of project-based learning. The inclusion of camps was not a high priority for most parents, with only one parent expressing appreciation of how the camp program promotes cohesiveness within the year group. There was, however, no clear difference between parents with a faith affiliation and parents with no faith affiliation in any of the School Educational Options.

School Leadership and Community was an area that contributed to parental school choice. Some parents were impressed with a school's strong leadership and future vision. The

community feel of the school was important to many parents and for some this was positively discussed in the context of a Christian and Adventist school community. Parent involvement in the school and the school's involvement in the wider community was also a valued aspect of the school community. Many parents strongly recounted that the school's cultural diversity and inclusiveness of all faiths and the Indigenous community was a significant factor contributing to their school choice decisions.

Numerous parents discussed the importance of School Facilities and how it contributed to their school choice decisions. Some parents chose the school because of its superior facilities and resources when compared to other schools. Some parents mentioned that they valued a healthy canteen, including catering for dietary and religious requirements. Attractive grounds or natural setting was an important school choice factor of rural parents while attractive buildings, the layout of the school or well-maintained grounds was an important factor of school choice for urban parents.

School affordability was discussed by a number of parents and some identified a threshold that would affect their school choice decision. Some parents of children at urban schools noted that the fees were comparable or cheaper than other urban non-government schools. Other parents expressed that the fees were at their threshold and would need to reconsider their ability to stay at the school as their child progressed through the years. Others stated that they would pay whatever it took because they were so impressed with the school and what it offered. This was also evident for Christian parents, including SDA parents, who were committed to their children attending a school that provided a Christian ethos.

Each parent may have begun their school choice search with a set of necessary conditions for the Contextual School Factors, but as they progressed through the process of choosing a school the threshold was often modified. This modification and compromise were often influenced by the other contextual factors. There was a continual interaction between contextual factors in Stage 2 and the data indicated that the thresholds for the components were fluid and dynamic. These thresholds varied somewhat for different parent communities and the perceived benefits of various factors influenced and modified the thresholds.

5.4.3 Stage 3 – Contextual Personal Factors

Stage 3 of the decision-making process identifies parents as gatekeepers of specific factors relating to their children and the school choice process. It became apparent in the

interview that parents saw themselves as gatekeepers of family values and chose the school because its values aligned closely with their family values. Parents also saw themselves as gatekeepers of their child's well-being. Parents chose the school because they believed the school would provide care, nurture and support for their child. Furthermore, parents saw themselves as the gatekeepers of their children's educational potential and chose a school that they believed would provide a positive educational experience for their children. These themes that emerged from the data and how they contributed to school choice will be discussed at length in the next sections.

5.4.3.1 Parents choose as Gatekeepers of Family Values

The first theme of parents as gatekeepers that emerged from the data was that parents chose a school that aligned with their family values in the hope that the school will reinforce these during their child's education. However, it was clear that the term 'values' was interpreted differently by parents, but at the same time there was considerable overlap in the interpretation of values. Phrases used during the interview process such as 'ideals-based education' and 'ethics-based lifestyle' were often conjoined and their intended meaning is considered synonymous with the term 'values'. Different phrases and terms were identified during the coding process with the term 'values'. They have been organised into connected sets of specific values generating a number of categories and will be discussed below: kindness and compassion; respecting differences, consideration for others, being inclusive; patience, resilience, gratitude; manners, no swearing, appearance, confidence to speak to others, respecting your body; good morals, being a good person; service to others, service trips; Christian beliefs. Some of these terms and phrases were explained by the parents; some of these terms and phrases were mentioned with vague and non-descript responses. Some parents would include a number of these categories when discussing these values while others would focus strongly on only one of these categories. This research acknowledges that these phrases and terms have a variety of intimated meanings, but all these terms are identified as factors that contributed to parents' current school choice because they believed the school would reinforce or teach these values.

Many parents clearly stated that an attractive feature of the school, and one that contributed to their choice, was that the school taught desired values and reinforced the values taught at home. Abigail, at a rural school, simply stated that the school continues "our values from home". Amanda, affiliated with a Christian denomination, chose the school after

considering others because the values taught at the school matched the family values, "…we thought that [this] Adventist [school] really matched best with our values as a family…" Andrew, an Adventist parent at an urban school, stated that a reason for choosing an SDA school for his two children revolved around the values of the school, "I think the values are, are aligned. I think just having aligned values with us as a family…" Shaun, has a son at a different urban school, and has no faith affiliation. He emphasised how he and his wife see the importance of the school teaching the same values to their son as they do at home, and that this was the main reason for school choice,

> … the way that we teach him at home, we teach him at home, if you look at the, as a percentage of the year, we only spend two days a week, full days a week with him. We can teach him what we know and the values that we have, but when we're brought up with those, with those same values we want to make sure that the other five days a week when he's here for whatever it is, six hours a day, that during those six hours, that he's getting the same level of guidance around values, values that we had growing up... We both drive those values so, so, knowing that he's coming here for six hours a day and getting those same values instilled in him that was, that was categorically the number one reason we chose a faith-based school.

Julia, at the same urban school as Shaun, belongs to a different Christian faith but noted that, "…we have a lot of values in common, and I really appreciated that." Naomi, who follows a different world religion, concurs with other parents and focused on the fact that the school reinforces their home values,

> I think that the values are extremely similar to what we're trying to teach her from home. So that's also, you're right, that's probably also one of the other reasons why it's been an easier transition for us because the values that we're trying to teacher that come from our religion and our moral code are the same as the values that you're teaching her here.

Megan, a parent from a rural school, discussed ideals-based education and how this was connected to the family's pursuit of an ethics-based lifestyle,

> What I liked about the school… there seems to be quite a strong emphasis on … ideals based, ideals-based education. So, even though I'm not Christian or Adventist or any faith I do have very strong values and very, very strong ideals. And ethics is what drives me. So, I really liked that fact that my son is having an ethics-based lifestyle.

Amber, at a rural school, commented that a non-government Christian school has the autonomy to teach values. She does not believe these values would be taught at a government school,

> A lot of, you know, the Ten Commandments from the Bible. They're very good values to instil in children's teachings, but you don't really get that at, so much at the public school as you do at a private school, and so I, I think that was really a big positive for me.

A considerable number of parents focussed on the 'kindness and compassion' set of values. Megan continued to explain how her family are vegan and connects compassion with their dietary choices, "… we are vegan and, and we really liked that the school was at least vegetarian and the compassion that was in that… it was one of the attracting values". She added that kindness, compassion and empathy are the values that are taught at home. "I mean, for us, kindness and compassion are first and foremost empathy, kindness and compassion. It's like the ruling, that sounds really pretentious, but the ruling doctrine of our house." She was impressed that the value of kindness, which was taught at home, was reinforced at school, "…he comes home with great values and comes home saying some really kind things that he's learned from school." She continued explaining how school reinforces home values,

> …so he'll come home and say, Mommy, is there anything that I can help you with? I recognise your hard work and I'd like to be a member of this family and help out, too. Like he'll, he'll use that, like, not those exact words but that kind of language. My son's very kind anyway, but you know, you can tell that that's come from a lesson at school and he'll just or he'll get up and he'll just do something at home. He'll say that's because you know we're part of a family and we have to help each other out. And I really value that. A little bit of it is from home, but it's all, it's reinforced and built on at school.

Brianna, at a different rural school, added that they felt the school focused on teaching the values of compassion and empathy to students, "…we felt that the school was coming from a position where they, they want to teach the kids… to show compassion and empathy." Shaun, from an urban school, wanted Christian principles, including kindness, to be taught,

> The things we were looking for were mostly were not the beliefs, but the ethos around, you know, being kind, looking after people, love thy neighbour. All those kind of things for us were the reasons we chose a faith-based school, even though we weren't faith-based, because we knew those would be taught. We wanted that. Mostly it was about teaching how to be good, how to be kind, how to be nice…

Julia, at the same school as Shaun, commented on the common aspects of the 'Christian values' of her church and those of the school and specifically mentioned kindness as one of these values, "…you have strong family, um, how do I say it, values as well and

you believe in God. You believe in kindness… All these things that they are in common and to me they are very important…"

Some parents focused on values that reflect respect for other people, including respecting differences, consideration for others and being inclusive. Megan, at a rural school, when asked what she meant by values mentions that "to respect difference" and showing "consideration for others" is important to her family. Gavin, at the same rural school, discussed how it was important for him that his sons were taught about how they should treat others,

> … the way we treat others… the kids from the higher classes would look after the kids from the class because that's what they've been taught. So, it was something that flowed down, so it came from the teachers to the students and then from the students to the other students so that they all kind of got along. And that's something that we wanted our kids to have, sort of thing. Because … we're here to help others, not just to benefit ourselves.

Susan, at an urban school, discussed Christian values and "being inclusive of other people". Julia added that the school being inclusive of others, such as her family who are of a different Christian denomination, was a drawcard,

> And then to me, even the fact that you guys are accepting of others. That to me was very important. I felt that even though we are a different religion that didn't matter, we are children of God and you take care of each other and that to me was amazing.

Brianna mentioned that after a school tour, she felt the school and its values were right for her family,

> …just felt right, the values, the ideas of the school… So that was probably leaving here, hubby and I looked at each other in the car and went OK this is, this sounds right. This sounds like the right fit.

Some parents discussed values in terms of their children learning 'patience, resilience and gratitude'. Shaun, who has a son in an urban school, stated that he was looking for a school that would teach his son these values,

> The way that they approached that, and the stories that we heard from the parents about patience, teaching them resilience and the kids, not just their kid, but the kids around them to be able to understand why that, that, that particular student was doing what they were doing and, and those are the kinds of things that we were looking for.

Kelly, from an urban school, added that she desires her son to be exposed to the concept of gratitude which she held to be "… the essence of what it is to be a Christian…"

She chose her child's school because she believed it effectively taught and encouraged gratitude.

Abigail, from a rural school, felt that the school she chose contributes to her children's exposure to the values that are also taught at home, such as manners, appearance and confidence,

> I feel like they continue our values from home, so keeping up with manners, appearance, giving them confidence to speak properly to people. Those sorts of things that really moulds them, especially the boys into gentleman, which I found was good.

For other parents, the values highlighting 'manners, no swearing, respecting your body, appearance and confidence to speak to others' were the focus when discussing values and school choice. Brian, from another rural school, discussed values in the context of no swearing. He has familial links to many of the Indigenous students at the school and noted how this positively impacts his community,

> They see, like if the students around, there's not a lot of, not abusive like language stuff, right? You know, the verbally swearing and all that sort of stuff, they don't see that, so the kids that, the kids, parent, child talks about that.

Julia, from an urban school, compared the lack of swearing at the school to their previous school, "…to have a clean language and things like that. But at the school, even the teachers were swearing at the other school, but [my sons] said, you know, there's no such thing." Julia continued how she saw the school overtly promoting respect for their bodies. Again, she compares her son's experience at their previous school where he was introduced to drugs, but that at the current school, he has not been exposed to drugs,

> You … respect your body. All these things that they are in common and to me they are very important, especially because in the other school my kids have been offered marijuana, LSD, things like that. And they've been exposed to that. And my son … took marijuana because he thought that was going to help him not to kill himself. Things like that. This is something that here doesn't happen because we believe that, I think you, you guys believe too that our bodies are like a temple. We have to take care of it.

Several parents discussed values in the context of having 'good morals and being a good person, service to others and service trips'. Amber, from a rural school, stated that at their school, "…there are a lot of good morals that are taught to kids that aren't necessarily taught to kids in a public school." Naomi, who is affiliated with another world religion, discussed the moral code of her faith as being the same as the morals being taught at the

school, "… the values that we're trying to teach her that come from our religion, and our moral code are the same as the values that you're teaching her here." Some parents discussed the school's teaching of values as synonymous with their child becoming a good person. Shaun mentioned the values that his son is learning in Pre-Kindy and how they are focused on teaching him how to be nice,

> We talk about, we immediately go back to what the values, the values that sit behind it are and what did you learn from it … And that's exactly the reason that we wanted him to come here. Because the things that are being taught and we're seeing it already, once we unpack those stories about what it means to be a nice human and those are kind of, that's, that's, that's what we're doing.

James, at the same urban school as Shaun, also mentioned that he wants the school to teach his children how to be good people, "I just want my children to be good humans and if the school can create an environment to make a better, good human then that is really what we're looking for." Brianna, at a rural school, agrees, and claimed that her school and the teachers promote the values she holds, to help her children be the best people they can,

> …they want to teach the kids or help the kids or nurture the kids to be the best person that they can be. That being a good person wasn't about getting the top grades. It's not about having the nicest house. It is about being or trying to be positive towards other people, trying to be positive towards things and understanding that there's not always positives, that there's sometimes negatives and that, to show, to show compassion and empathy to that.

Jennifer, at an urban school, believes that the teaching of values at a Christian school contributes to the character development of her children and provides a good grounding for life,

> I think it's just a good grounding for them, for both of the behaviour management policies that they put in place, but also just like values in life. I think it's just yeah great values that they instil in them…we're happy that she's getting a lot of support in the Christian aspect and developing her character…

Within this set of values, other parents focused on the school's promotion of service to others, including service trips. They appreciated that the school focused on looking outward to the needs of others, rather than self-focus. Megan discussed many values the school teaches her son and mentions "service to others" in her list. Gavin, at the same rural school as Megan, mentioned "…we're here to help others, not just to benefit ourselves…" Jennifer, at an urban school, described how the school teaches her children to look to the needs of others,

> I think the school really promotes that we need to be looking out for other people, not just ourselves. So, it's sort of that outward look as opposed to doing everything to better yourself. It's more about we're here to lift up everybody else and support other people in our community.

Kelly, at another urban school, commented on the school tradition of a service trip at the end of Year 12 and hopes that it would be available when her daughter completes high school,

> And I really appreciate that the school at the end of Year 12, they go off and they do a sort of fly 'n' build type sort of thing and I'm hoping that that still happens with [my daughter]. Um, or they go and do, like they go off to I think, is it to an Aboriginal Indigenous [community]? Those sorts of things. That's what I want. I want them to realise that the world is big and they can be part of the solution.

A number of parents connected values taught at the school to their Christian beliefs. Some expanded on what they considered this to be, others generalised their descriptions. During the interview Amanda mentioned that the urban school they chose aligned with their Christian values. When asked to explain what she meant by Christian values she discussed them generally in the context of her Christian beliefs,

> …honouring God's important to us and that as Christians we believed that his word is the ultimate way to inform our lives and guide us and that our Salvation is in Jesus. And so, we felt like what the school believed, upheld those truths and that the teachers would honour that.

Gavin, an SDA parent, when asked to expand on what values he wanted his children to be exposed to, states, "the Adventist value system". When pressed to explain what he meant by the Adventist value system he added, "core beliefs". When pressed a little more, he explains that these values and beliefs focus on,

> …how we deal with each other and how we deal with God. So, we have the spiritual and then we have the mental growth as well. So, we have the things that actually prop up a person in life. Their spiritual, mental and physical attributes.

Brian is an Indigenous grandparent with a familial link to many students at the rural school. He explains the desire of the local Indigenous community to learn the spiritual aspect of Christian values, "Because of their background. Because of their respect for the Adventist message, the spiritual part of it. They want their kids to get that foundation, a spiritual Christian foundation. The value[s] are different." Later he explained that Christian values provides a connection to country and nature,

> The, the Christian value[s] are one that gets us, gets us through. Even if we weren't Seventh-day Adventists, Christian value[s], a connection to, a connection to country, a connection to nature and connection are one that get us through. Even if we don't get an education within that system, in the system, we can still survive. We can still survive out there, you know, we haven't got a lot. We don't want a lot. We just want to get through. We want to be equal. We want to share it, the Christian value[s], to everybody.

He also identified that these Christian values are intertwined with religious practice, "And we respect the Christian value[s], they do a lot of praying, a lot of singing and they talk about God in all their, all their schoolwork, and you know, all that stuff. So, they're all the value[s]…"

Interestingly, Susan, a non-faith parent, also discussed the importance of Christian values being taught at the school. Even though they are a non-faith family, she wants her children to be exposed to Christian values and beliefs because she recognises that much of Western society is based on Christianity and her children would be disadvantaged if they did not understand them,

> I think the faith element helped guide the values and the principles in the community… So, but, they need to be exposed to it. You know, I want them to learn about it. I think so much of world and you know, like you see our politicians, they use Christian values to help guide them around the decisions that they make. You know you see people, quoting the Bible and sorts of things in all sorts of literary texts and forms and so, if you haven't ever been exposed to that you're really kind of locked out of a lot of information and you know, I guess you could say, philosophical boundaries that a lot of other people operate in. So, I wanted them to learn that.

Bailey, an SDA parent, noted that he wanted a school that focused on Christian values, although he doesn't discuss what these are, "A school that implements Christian values and they, that spirituality is one of their core values and you can see it in their curriculum, strongly in their curriculum."

In summary, many parents stated that the teaching of values strongly contributed to their school-choice decision when these values reinforced the values taught at home. It is apparent that the term 'values' means somewhat different things to different parents and sometimes parents explained what they meant by this term, other times their meaning was vague. Phrases such as 'ideals-based education' and 'ethics-based lifestyle' were used synonymously with the term 'values'. But, across the parent communities six value sets were identified as important in their school choice: kindness and compassion; respecting differences, consideration for others, being inclusive; patience, resilience, gratitude; manners,

no swearing, appearance, confidence to speak to others, respecting your body; good morals, being a good person; service to others, service trips; Christian beliefs. There was no discernible difference between parents of rural and urban schools and the values that were wanted or between parents affiliated with a faith and those that were not. However, for many Christian parents, promoting a positive view of God and the importance of a relationship with God was also connected with the understanding of appropriate values. Further, some Christian parents connected values with Biblical principles; others did not.

5.4.3.2 Parents choose as Gatekeepers of Child's Well-being

The second theme of parents as gatekeepers that emerged from the data was that parents are gatekeepers of their child's well-being. Their school choice decision was impacted by the parent's perception of how well the school would contribute to their child's well-being. Parents were not consistent in their use of the term and what they meant by well-being and it is evident that well-being meant different things to different parents. Six different phrases and terms were identified in the coding process that parents used in relation to the well-being of their child and included: nurture, care and support, the child's happiness, pastoral care, the availability of chaplaincy and counselling, a safe environment, the school's anti-bullying policy and provision for special needs. These phrases and terms were initial codes that were categorised together under the theme of well-being.

It is important to note that some parents discussed their experiences of how the school reinforced their perceptions of supporting the well-being of their child after enrolment. Often, parents implied that they chose the school because they believed it would contribute to their child's well-being and during the interviews, they gave examples of how their current experience of the school confirmed their choice. Their positive experiences impacted their confidence that the school would continue to provide well-being in the form of nurture and support for their child and that their initial school choice decision had been the right choice. The significance of these experiences is that these parents will continue with their child's enrolment at the school into the foreseeable future.

Many parents mentioned wanting their child to be nurtured and cared for in their educational setting. Megan, at a rural school, discussed the desire that her son's "creativity and intelligence to be nurtured." Abigail, at the same rural school as Megan, identified teachers as being nurturing, "the nurturing teachers and that sort of thing, that's really been

super impressive." Although not an Adventist, Abigail believes that the Adventist school focuses on the care and nurture of its students than other schools,

> I found, I feel … [it] is much more caring and it's more nurturing and it's more focused around making the child, um, I guess, the best they can be as opposed to just a number. That's what I've really picked up on. I've been really impressed.

Naveen, a migrant and at the same rural school, keenly discussed his desire that teachers care for his daughter,

> Teachers when they, they get involved and they look after kids because when they're very little it is very, because we're from a very different background, so it is very important that kids do not feel that she's outside in the country, like she feels that she is part of the country because now this is our country… So, so we wanted to make sure that she is being looked after in her early age so that she feels that she is part of this country.

Amber, at a different rural school, explained that a friend referred her to this school by highlighting that, "they really support the kids." She added that "They felt like their child was really, really well supported." This appraisal encouraged her to consider the school for her daughter and to enrol her at the school. In the interview she shared how her daughter struggles with anxiety and how her teacher is able to provide a caring and supportive environment for her,

> I think that I'm really blessed with her teacher this year. Her teacher is definitely a nurturing and supportive person, really understands, has a couple of kids in her class that have learning difficulties or that kind of thing and so, really, really supportive. And knows how to support my daughter in the best way possible and make her feel comfortable within the environment. And if she starts to get anxious knows how to calm her down, bring her back down, ground her, that kind of thing.

Brianna, at the same rural school as Amber, also discussed how the school provides a supportive environment. She noted how at their school "… it was more about that sense of a child is a person that has an education but also has growing to do and, and to support the kids through that." She later added, "… we felt that the school was coming from a position where they, they want to teach the kids or help the kids or nurture the kids to be the best person that they can be." Stewart and Emma, who are affiliated with the SDA faith, wanted the nurture to be a part of their children's spiritual journey. Stewart stated,

> And, I guess, nurturing the spiritual journey [Emma: yeah]. You know, I guess, ultimately, even if the subjects weren't here, if we could see that their spiritual

> journey was being nurtured, and that they were growing in that, we would be happy for them to continue here.

Kelly, at an urban school, is adamant that teachers provide the nurture, support and care her children receive at the school, "I knew that they [the teachers] would care about my kids, they'd lookout for them if anything was going on and let me know… they are switched on totally focused on my child… the teachers really care…" She expressed that her initial perception of care and support the school would provide for her children has been her reality.

Shaun, a parent at the same urban school as Kelly, remembered that it was the care and support for students that helped him in the decision-making process. He recounted a story that he claims was "the icing on the cake" in their choosing this school. During their school tour he noticed emu prints on footpaths around the school and asked what they were. He was told they help a visually impaired student find their way around. For James this was pivotal, "…to know that a whole school is ready to change just the way they do one thing for one student, that's pretty massive."

Julia's son struggles with mental health. She was looking for a school that would provide understanding and support for him and chose the school because of the caring environment she saw during their tour and interview,

> And we were very impressed because the culture of the school, it's incredible, as a caring, there's a lot of genuine taking care of each other, which to me was amazing… They were firm but they were caring and that really, I really fell in love with the school and because Sam needed extra support…"

Julia found that her initial perceptions of the care her son would receive has been her son's experience. She became very emotional recalling the time her son was 'missing' and the nurture, support and care her son received,

> I'm getting tears here because the support and the care here is, I've never seen something like that. So, one day, for instance, this is an example. Sammy needed to go to the uniform shop. He didn't know that he had to tell the teachers. So, he went during recess, I think. He told his friends I'm still there. I don't know if the friends told the school, the teacher, that Sam wasn't there. So, they sent a search party because they wanted to look for him and see if he was safe and that to me was like, wow they really, they really care for my son, which I haven't felt before.

She was so impressed with the school that she later enrolled her younger son. Julia continued at length providing examples of the care, nurture and support her sons receive saying that

"teachers are very kind". Because of this care factor she will continue to maintain their enrolment.

Amanda, at another urban school, discussed how teachers show care at the school her son attends not just in academic achievement but in student well-being, "… the teachers actually care about the students in their class, their well-being as well as their academic achievement." She continued, "…these are teachers you can trust, who actually do care about you and will say this isn't right and you are important and so you do need to be looked after…" Susan also mentioned care and nurture as being important elements in her children's learning environment, "…having a learning community that's caring and nurturing to your child… you know that they're able to actually nurture the children…" Andrew, a SDA notes how the teachers are "caring, involved with the students." He explained that when he was making his school choice decision he was influenced by accounts of the care provided by teachers,

> Just that the teachers were, as a general rule, interested in the students and I know we have found that ourselves. So, the recommendation was that really caring, um and involved with the students and interested in their welfare and education.

Bailey added that the communication from school makes him feel that students are valued. He provides an example from remote learning during COVID-19 and how teachers showed their care for their students,

> So, I think the, the undertones from all of the communication, especially the newsletters that come out regularly, which I think is so important… the fact that the students are important. Obviously, they're the bread and butter as to why a school exists but during Covid, for example, when things were shut down, you know we were getting communication to say the teachers are missing the kids, kind of thing. You know there was this sense of, um, … that they value the kids as well.

Several parents discussed the importance of their child's happiness at school and how this informed their school choice. Megan, at a rural school, focused on her son's happiness and iterated that this ultimately drove her school choice. Clearly, she felt that the school she chose would contribute to her son's happiness,

> My child's happiness is what matters more than anything. My child's happiness and emotional well-being is what ultimately decides which school my son goes to… if my son says "I can't wait to go to school tomorrow, I love my school", then you know, as a parent, that's all you hope for… You can't ask for more than that…

Sarah's children travel to school by bus, but the commute is about one hour. She is concerned with their level of fatigue when they arrive home, especially her son. However, when her son was given the option to move to a school closer to home he declined,

> … he gets tired much easier. He's not as active as my others, and so he comes home fried. And I said: do you really want to look at another school that's local? Because it's too much, 'cause it's your entire..., you have a full-time job really, and he said no, no, no, no, no [emphatically]. So, they're really, I see they're happy.

She has kept their enrolment at the school because they are happy there, "They're very happy at this school…And if our kids are happy, then we're happy." Susan concurs with Sarah's sentiments, "So, if they were happy, I was happy."

Jennifer, at the same urban school as Susan, recognises the importance of her children's happiness at school and its connection with well-being and mental health. She mentioned that the school is not the most affordable non-government school in the area but she is willing to keep her children at the school because they are happy,

> It sounds so silly, but our children's happiness. I think because we've seen the impact that it can have that if the education setting isn't right for your child. So therefore, we know, yeah, you've gotta get it right otherwise you're going be in for so many other mental health issues…

Some parents discussed their children's well-being and school choice because the school provided support through pastoral care, chaplaincy or counselling. Amanda was impressed with the type of support provided through pastoral care, "…there's different layers of support and counselling and pastoral care." When asked what she meant by pastoral care Amanda stated, "I guess it means that the teachers actually care about the students in their class, their well-being as well as their academic achievement." Andrew's choice of school was influenced by the availability of chaplains for his children, "I think there was sort of attraction that there was a … chaplaincy program, as well." Emma, from a rural school, was thankful that there was a chaplaincy program to help her daughter through difficult times, "It was a scary time for us and so we felt that yeah, the year that our two girls started here was kind of the best timing, as far as you know, chaplaincy." Naomi, from an urban school, related how the school counsellor helped her children, who have Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD), better transition from primary school to high school,

> High School was extremely overwhelming for them. Both of them have trouble organising. It's part of their, as part of their ADD their weakness is organisational

> skills, so to be given a timetable and then, you know, all these different periods. It was a huge shock to the system… we did get help from the counsellor…

She also believes that this would not be available at a government school, "I don't think in a, in a public school we would have had that service available."

Many parents at urban schools identified the school they chose as a safe environment for their child. Julia explained that when she was exploring the school for her son they felt very safe at the school, "And we were very impressed because the culture of the school, it's incredible, as caring, there's a lot of genuine taking care of each other, which to me was amazing. Everyone was friendly. We felt very safe." This confidence in the school's safety was important in her school choice because of her son's mental health concerns. She also enrolled her second son at the school and both feel safe, "And you know, he feels safe. Both of them feel safe." Similarly, James, at the same school as Julia, discussed the school's safe environment, "… for me it looks as though that, there's an open environment to be able to, you know, journey in … who you are as a person. And then it's a safe environment… creating an environment that is warm and comforting…" Jennifer connected the sense of safety with better learning outcomes, "…if they're not in a place where they're feeling safe and happy then they're not going to be able to learn either."

Two parents at rural schools explain their perception of a safe environment. Brian's evaluation of the school as safe reflects the local Indigenous community's perceptions of the school, "They say that it's a safe environment." He further explained what this means to parents and the community, "It's a safe, a safer place than in other schools. Other schools it's just full-on bullying, swearing, all that type of thing, you know. It's full on." It seems that parents perceive that the absence of bullying, swearing and similar behaviour is what makes the school environment safe.

Brianna, considers a safe environment to be one where her children are not exposed to, or dealing with, outside social problems,

> …just trying to have the kids in an environment where they can learn. There's not the distractions of, um, this boy can't come to school because his dad bashed his mum or mum's in hospital because of an OD [overdose] or mum turning up school drunk. So, all of those things, the kids don't need to be distracted by that. It's tough enough, particularly going through puberty. Don't need to be witness to, to, to have that, or to be trying to support your friends through that when your mind is already going all over the place.

The school's anti-bullying program was an attraction for many parents, impacting their school choice decision. Amanda recounted how her son had been bullied at his previous school and that she chose this school because of the positive reports she had heard about how bullying was dealt with, "Everyone else raved about it and said how impressed they were when like they talked about hard stuff, like when their child had some bullying, but the school had handled it really well…a lot of testimonies from people…" She continued that when they moved to this school her son experienced bullying from his peers and when she alerted the school it was dealt with immediately. She connected the school's anti-bullying with care for her son and promoting his well-being,

> …so [her son] had had some bullying, physical bullying, and that was really significant… [The Assistant Head of Secondary] was onto it straight, like pretty quickly. Actually, I ended up speaking to the principal because he was on leave. And then she Then … it stopped completely. And, and it was addressed straight away. So, we were thankful for that. For him, that was very affirming of this as a school, and these are teachers you can trust, who actually do care about you and will say this isn't right and you are important and so you do need to be looked after.

Shaun was impressed with the open discussion around the topic of bullying when he was considering the school for his son. He noted that, in comparison with another school option, the school's anti-bullying stance was one of the key elements in their choice of school, "here it's, uh, it's part of everything, you know… So, the key things for us: values, resilience and no bullying."

After enrolling her older son at the school, Amira reported that her son then encouraged her to also send his younger brother to the school because of the lack of bullying,

> First, my older boy mentioned that there is no bullying at the school…Everyone is nice, so you should consider bringing my brother, my brother to the school. Everyone here is nice. There is no such bullying. There's no such thing. Even if, because we are not angels and the boys, they are not angels, even if some incidents happen, it's spotted directly on the spot. We're not leaving issues like this open. It's just spotted immediately and actions are taken immediately.

She was also impressed with the timely action by the school in relation to bullying and enrolled her son. Brian, who has Indigenous links with the school, noted that "…there's not a lot of fighting, not a lot of bullying…" Naveen heard about the school's anti-bullying stance from friends and wanted this aspect of care for his daughter, "So, and my friends actually had told me that they look after the kids very closely and they look after [the students] if there is any bullying happening in anyway." This was important to him as a member of a migrant

family who wants to ensure her well-being, “So, we wanted to make sure that it doesn't affect her mentally…” Gavin wanted an environment where his children were supported, cared for, and safe from bullying. He was impressed with the school’s anti-bullying program and how they were putting it into practice to counter bullying,

> …the way we treat others… So, we had, so the, the system that was here, sort of thing, was almost like a buddy system instead of a bully system. So… the kids from the higher classes would look after the kids from the class because that's what they've been taught. So, it was something that flowed down, so it came from the teachers to the students and then from the students to the other students so that they all kind of got along. And that's something that we wanted our kids to have…

Some parents identified their children as having special needs and commented on the support provided by the school as providing an avenue to their child’s well-being. Some parents were specific about the types of special needs their children had such as Attention Deficit Disorder/Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADD/ADHD) or Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), others were broader in their descriptions and using terms such as ‘learning difficulties’. Amber reported that the school’s ability to support her daughter, with special needs, was a reason for enrolment. She feels that the support for her daughter has reduced her anxiety and provided better well-being,

> … her teacher is definitely a nurturing and supportive person, really understands, has a couple of kids in her class that have learning difficulties or that kind of thing and so, really, really supportive. And knows how to support my daughter in the best way possible and make her feel comfortable within the environment. And if she starts to get anxious knows how to calm her down, bring her back down, ground her, that kind of thing. So, yeah. That was also something that was really important…

Brianna, has two children with ASD and explained her dissatisfaction with their previous school’s limited support for her children’s special needs,

> So, one of the reasons why we weren't entirely satisfied with the, the public school was that my eldest, and also now my youngest, are both on the spectrum and it just felt like there wasn't enough understanding of why they were behaving in the way that there were…

She continued and reported how during the school interview the staff immediately began to provide an overview of the services they had in place which would provide extra support for her children. She felt they understood her children’s special needs and this confidence contributed to her school choice,

> Understanding during the interview… that the oldest is on the spectrum. OK, well, these are some of the support services that we've already got in place. And straightaway talking about [it] … When you talk about someone being on the spectrum or having any sort of learning difficulties or, or any, anything outside the box that not every, every solution is going to fit, you know, one of the solutions is not going to fit every child, so it was really comforting that they got that. So, that was, that's when we decided that that was probably going to be our best option, so, uh, we moved about three weeks later…

Before enrolling her children, Amanda heard from friends how the school had supported their child. The care and support the school provided for children with special needs impressed her and was a key the reason for choosing this school,

> One of the families we know, their child has some significant learning difficulties, and she'd been really impressed about the way the school had, before he even started, rung and contacted them, phoned them and asked, asked how to best meet his needs and said … this what we're putting in place. And we're just impressed by that.

When Susan was looking for a school for her child it was important for her that the school be able to support the different needs of each of her children. She confirmed that the support programs the school had in place for both her children contributed to her school choice, "I've got one child that's dyslexic and another one that's gifted and talented, so having the one school that can deal with both was important." Shaun shared that family friends have children at the school. Shaun was impressed how the teachers identified the need for extra support and how it flowed on to his classmates,

> So, they just talked about, particularly for us, that one of them has, wouldn't call it necessarily special needs, but they were, the school was able to identify very early that there was some extra work that needed to be done. The way that they approached that, and the stories that we heard from the parents about patience, teaching them resilience and the kids, not just their kid, but the kids around them to be able to understand why that, that, that particular student was doing what they were doing and, and those are the kinds of things that we were looking for.

Shaun concluded by saying that this type of support was what they were looking for in a school. Naomi has two children with ADD and believes they would not have the support needed in a government school. They searched for a school that would provide the necessary structure and support for their children,

> Both of our children have ADD. So, in a public schooling system, if it's not a school that's really on top of their students, they're likely to fall through the cracks. Transitioning them into high school we didn't have the same confidence, because I think it's a lot more sink or swim in high school. They give you, they educate you

> obviously, but they don't force you to do work or, and they don't follow up as much, I think. And our children are better in a more structured environment.

In summary, many parents were concerned with their child's well-being and their school choice decision revolved around how well the school would be able to support and contribute to their child's well-being. In many instances parents reported their child's experiences after enrolment in the school had reinforced their initial perceptions that the school would support the well-being of their child and contributed to their continued enrolment at the school. It is apparent that the term 'well-being' means somewhat different things to different parents and parents were not consistent in their use of the term. For these parents, the interview data indicated that well-being included the following: nurture, care and support, the child's happiness, pastoral care, the availability of chaplaincy and counselling, a safe environment, the school's anti-bullying policy and provision for special needs. Many parents, from both rural and urban schools, discussed the importance of their child's well-being in the school context. There was, however, no discernible difference between parents of rural and urban schools and their desire for the well-being of their child. Also, there was no discernible difference between parents affiliated with a faith and those that identified as non-faith in their desire for their child to experience well-being at school or what defined well-being.

5.4.3.3 Parents choose as Gatekeepers of Child's Educational Potential

The third theme of parents as gatekeepers that emerged from the data was that parents have educational expectations/aspirations for their child. Their school choice decision was influenced by the importance they placed on their child's education and reaching their potential, and whether the school would contribute positively to that educational experience. Expectations, aspirations and perceptions of parents varied and parents discussed several different educational aspects that were important to them, however, these varied in importance for parents. Six codes were identified in the data which related to parents as gatekeepers of their child's educational potential: individual attention; quality teachers; good standard of education, academic outcomes and well-rounded education; curriculum and range of subjects; talented students' program, and project-based learning.

Importantly, some parents discussed their experiences of how the school reinforced their perceptions of providing an environment supporting their child's educational potential. Sometimes parents implied that they chose the school because they believed it would support

their child in their learning and enable them to reach their potential. Occasionally, parents provided examples of how their current school experience confirmed their choice. As a result, these positive experiences promoted their confidence that the school would continue to provide a supportive educational experience for their child and contribute to their child reaching their potential. This experience also confirmed their initial school choice decision and that it had been the right choice. The significance of these experiences is that these parents will continue with their child's enrolment at the school into the foreseeable future.

Two parents at the same rural school mentioned the importance they placed on their child being treated as an individual by the school and receiving individual attention. With a son in Kindy, Megan did not want him to attend a government school where he would get "lost in a nameless system". She preferred to send him to a non-government school that would "foster his differing interests and his personal growth." She implied that she chose her current school because it provided the individual attention she desired for her son. Abigail expressed similar sentiments and reported that she didn't feel the same level of individual attention would be provided at other local schools, "there wasn't that individual attention". She added that her children have thrived in an environment where they are given individual attention and this contributes to her children's continuing enrolment at the school,

> I feel like [the teachers] take the time to get to know the child, their strengths, their weaknesses their dislikes and the way they learn best. So, some kids, obviously, learn visually better, written, reading. You know, I feel like that's been the biggest thing and I feel like that's how, in our experience, our children have thrived the most.

Two parents at the same urban school explained how they felt the teachers provide individual attention to students at their school of choice. Amanda was concerned that children can "just get lost in the mix" at many schools. Friends had shared their positive experiences with the school and after enrolling her child, Amanda has found the teachers do focus on the each child, "You know they teach hundreds of kids, but for here it seemed like the individual was important as well…" Susan added her initial impressions when visiting the school, "Everyone we met was really lovely, really inclusive, and I felt like there was a really strong emphasis on educating the individual child…" She also noted that it "felt like they were interested in the individual rather than busy telling me how my child will change and adapt to kind of their way of doing things…" She doesn't discount the importance of academic rigour but believes that educating the whole child is important, "academic outcomes are important, obviously, but they're not everything like you know, they, that kid's a whole person, not just

the academic outcomes they produce." At another urban school, Naomi believes that the individual attention her child received would prevent her child going unnoticed and neglected, "I don't believe that a child would as easily slip through the cracks in a school like [this school]."

Julia's impressions of teachers providing students with individual attention were similar: "[they] know my kids by name. They know exactly, you know, what they like, their personality, they know everyone by name." Bailey, added: "we feel like the students aren't just a number. They're valued."

A number of parents mentioned quality teachers as an important factor in their school choice. Some parents used various terms that have been considered to be synonyms for quality teachers and these included: good teachers, good at teaching and teacher quality. Naveen, at a rural school, claimed that the main reason for school choice was the quality of teachers, "They have got good teachers and that, and that was the main reason." He added that the review of the teachers he received was that "they are very good at teaching". Susan, an urban school parent, claimed that teacher quality was an important consideration in her choice of school, "the quality, teacher quality is very important."

At another urban school, Shaun mentioned that when he met his son's Kindy teacher he knew his choice was the right one, "once we went through that first process of meeting the teachers and meeting the other families, we just knew that we were in the right spot…" At the same urban school as Shaun, James, an indigenous parent, supported a similar view of teachers due to his personal connection to the school's teachers as an Adventist. Knowing the teachers gave him confidence in the teaching quality, "teachers have been great". Amira, at the same urban school as Shaun and James, noted that the school achieves well academically. She implied high teacher quality when she claims, "the academics, it's all, it comes again through the teachers".

Parents were also vocal about a good standard of education, academic outcomes and a well-rounded education as being important in their school choice decision. These elements were important for parents as gatekeepers of their children's education and their children reaching their potential. Parents didn't always articulate that they chose the school because they believed it would provide a better standard of education than another school. However, it was implied that they believed the school would offer a good level of education because they voiced how important education was for them. For Naveen, at a rural school, "education

was the priority" and his choice of school was closely tied with his daughter succeeding at school and adds cautiously that "…hopefully the standards are the same until Year 12." Susan, at an urban school, wanted "good educational outcomes" for her two children. She noted that the school had to meet her "standard for educational outcomes" but didn't explain what these outcomes were for her. Naomi, at a different urban school, chose the school because her children, with ADD, needed a structured environment to succeed and she believed that the school was able to provide this,

> [This school] won for us because it felt a bit more structured. There was a bit more emphasis on education. And that was that's important to us. So, a bit more emphasis on grooming children to go on to university.

Throughout the interview she reiterated the importance of academics to her choice, "the education… won out", "the education levels… were important for us", "the focus on education" and "we've been really happy with the standard of education that we're getting here". Amira, at the same school as Naomi, also briefly mentioned the importance of academic standards to her family, "academic performance definitely". She added that, "For the academics, it's all, it comes again through the teachers…" Bailey, at another urban school, stated that the school provides a well-rounded education for his son, "I think it's quite, quite well-rounded in the education". He doesn't state, however, how he came to this conclusion.

A couple of parents focused on the curriculum and the range of subjects offered by the school. Abigail, at a rural school, was impressed by the school's curriculum, "Oh, hearing about the curriculum, when we had our tour and learning about it. Yeah, we really impressed." When asked what attracted her about the curriculum, she added,

> What they're teaching here, um, we found it really interesting, especially… in Year 5 and how they're learning about politics and they did a business day recently. What they're teaching here is what we were expecting for them to have in … those big schools... They didn't but they're learning it here. So, we're really blown away really from that.

She also noted that even though the school was small, it found ways to ensure a range of subjects was available to students,

> I think even though it is a smaller school, it didn't mean you would miss out. So, when you're in Year 11 and if you wanted to study certain subjects, they would collaborate with other schools so all that sort of stuff so even now you still benefit from the small, small class sizes, um, but you don't miss out on other things. That's good.

Julia was excited about the opportunities available to her son in the range of practical subjects the school offered. When asked what aspects of the school impacted her initially, she stated,

> I was mind blown, honestly, and it gives the kids, like umm, the opportunity to see different aspects … if you're good with your hands you can open your business and do this. You know there's a lot of different aspects or there's a business, like a business entrepreneur program for kids that are interested in opening their own business. You know it's not just the stale program. It's a variety of things, so the kids can really try many, many things and decide what they want to be. So, they help them to open their horizons, expand their eyes and that.

A couple of parents from one urban school discussed the importance of providing programs to extend their talented children. Jennifer was impressed with the academic streaming that was available for her daughter and this helped with her decision-making concerning school choice,

> …one of the things we really liked is again, our daughter's quite driven academically also and so in Year 4 at that time they had the group's streamed, so for math they would break them up into sort of different levels.

Susan was also looking for a school that would suit her daughter's academic talent and cater to her son's learning difficulties. Her school choice decision was based on "gifted and talented programs, things like that. I've got one child that's dyslexic and another one that's gifted and talented, so having the one school that can deal with both was important." Her daughter was placed in an accelerated class that catered for her academic needs,

> In the Primary they have the graded classes so that the kids able to actually do accelerated modules and things like that. So, my daughter's actually been lucky enough to be put into accelerated learning. So, in Year 5 she was doing Year 6 work and so she was able to work at a pace that met her rather than having it sort of standard…

Two parents at one rural school discussed project-based learning as a positive incentive for school choice. Amber was attracted to the bush setting of the school and its encouragement of bush play. She continued, during the interview, to highlight how her daughter participated in a farm-focussed project-based learning initiative at their school of choice,

> Last term they did project-based learning and they did farm work which was really, really, good and I think it's important that kids understand the process and you know,

> this is where eggs come from, this is where chickens come from, this is how we have to look after these animals so that they well. So, yeah, I thought that was really cool.

Sarah, at the same school, also discussed project-based learning as a positive hands-on learning experience for her son who has ASD. She knew that the school provided non-traditional classroom options and this attracted her to the school,

> For me in particular, was the hands-on learning. Um, my oldest son has autism, like high functioning autism. My second son has what used to be called Asperger's, my older one in particular, is very hands on, is not built for the classroom. Really bright, really bored sitting down. So, being able to go and build things and try things and investigate things. It just was perfect for him, is perfect for him…

In summary, the theme of parents as gatekeepers of their child's educational potential emerged from the data. Their school choice decision was clearly influenced by the importance they placed on their child's education and reaching their potential, and whether the school would enhance that educational experience. Parents expressed the notion of their expectations, aspirations and perceptions differently. Terms and phrases used by parents included: individual attention, quality teachers, good standard of education, academic outcomes and well-rounded education, curriculum and range of subjects, talented students' program, and project-based learning. Parents from both urban and rural schools placed importance on their school choice based around their child's educational potential. The school was chosen if parents could see that the school would contribute to their child's educational experiences positively. There was no discernible difference between parents affiliated with a faith and those that identified as non-faith in their desire for their child's enhanced educational experience and potential to be reached.

5.4.3.4 Stage 3 Summation

Stage 3, interestingly, found that parents considered themselves gatekeepers of three specific Contextual Personal Factors relating to their children which influenced their school choice decision. Parents saw themselves as gatekeepers of family values, gatekeepers of their child's well-being and gatekeepers of their child's educational potential.

Many parents viewed themselves as gatekeepers of family values and overtly expressed that they were searching for a school whose values aligned with their own family values. They wanted the school to teach values as an extension or reinforcement of the values taught in the home. A variety of themes emerged from the data in relation to the values that parents sought from a school. The values were to teach kindness and compassion, respect

differences, develop personal traits like patience and resilience, promote manners, encourage clean language, inspire confidence, promote good morals, and encourage service to others. It is acknowledged that most parents emphasised only a few of these identified values that were particularly important to them in the interviews but had others in mind that were often implied or mentioned only in passing.

The research revealed that in this cohort there was no discernible difference between parents of rural schools and urban schools on their desire for the teaching of values, indeed most parents articulated that this was an important consideration in their school-choice decision. Parents with a faith affiliation whether SDA, Christian or other world faith expressed their keen desire for these same values. Interestingly, parents who stated that they had no faith affiliation still wanted values taught to their children. As a point of difference, Christian parents strongly connected values to Biblically-based principles, which was not always a connection made by non-Christian parents. Non-Christian parents, whether affiliated with another world faith or no-faith didn't always attribute values to Christianity but were certainly supportive of these values. Christian parents, including SDA parents, clearly articulated their desire for values teaching that would result in their child having a personal faith with God. Also, it is important to recognise that Christian parents saw values as an extension of Christian doctrine which was not the case for non-Christian parents. Even if non-Christian parents recognised values as connected to Christianity, they were not focused on aspects of personal faith or a belief in Christian doctrine, only that they were important values for living a positive life. Simply, SDA, Christian, other world faith and non-faith parents all were searching for the same values but interpreted them through a different lens. It is noted that the extent that parents believed a school could contribute to the teaching of appropriate values contributed to their decision-making process and helped solidify their final school choice.

Parents also viewed themselves as gatekeepers of their child's well-being and their school choice decision was heavily based on their perception of how well the school could support their child's well-being. A number of themes emerged from the data on what well-being meant to parents. At its core, well-being was viewed as providing a safe, nurturing, caring and supportive for their child which would contribute to the overall happiness of the child at school. The idea of well-being also extended to how this was achieved at school and the availability of counselling and pastoral care was seen as contributing to well-being for students. Some parents emphasised some of these factors more than others but for others

these factors were intertwined. Some parents were keen for a safe environment or the school's anti-bullying program; others focused on the care and support provided.

The data revealed that parents are acutely concerned about their child's well-being and certainly wanted to choose a school that supported and contributed to their child's well-being. This was a universal desire between parents of all school types and of all faiths. No discernible difference was noted to exist between parents of rural and urban schools and their desire for the well-being of their child. There was also no discernible difference identified between parents affiliated with a faith and those that identified as non-faith in their desire for their child to experience well-being at school. The extent that a school could contribute to their child's well-being certainly contributed to parental school choice decisions.

Parents also presented themselves keenly as gatekeepers of their child's educational potential. Their school choice decision was clearly influenced by the importance they placed on their child's education and reaching their potential and whether the school they chose would contribute to positive educational experiences and outcomes. It was clear that parents did not always look for high academic achievement in the school but often spoke of a well-rounded education that would impact their child's academic learning and social and psychological needs. Concerning academics, parents often emphasised their desire for their children to achieve to the best of their ability and for the chosen school to promote this type of learning. Parents saw this as achievable if there were quality teachers that would provide a good standard of education for their children. Parents were also keen for a variety of learning needs to be met and therefore were looking for a school with a range of curriculum options and programs for talented students as well as those needing learning support. Parents believed that it was these elements that enabled their children to reach their academic and personal potential.

Urban and rural parents both placed importance on their school choice around their child's educational potential, but, as a point of difference, more urban parents than rural parents emphasised academic outcomes as a factor that influenced their school choice decision. There was no discernible difference between parents affiliated with a faith and those that identified as non-faith in their desire for their child's enhanced educational experience and potential to be reached.

It is important to note that parents did not see the teaching of values, the well-being of their child and their child's educational potential as mutually exclusive. They often discussed

them as interrelated factors contributing to their school choice decision. This reinforces the notion that at Stage 3 school choice for parents is a complex process and reasons for school choice often overlap. The data showed that it is difficult to isolate any single element as a major reason for school choice.

5.4.4 Stage 4 – Decision is made

Stage 4 is the culmination of the first three stages of school choice. Stage 1 focuses on parents deciding that they want a non-government school for their child. Stage 2 explores Contextual School Factors that parents consider: School Location Threshold, School educational Options Threshold, School Leadership and Community Threshold, School Facilities Threshold and School Affordability Threshold. This study identified that there is a threshold that parents may have for each of these, but the threshold is fluid when parents consider all available factors of the school. Stage 3 identifies three important Contextual Personal Factors that parents see themselves as: Parents Choose as Gatekeepers of Family Values, Parents Choose as Gatekeepers of Child's Well-being, Parents Choose as Gatekeepers of Child's Educational Potential. After considering all contextual factors relating to school choice the decision is made by the parents to enrol their child into their school of choice. Stage 4, the final decision, is made by parents through a synergistic synthesis of all elements of Stages 1 – 3. All of the stages, however, are not stages that are independent of each other. Each stage impacts other stages and even within each stage there are factors that impact choice. Each and every factor is essentially a series of interacting loops. It is evident that the school choice decision-making process is complex, the multiple variables make this process unique for each individual parent.

5.5 Sources Of Information

This chapter has so far reported on the reasons for school choice as provided by parents during semi-structured interviews. Another aspect of investigation in this research was to understand the sources of information parents used to help with their school choice decisions. During the interviews, parents proffered insights into how they chose a school and what resources were available to them to facilitate informed choice. The analysis of the parent interview data identified that there were four distinct major categories that provided parents with information. These areas were: Interaction with the school, Research online, Influence of others and Child agency. Some parents accessed and relied on multiple sources of information in their school choice decision-making; others were selective and relied on

fewer sources. Parents differed in their reliance on these resources; no parent used all the sources identified in this study to help their decision-making. Figure 5.3 is a visual representation of the categories within the process of choosing.

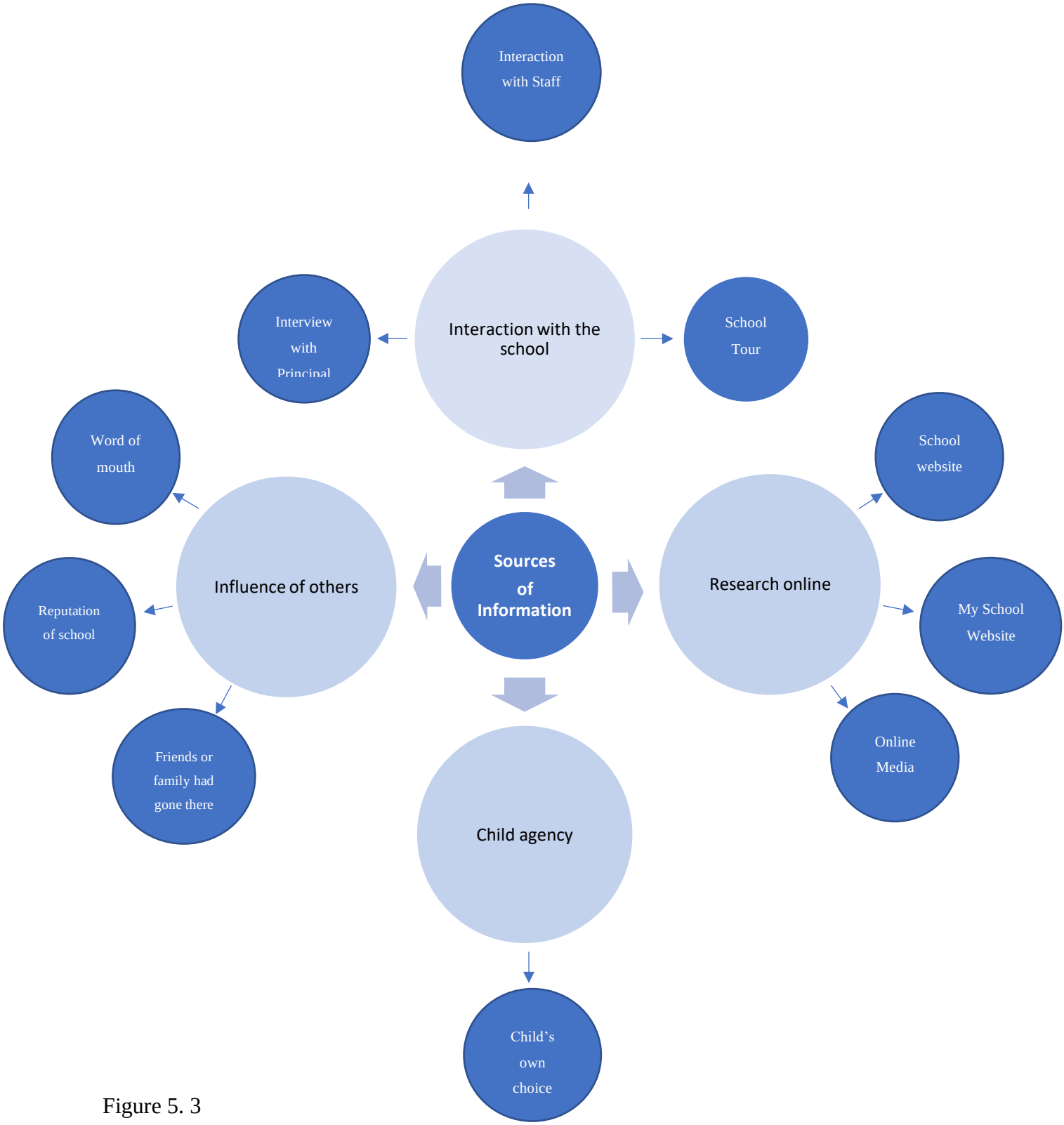


Figure 5. 3

Sources of Information

5.5.1 Interaction with the school

A number of parents from both rural schools and urban schools shared, during their interviews, that interacting directly with the school was useful to their decision-making process. Interaction with the school was most often identified as participating in an interview with the principal and/or interaction with staff and/or a tour of the school.

Several parents identified parent interviews with the school's principal as an important source of information about the school. Abigail, a Protestant Christian with children in the primary sector of a rural school, identified that her discussions with the principal and his transparency was what influenced her school choice,

> … he was upfront and honest about the pros and cons of a smaller school and, and that sort of thing, so I thought that was great. Um, so, yeah, I think it was all quite transparent from the start, so it wasn't the smoking mirrors… It was basically under promising and over delivering right from the get-go. So, it's been really great.

Naveen, a parent at the same rural school as Abigail, was confident in the responses given to his questions by the principal, "And we liked his answers… so we were very confident that [our] child will be very good in [her] studies and in her extra-curricular activities as well…" Naveen identifies as a Hindu and was not concerned with the Christian affiliation of the school.

Susan, a non-faith parent at an urban school, was impressed with the principal and his open acceptance of her non-faith family at the school. She stated that if he had been dogmatic about faith she would not have chosen the school,

> I think having that really honest conversation, you know with him and his leadership I think kind of really helped. If he had I said, like no, like our Christian values are such that you know this is the way that it is, and we're not tolerant of change or any sort of inkling towards that, I think I probably would have run. But he was really good.

James, an SDA parent from another urban school, came prepared with questions to the interview with the principal, before enrolling his children. He and his wife were particularly impressed with the honest answers they were given,

> We were, we had many questions that we had prepared and we were happy with the honest answers that we were given. We weren't kind of like given what we wanted to hear… So, we asked some of those questions in terms of, um, yeah, some of the approaches and opportunities and a bit more broader scope of classes availability and the importance of the arts in the school… I think we liked some of those answers of like, hey, we haven't really, we've struggled with this or we haven't been good at this,

> but we actually are planning to move forward and I will say that like you know, yeah, [the principal] and the two heads of school were honest in giving those answers.

James was also especially interested in the school's acknowledgement of Indigenous Australians. As an Indigenous Australian, James was keen to gauge the school's position and stance. He was encouraged that the school was honest about how they could improve and that they were working towards a better approach to Indigenous acknowledgment,

> We did ask what that, what that meant and what would be, I suppose, what language was being used and, and I think that was an encouraging conversation because there was an honest answer to it. You know, not just like, oh, yeah, yeah, we're all good we're all over that. It was like, well, actually we could do better in that area. And particularly, the principal … was honest as well, and said look, "We're endeavouring to really delve into that much better and be much better."

Some parents had interacted with staff to varying degrees, which seemed to provide confidence that the school was a suitable choice for their child. This was particularly the case for several SDA parents but also for a parent with no faith affiliation.

James, an SDA parent at an urban school, explained that he was considering the school because he had personal knowledge and interaction with staff, including teachers and chaplains. He "was very familiar with… some of the teachers…and the other factor was that the chaplains… We knew them quite well." He also mentioned how, during their school tour (discussed later) staff interaction made him feel very wanted at the school, "One thing that made us feel very comfortable coming away from it was the fact that multiple teachers and chaplains made a massive effort to actually, while we were walking around the facility, they wanted us." He added the strong influence this had on the school-choice decision, "So that was actually a very big factor in the decision." At the same urban school, Kelly, an SDA parent, had personal knowledge of staff and interacted with teachers at the school. As an alumnus of the school she explained how the inter-generational connections she has with teachers provided her with the assurance that her child would be well looked after,

> And plus I knew a lot of the teachers that work here. So, I knew that they would care about my kids, they'd look out for them if anything was going on and let me know. So, there was a few sort of more personal reasons that most people might not necessarily get… So, you're gonna meet the teachers that you went to school with. They're gonna, you know, they're still here, some of them. And then students you went with through are also here. So, I know that there's teachers that will care about my child.

Shaun, a non-faith parent at the same school, did not have a personal knowledge of the staff and relied on alternative methods to interact with staff. He discussed an interaction with staff that he views as important to his school choice decision. The school provided a "Meet the Teachers Day" and both he and his wife were impressed with the Kindergarten teachers,

> … we had a 'Meet the Teachers Day' and the three teachers from kindergarten were up there and talked to us about, you know who they are and how long they'd been with the school and what their principles are, and all those kinds of things… But when all three got up there, it was this kind of sigh of relief, to kind of go, well, That's great, doesn't matter where he lands. He lands where he lands and we know he's going to be in a safe pair of hands.

This staff interaction certainly gave Shaun confidence to send his son to the school. Andrew, an SDA parent at another urban school recognised that his personal knowledge of staff stems from his church affiliation and association,

> You know them from church or, or a family association. So, there's that added relationship side of it that you can... I don't know, it just seems to be... gives a better vibe and a better relationship with your teacher and, and being a parent, you know the teachers you, you see them at church or you hear about them in their community

This interaction with staff was seen as a positive aspect of choosing the school for his children.

SDA parents at both rural schools also mentioned their interaction with staff as a source of information about the school. Stewart and Emma, SDA parents transitioned their children into the school from interstate. They noted how their personal knowledge of staff gave them confidence in their decision to select this school for their children, "And we also had connections with, you know, staff at the school and also with the chaplaincy team and whatnot. So, we felt very comfortable, you know…" Gavin, at another rural school, was comfortable with their school choice for a number of reasons, one being that "we knew some of the teachers that were here."

Many schools offered a tour of the school to showcase facilities and resources. This allowed parents and the child to see the school operations for themselves. It was clear in the analysis of interview data that a tour of the school was a valuable source of information in parents' decision-making process.

Abigail, at a rural school, discussed how the school tour and seeing the facilities in person helped her decide that the school was the right school for her children,

> … coming in, having a look and um, looking around. And seeing opportunities with the woodwork room and the kitchen, the hospitality is just quite, it's really good. Yeah, so I think, yeah, seeing it in person instilled that it was a good idea.

Amber, a non-faith parent from a different rural school, mentioned that she used the school tour as one source of information to help her make her school choice decision,

> I really tried to get a broad perspective on the school and then I also did a walk around with the deputy principal and have a look at the school and she told me about it while I was here and everything, so yeah.

Brianna, at the same school as Amber, is a non-faith parent. She also mentioned the positive impact of a school tour on her family. In this instance it was the principal that conducted the tour with the entire family,

> He was lovely, took us and the four kids for a walk around the school, talked about the future plan for the school. Like yes, we might only have these facilities now, but this is what we're working towards. He had shown us some plans and, as I said, is walking around the school saying what we'd like to do this and we'd like to do that and, and … it just felt right.

Sarah, with children at the same rural school as Amber, mentioned how her husband and two of her children had a tour of the school. She recounted how her children were initially not keen to move schools, "we're not moving, we're not changing schools". However, after seeing the school with its modern facilities blended with a natural environment they became very excited about the move,

> My husband had a tour first. He came up with a couple of the kids … And apparently when they walked onto the grounds they looked around, they said, "Oh, my goodness, this is amazing." And the setting's so beautiful, natural. So even though we've got these really modern hubs around everywhere, it's still got the backdrop of our earth, like the trees, animals and all those natural things. So, it's yeah, it's a really beautiful setting.

Jennifer, a parent at an urban school with an Anglican background, remembered how she and her husband participated in the school tour. She cited how during the tour their decision to send their children to the school was being carefully considered but by the end of the tour the decision was made, "we had the tour and then … through that tour there was, there was lots of nodding and pretty much as soon as we got in the car he was like, yep, that's it." James, from a different urban school, focused on how the school tour made his family feel, that they were wanted at the school. This certainly contributed to the decision to attend that school,

> The day that we did come … a campus tour was organised. One thing that made us feel very comfortable coming away from it was the fact that multiple teachers and chaplains made a massive effort to actually, while we were walking around the facility, they wanted us and we felt like they would run across from other parts of the thing to say, are you thinking about coming? It's so great, we hope you come, you know you're gonna really enjoy it. So, we walked away from that actually feeling really, really wanted.

Naomi, at the same urban school as James, used school tours to compare different schools she was considering for her children. Naomi has a Jewish background and was not specifically looking for a Christian school. She discussed how she was impressed with the facilities of the school that were showcased during their school tour and this contributed to her school choice decision,

> We researched, I think, about three or four different private schools. And we did go on two other private school visits. Um, I think… when we did our [urban school] visit, we were really impressed with the standard of facilities more so than the other two schools.

In summary, the data analysis reveals that interviews with the principal, interaction with staff and school tours were useful sources of information for parents when considering a school for their child. Interviews with the school's principal clearly provided parents with confidence about choosing the school for their child. Interestingly, no parent mentioned a negative experience with their principal interviews. Indeed, the data suggests that interaction with the principal is the greatest influence on school choice within the 'Interaction with school' source of information. 'Interaction with staff' was significant for parents with an SDA faith affiliation and the data supports that this was more important than a meeting with the principal or school tour for this group of parents. School tours were also considered a useful source of information for parents, allowing them to see first-hand the facilities, resources and grounds of the school. Oftentimes these school interactions cemented their school choice decision. There were no notable differences between parents of urban schools and rural schools in terms of the importance of interaction with the school as a source of information. The data shows that parents from both urban and rural schools relied on their interactions with the school to be useful and impactful in their school choice decisions.

5.5.2 Research online

Another source of information that parents viewed as helpful in their school choice decisions was online research. This is hardly surprising considering the heavy reliance and

use of the internet in society today. Parents conducted online research by visiting the school website, the My School website and viewing other online media platforms.

A few parents briefly mentioned viewing the school's website. This, however, does not mean that other parents did not visit the school website, it simply means that they did not mention the school website as a source of information that helped their school choice decision. Abigail, from a rural school, stated that she "looked at the main website and went through that". Melanie, from the same rural school, informed herself "basically from looking at the website". Naomi from an urban school also "looked at the website" as a source of information. A third parent, Amber, from a different rural school, shared that she looked at the school website but with a critical eye and relied on other sources of information in her school choice decision,

> I did use the website. I think a lot of the time I'll read them. With schools they're going to paint, you know they're going to put up this very specific view of the school, which it's kind of like marketing you're going to sell the school in a very specific way, so I read it. I did read through the website and everything and I have looked through the curriculum and I have looked through all of the tabs and everything.

The My School website provides parents with resources on every school in Australia (Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2016). Information available on the website that may help parents with their decisions about different school includes key facts and figures, financial information for each school, student literacy and numeracy attainment and students' NAPLAN results. A number of parents noted that they consulted the My School website but the value placed on the information found varied from parent to parent and indeed, some parents voiced their limited reliance on the website in their school choice decisions.

Abigail, a parent with children at a rural school, was familiar with the My School website but stated that she didn't use it to help her decision and explains why, "I know it comes up and then it will give you a rank as well, but with those ranks I don't really, I don't read into it too much."

Amanda, at an urban school, had used the My School website when choosing a primary school for her children. In her choosing a high school for her children she stated that it wasn't an influencing factor of her school choice decision. She explained,

> I've used My School in the past when we picked a primary school and found that My School wasn't sufficient for and realised we, with our values, what we valued in

> education was much broader than just the academic… I looked at My School a couple of years ago, but that wasn't an influencing factor.

Susan, at the same urban school as Amanda, mentioned only in passing that she consulted the My School website and continued to discuss other influences in her school choice decisions. Jennifer, at the same urban school, consulted the NAPLAN results available on this website but only as adding to her overall assessment of the school, "… we know that NAPLAN doesn't really have a great effect, but I guess you need something to look at to see where the school is overall." Naomi, from a different urban school, implied that she consulted the My School website but without specifically naming the site, "But we did find a comparison website of schools in our zones and we also went and visited the school." Naomi stated that she did not rely solely on the My School website but complemented her research online with a tour of the school. Shaun, at the same school as Naomi, also consulted the My School website and looked at the school's NAPLAN results. However, he is keen to emphasise that although academic results are important, he was primarily looking for the teaching of values, promoting resilience and anti-bullying at the school,

> Academically, yeah, look, it's great. Like we, we checked out the research on… My School, yeah and NAPLAN results and all those kind of things and they were good. You know that, that's kind of what, all we really wanted was to know that there was those three things and the academic side was important…

Abigail, from a rural school, added that she researched online media and only found positive information about the school, "So we looked at news articles to see what sort of, what they were doing. All were positive, there were no negative." She then added that other sources of information helped her school choice decision: "So reading about all that and sort of nestled in with the informational website and then the interview and then seeing it in person, all those elements together." Interestingly, she would have liked to have seen testimonials online from parents, "One thing I thought was missing, which I think, after being a parent here, which I think would benefit, would be testimonials from parents on the websites."

In summary, a number of parents researched the school online by looking at the school's website, the My School website and other online media. Their reliance on these websites varied and online research was only one source of information parents used in their school choice decisions. There was no discernible difference between parents with various religious affiliations who used these platforms as a source of information nor whether they were from urban or rural schools.

5.5.3 Influence of others

Analysis of interview data revealed that parents often relied on the influence of others as a source of information about the school. During the interview process it became clear that parents wanted confirmation from others that the school they were contemplating was the correct choice and relying on reports from other people was an important source of information. Parents were influenced by word of mouth, the recommendation of friends or family who had gone to the school, and the reputation of the school in the community. Every school in this research had a number of parents that were influenced in their school choice decision by others.

Word of mouth was one source of information for numerous parents in rural and urban schools. Amber, who has a child in the primary sector of a rural school, explained that she gleaned information about the school through word of mouth. She believed it is a reliable source of information,

> I actually talked to a friend of mine. Well, a friend of the family's. And I know them through my parents. My parents go to a church over in [rural town] and they go to the same church and I was talking to them and I was talking to my parents and they all kind of said well, what about [the urban school]?... I made sure that I also did word of mouth and I did talk to people, and I did because I think that definitely gives a true indication.

Brianna, at the same rural school as Amber, vaguely remembered speaking to someone and their local SDA school was suggested in that conversation, "…somebody had suggested the Adventist school and so sort of talked to a few other people and then gave the school a call." Similarly, Stewart and Emma generalised the word of mouth they received, "We talked to parents with kids that attend here". Abigail, from a different rural school, had recently relocated to the area. She stated that she did not know anyone at the school, so personal recommendations were not available to her. However, she knew people who knew of children that came to the school, "… people said that they knew of people, and … that was the most feedback I got from when we first arrived." Clearly, word of mouth was not the primary source of information for Abigail.

Urban school parents also sought word of mouth recommendations about the school they were considering. Amanda brought up her experiences with word of mouth a number of times in her interview,

> I spoke to quite a lot of people who said I hear good things about that school. My family member goes to that school. They love it, so I've only heard one person have a negative experience. Everyone else raved about it and said how impressed they were… There was a lot of testimonies from people like maybe eight different families in different contexts. Some I knew quite well and others I just would meet and they go "I couldn't be happier with that school, it's fantastic".

She added that hearing directly from people was important to her decision-making, "I think people's testimony was, is, significant for me because they're people whose kids are going here and they'll tell you the ins and outs and things they're not happy with." She also iterated that the school's name "just keeps popping up".

Some parents were influenced by family and friends who had children at the school. Naveen, from a rural school, had friends at the school who gave him positive reports. "Now, because my friend's kids are in here and they have, they already had the experience. So, I did ask them and they did say that this is a good school." He adds, "… my friends' kids are already studying in here, yes, so I had more confidence". Naveen's friends, who had children already at the school, were certainly a valued source of information for him in his school choice decisions. Gavin, from the same rural school, explained that he had family that had attended the school, "My sister had bought her three kids through this school as well… So, they virtually just followed on sort of thing 'cause we wanted to be integrated as a family." He implied that being in the same school as family would connect them.

Jennifer, from an urban school, remembered the importance she placed on friends' recommendation of the school, "We had friends that also go to [the school], so their feedback was obviously pretty important." Andrew, at the same urban school as Jennifer, mentioned the feedback from his friends who had children in the school, "our friends had always said that it's a really good school… We heard about the really good atmosphere". When Shaun was choosing a different urban school for his son, he relied on his friends' recommendations and as a result chose the school,

> …we have very close friends… their two children come to the, to the school… close friends whose kids are still going here… it was story on story… the stories were enough for us from the people that, the research we've done, the stories that we heard were more than enough for us to send [our son] here.

Julia, at the same urban school as Shaun, has children in the high school. She also had friends that recommended the school to her, "Well, another friend came here and she was really happy" and "I had a friend from church that came here and she told us about it as well." Amira too, transferred her children to the same urban school because "he has friends

here". James, was also influenced by friends and family who were at the school, "had good friends and also family cousins in the school… So that was a big thing as well."

Naveen works in the medical field and stated that he also relied on the reputation of the rural school in the community. He was able to take the opportunity in his workplace to ask members of the community their recommendations about schools in the area. He shared,

> Yeah, I did ask other friends, as well as my work, and from patients who come in with the kids and we actually ask them as well. Like, which school do you prefer? All the kids are… in different schools because of different reasons, but they actually said, have you looked at [rural school]? That's a nice school. So it was, it was like that in people's mind, the school. And no one said anything wrong about it. So that was one positive.

Naveen added that he chose the school because "it was all good in the community as well. Like they had good views about it." Amber, at another rural school, simply stated that "they've got a really good reputation."

Amanda, from an urban school, claimed that she didn't know much about the school till "this school's name just keeps popping up". She added that the reputation of the school impacted their school choice decision,

> Reputation was a big thing… we didn't really know a lot about the school it was only that I started hearing about it in the community… it was mainly reputation actually and then we, because of the reputation, we should actually consider that school.

Susan, at the same urban school, moved from a capital city to the region. Before even purchasing a house she canvased random people in the community to see which school was recommended. The school's reputation in the community certainly contributed to her confidence in their school choice,

> I would pretty much ask anyone with a pulse, their opinion, because I believe that sometimes the opinion of people that live in the area they know more than what's written on an annual report or on a website. So, I would go to IGA ask the kid at the checkout and I asked the real estate agents that I was, we were looking at properties around the area. I would ask them, I would, I would literally ask the person serving me at a cafe, you know. Hey, I'm looking to bring my kids up to the coast. What do you think? [The school] came up repeatedly. But yeah, [the school] just came out of people's lips far more common, which reaffirmed a lot of the stuff…

Bailey, at the same school as Amanda and Susan, claimed that the school "has a good name in the local community as well." He added that the school's reputation in the

community impacted him, “But the people that we bumped into in the community, 9 times out of 10 was always a good comment attached to the school.”

This researcher noted that the notion of reputation in the community could go beyond the local geographic community and can reflect the religious community that the school belongs to. Sarah relocated her family from another regional area where they had attended the local SDA school. At the previous school she was told about the positive aspects of the new school. “We had been told from people in the Adventist community down in [regional area] that it was a bigger school but had really great facilities and that has rung true.” The reputation of the school clearly went beyond the local community and was reflected in the religious community over a thousand kilometres away.

In summary, for many parents the influence of others was an important source of information. Sometimes this influence came through word of mouth, sometimes it was the recommendation of friends or family who had gone to the school, other times it was the reputation of the school in the community that was influential. Some parents relied on more than one of these influences to gain information about the school and affirm them in their choice decisions. It seems that some SDA parents, relied heavily on friends and family for information, or confirmation, of their choices whilst parents of other faiths and those that had no faith affiliation were influenced by word of mouth and the school’s reputation in the community to a greater degree.

5.5.4 Child agency

The data showed that parents considered many elements in choosing a school for their child. The decision is not made lightly and often more than one family member is participant to that decision. A small number of parents were happy to choose the school based on child agency, that is, allowing the child to choose the school themselves or being intimately engaged in the decision-making process.

For Susan, at an urban school, she wanted a school where her children wanted to be, “Well, my kids had to wanna go there. OK, so that was a big thing. You know, like we, we would go and see the school and that that was a place they wanted to be.” She added that when her daughter saw the school facilities, “she just walked out and she was like, where do I sign?” Jennifer, whose children go to the same school as Susan’s children, stated that her daughter “was a part of the decision-making as well.” At one point, Julia at another urban school only had her elder son at the school. When Julia’s elder son was thriving at the school

she asked the younger son whether he would like to go to the school. He answered with a resounding “Yes, yes, I wanna come, I just do”.

In summary, allowing a child to be involved in school-choice decisions could make school transition an easier experience. The data showed that a small number of parents were willing to be influenced by their children in choosing a school; indeed, some parents encouraged this input. However, this child agency was only given to older children, from upper primary onwards, and when a change of school was occurring.

Sources of Information Summation

In summation, during the interview process the researcher identified four distinct major categories of sources of information that aided parents in choosing a school for their child. These major categories are Interaction with the School, Influence of Others, Research Online and Child Agency. Many parents shared that there was more than one source of information that influenced their school choice decisions and these sources were used to inform their decision to send their child to that school.

Interaction with the school took place as an interview with the principal, interaction with the staff and/or a school tour. The data showed some differences between parents of SDA faith affiliation and those who were not and the degree to which these sources were used. For SDA parents Interaction with staff was an importance source of information and strongly influenced their commitment to sending their children to an SDA school. There was no discernible difference between parents of different faith affiliations or no faith affiliation in this major category. There were also no notable differences between parents of urban schools and rural schools in terms of the importance of interaction with the school as a source of information. Importantly, these school interactions cemented the school choice decision for some parents.

Online research was also an important source of information for numerous parents. Online research included accessing the school website, the My School website and online media. Parental reliance on these websites was varied and Online research was only one source of information parents used in their school choice decisions. There was no discernible difference in the religious affiliation of parents who used the internet as a source of information and no significant difference whether parents were from urban or rural schools.

The influence of others was a source of information valued by many parents. Parents relied on word of mouth, family and friends who had gone to the school as well as the

reputation of the school in the community. It seems that some SDA parents relied heavily on friends and family for information, or confirmation, of their choices, while parents of other faiths and those with no faith affiliation were influenced by word of mouth and the school's reputation in the community to a greater degree.

It is suggested that in this research interaction with the school and influence of others were the most influential sources of information with the Influence of others also influential but to a lesser degree. Research online was used warily by parents and child agency was arguably the least influential source of information. It is recognised that these conclusions would most likely be different if conducted elsewhere or at another time.

5.6 Summary

This chapter provided an in-depth exploration of Phase Two of this research: the qualitative data, results and analysis. Comprehensive analyses of interview data were completed to present parental views of school choice. Further, this qualitative research aided in a deeper understanding of factors contributing to school choice and the sources of information parents used to aid in their school choice decision.

The data indicated for these parents the school choice decision was often a four-stage process. Firstly, Stage 1 – Parents decide they want a non-government school, Stage 2 – Parents consider Contextual School Factors, Stage 3 – Parents consider Contextual Personal Factors and Stage 4 – Decision is made. This research highlighted that all the Contextual School Factors and the Contextual Personal Factors contributed to a parents' school choice decision process. Secondly, the data identified four distinct categories of sources of information that helped parents in the process of school choice. These major categories are Interaction with the School, Influence of Others, Research Online and Child Agency. The data revealed that parents were influenced by a combination of a number of sources in their school choice decision.

The following chapter, Chapter 6: Synthesis and Discussion will present a final synthesis of the research conducted and a detailed discussion of these findings as they relate to implications, limitations and recommendations.

CHAPTER 6: SYNTHESIS AND DISCUSSION

6.1 Introduction

This case study was located within the North New South Wales region based on data obtained from two urban schools and two rural schools. The research was focused on a specific Australian faith-based school system, Adventist Schools Australia. It aimed to help understand why an increasing number of parents are choosing SDA schools in Australia, despite ample government and other non-government schools from which to choose, and to explore the factors that influence parents when making that choice. The overarching research question was:

> What are the motivating factors that influence parents when choosing a faith-based school for their children?

Four sub-questions were identified that stemmed from the research question:

1. Are there differences between parents' ideal school choice and their reasons for school choice of their current school?
2. Are there differences in the reasons for school choice between parents that have different faith affiliations: SDA faith affiliation, other faith affiliation, and parents that have no faith affiliation?
3. Are there differences in the reasons for school choice for parents whose children attend urban schools and rural schools?
4. What sources of information were influential in helping parents make their school choice?

6.2 Synthesis Of Major Findings

6.2.1 Introduction

This section of the chapter synthesises the major findings of the quantitative and qualitative research presented in Chapters 4 and 5 respectively. It is interesting to note that the results from the quantitative data analysis often reinforced elements of the results of data analysis from the qualitative phase.

This study identified four distinct stages of the parents' school choice decision-making process. Stage 1 identified the notion that parents initially choose their current school because they specifically wanted an SDA school, or because they desired a Christian school, or they wanted a non-government school for their child. Stage 2 recognised that parents then

evaluated their school based on the perceived quality of the school's contextual factors. In Stage 3 parents evaluated the school from the perspective of the Contextual Personal Factors and Stage 4 was the culmination and summation of all these considerations where their school choice decision was made.

Each of the research phases of the study, however, provided unique insights into different aspects of the school choice process. Firstly, the data from the survey enabled the researcher to gain a greater understanding of the second stage of the decision-making process relating to important school contextual factors; particularly the relative importance of these respective school contextual factors. Secondly, the data from the interviews provided deeper insights into the parents' school choice decision-making process relating to the school's Contextual Personal Factors.

The current research revealed that parents choose a faith-based school based on a synergy of reasons, rather than a tightly defined set of reasons. School choice decisions were complex considerations made by parents; this was apparent in the survey responses and the interviews. The data showed that these parents were indeed rigorous in their school choice decisions and their decision was not based on isolated factors but on many interacting and inter-dependent factors. This concurs with the findings in the literature that there is no single reason or factor for school choice but rather that parents consider and make their school choice based on multiple factors (Beamish & Morey, 2012, 2013; Goh & Dolnicar, 2006; Independent Schools Council of Australia, 2017; Independent Schools Queensland, 2019; Kennedy et al., 2011; Warren, 2016). A unique contribution of this study is that there was a suggestive hierarchy of the importance placed on these respective factors by these parents.

This study parallels the Australian school choice literature in that it also identified a number of commonly cited factors that contribute to parental school choice decisions. These commonly cited factors include academic excellence, affordability, location, quality facilities and resources, quality teaching, smaller class sizes, a supportive and caring environment, and the teaching of values.

The complexity of the question cannot be answered simply and four sub-questions were identified that stemmed from the overarching research question. These results are discussed below.

6.2.2 School Choice Influences

6.2.2.1 Introduction

It is important to appreciate that the school choice decision-making process is a multi-stage process where parents consider and weigh up many factors. These factors are not stand-alone factors but are a dynamic interplay of interacting loops that parents constantly consider before making their final choice of school. Once parents made the decision to choose a faith-based school for their children the major factors that influenced them was their evaluation of a particular faith-based school across two domains: first, the Contextual School Factors and second, the Contextual Personal Factors.

6.2.2.2 Contextual School Factors

Contextual School Factors are factors that relate to the school's physical facets and the school's educational orientation. The data indicated that parents' evaluation of each of the school's contextual factors had to reach a certain threshold level before the school was considered a potential option for their children and parents could then move on to Stage 3 in the decision-making process. This threshold level, however, was context bound on at least two levels.

The first level was their family and community context (see Chapter 5, Figure 5.1). This context presented to parents what was reasonable, or a threshold range, for them to expect in relation to the respective Contextual School Factors. This is clearly illustrated in terms of parents' expectations of reasonable school fees. For non-government urban school parents in this study school fees in the middle range (for example, around $10,000) were considered reasonable and manageable relative to their income. However, for most urban school parents in this study, schools with fees in the high range (twice the average of middle range schools) could not be considered. On the other hand, rural school parents in this study considered school fees in the low range (for example, around $3000) as reasonable because this was financially possible. Yet, for some rural parents even the low range of fees was only just possible. These parents did not consider schools with fees in the middle to high range.

The second context was the comparison of Contextual School Factors. Parents were amazingly realistic about what a school could reasonably offer in terms of these factors. For example, the quality of school facilities and resources was considered relative to other factors such as school fees. Thus, if a school was perceived to be in easy reach of their initial

threshold values in most of these Contextual School Factors they were willing to lower their initial threshold values, for other the factors, but there was still a perceived threshold level to be met. With the threshold levels reached for the Contextual School Factors, parents could now move to Stage 3 in the school choice decision-making process.

Parents indicated there were six Contextual School Factors that were considered in their assessment of a school. Even though all these factors were considered important parents also generated an importance category for each of the six Contextual School Factors: Important, very important, very, very important and extremely important. This relative importance of the respective conceptual Contextual School Factors is a significant and unique finding of this study. These six Contextual School Factors and their respective importance category are presented below.

The **Context of School** factor focused on fees affordability, location and pre- and post-school services. Although this particular factor per se was not identified by previous research, elements of this factor were identified by other research as influencing school choice decision-making (Beamish & Morey, 2013; Campbell et al., 2009; English, 2004; Fahey, 2019; Goh & Dolnicar, 2006; Independent Schools Queensland, 2019; Kennedy et al., 2011; Windle, 2015). Even though this study identified the Context of School factor as being an important consideration for parents in their school choice decision it's relative importance within these factors was one of the three lowest factors.

The **Faith-based Characteristics** factor highlighted the faith-based nature of the school. This study is important in that the few school choice studies focusing on faith-based schools have mostly combined data all types of faith-based schools or have data from only one school (Beamish & Morey, 2013; Campbell et al., 2009; English, 2004; Independent Schools Council of Australia, 2020; Kennedy et al., 2011). Even though this study identified the Faith-based Characteristics factor as being an important consideration for parents in their school choice decision it was also one of the three lowest factors.

The **School Leadership and Community** factor which focussed on the impact of the parent's interaction with the principal (and/or administrators) pre-enrolment and their vision for the future. It also included the community feel of the school. A small number of school choice studies were identified that also established the importance of this factor influencing parental school choice decisions (Beamish & Morey, 2013; Cahill, 2009; Independent Schools Council of Australia, 2008). This study also identified the School Leadership and

Community factor as being an important focus for parents in their school choice decision. Again, it was also one of the lowest three factors.

The **School Structure Characteristics** factor, which captured the nature of the educational and physical structure of the school, included elements such as the appearance of grounds, buildings and facilities, class and school size, and K-12 availability. These same school structure characteristics have been identified as important school choices influencers by most school choice studies (Beamish & Morey, 2013; Beavis, 2004; Cahill, 2009; Campbell et al., 2009; English, 2004; Independent Schools Queensland, 2007, 2011, 2015, 2019; Windle, 2015; Wood, 2013). This study identified the School Structure Characteristics factor as being a very important deliberation for parents in their school choice decision.

The **Academic Program/Profile** factor promoted the academic and extra-curricular options provided by the school and included the perceived academic standard of the school. This factor is perhaps the most often highlighted factor in influencing parents' school choice and this study identified the Academic Program/Profile factor as very, very important. This finding concurs with previous school choice studies (Beamish & Morey, 2013; Beavis, 2004; Cahill, 2009; Campbell et al., 2009; English, 2004; Fahey, 2019; Forsey, 2008; Goh & Dolnicar, 2006; Independent Schools Queensland, 2019; McCarthy, 2016; Windle, 2015; Wood, 2013).

The **Student Interaction** factor emphasised the student-school interaction within the personal sphere. Items such as nurture, appearance of students, wearing of uniform and behaviour and management of students were included in this factor. Parents considered this factor as extremely important in their school choice decisions, the most important of the six factors. Other research also supports the high importance of this factor in parental school choice decisions (Beamish & Morey, 2013; Beavis, 2004; Cahill, 2009; Campbell et al., 2009; English, 2004; Goh & Dolnicar, 2006; Independent Schools Queensland, 2019; Kennedy et al., 2011; McCarthy, 2016; Windle, 2015; Wood, 2013).

To sum up, this study identified six Contextual School Factors and parents indicated that all these factors were important when considering their school choice decisions. However, it was evident that parents gave these factors relative importance in their ratings. This study identified the Context of School factor, Faith-based Characteristics factor, and School Leadership and Community factor as being important considerations for parents in their school choice decision. The School Structure Characteristics factor was identified as

very important for parents in their school choice decision. This study also identified the Academic Program/Profile factor as very, very important and the Student Interaction factor as extremely important in their school choice decisions.

The data indicates that all six Contextual School Factors were considered by parents in their school choice decision-making. There was, however, a hierarchical level of importance layered over these six Contextual School Factors. The higher the level of importance of the factor in the hierarchy the greater the parent's initial threshold value for the factor. This understanding has potential to enable schools to promote their schools more effectively. However, parents were interested in more than just these six important Contextual School Factors when choosing a school for their children. Contextual Personal Factors were also strongly considered in parental school choice decisions.

6.2.2.3 Contextual Personal Factors

The data indicated that the parents' evaluation of the Contextual Personal Factors, the focus of Stage 3 of the school choice decision-making process, was strongly influenced by their context, particularly their faith background, family background and close community background.

In Stage 3 three Contextual Personal Factors were identified. These were factors that reflected each parent's desire to ensure that the school would support and enhance their child's experience and development, evaluated against their own broad parent responsibility framework. These factors were: parents as gatekeepers of family values, parents as gatekeepers of their child's well-being and parents as gatekeepers of their child's educational potential. During the interviews, parents strongly articulated that they saw themselves as gatekeepers of these factors, which were seriously considered in their school choice decisions.

The first contextual personal factor identified was parents as gatekeepers of family values. Although the family values articulated by the parents were not identical there were a series of values that were common to almost all parents: kindness and compassion, respect, inclusivity, resilience, gratitude, manners, being a good person and service to others.

Most parents articulated during the interviews that the teaching of these values was an important consideration in their school choice decision. There was no significant difference between parents with a faith affiliation, whether SDA, Christian, other world faith, and parents with no faith affiliation and their desire for the teaching of these values. The only

difference was that Christian parents connected these values to Biblical principles whereas non-Christian parents and parents with no faith affiliation expressed their desired values without any direct connection to the Bible, rather referring to them as family values, or simply using the terms values or ethics. Parents' desire for the teaching of values in the school they choose for their children is also prominent in the literature (Beamish & Morey, 2013; Campbell et al., 2009; English, 2004; Warren, 2016; Wilkinson et al., 2004; Wood, 2013).

The second Contextual Personal Factor identified was parents as gatekeepers of their child's well-being. Again, this was not articulated consistently, and it became obvious that well-being meant different things to different parents. However, there was strong commonality among parents desiring a nurturing and safe environment, ensuring their child's happiness, providing pastoral care, the availability of chaplaincy and counselling and the provision for special needs.

The data revealed that parents chose a school they believed would contribute to their child's well-being. This is supported within the literature. Many studies identified parents' desire for the well-being of their children at school as a very important consideration in their school choice decisions (Beamish & Morey, 2013; Campbell et al., 2009; English, 2004; Goh & Dolnicar, 2006; Independent Schools Queensland, 2019; Kennedy et al., 2011; McCarthy, 2016; Windle, 2015; Wood, 2013).

The third Contextual Personal Factor identified was parents as gatekeepers of their child's educational potential. Parental school choice decisions were impacted by the importance parents placed on their child's education and reaching their potential. For some parents this also included a consideration of how well they believed the school would contribute positively to their child's educational experience. It is important to mention that the desire for reaching educational potential rarely focused on high academic achievement, but rather on providing an educational environment that best supported their child's learning in various ways. Parents expressed this desire in several different ways, however, there were clear and consistent common desires. These were individual attention, quality teachers, a good standard of education, a well-rounded education, a broad curriculum and range of subjects, a talented students' program and project-based learning.

The literature shows that parents did consider their child's educational experience and reaching their potential as an important aspect driving school choice. Research conducted by

English (2004), Independent Schools Queensland (2019), Beavis (2004), Cahill (2009), Independent Schools Council of Australia (2008), McCarthy (2006), Beamish and Morey (2013), Campbell et al. (2009), Kennedy et al. (2011), Rudd and Gillard (2008), Wilkinson et al. (2004) and Windle (2015) all consider educational experience and reaching potential as a consideration of parents in school choice decisions.

6.2.2.4 Evaluation of Factors

It must be kept in mind that these Contextual Personal Factors and Contextual School Factors are not stand-alone factors but are a part of a dynamic interplay of interacting loops that parents constantly consider before their final choice of school is made. Parents also recognised that schools cannot cater to every parent's wants and desires and they take this into consideration in their final summation of the above factors. Parents then moved on to Stage 4 in the school choice decision-making process where their final decision was made.

6.2.3 Ideal School Choice versus Current School Choice

Quantitatively, comparisons were made between the school choice factors that parents identified would contribute to choosing an ideal school and the factors that had contributed to choosing their current school. The quantitative data revealed that the importance rating for current school factors follows the distribution of the importance rating for ideal school factors very closely but there were some notable differences between parents' reasons for their ideal school choice and their reasons for their current school choice. This is also supported by the frequency analysis of the three most influential items identified by parents when choosing an ideal school and their current school.

Therefore, to answer the question whether there are differences between parents' ideal school choice and their reasons for the choice of their current school, the research revealed:

- There was little difference between the distribution and the actual importance of Contextual School Factors influencing parents' ideal school choice and their reasons for choosing their current school.
- The highest priority of parents in choosing an ideal school is their desire for positive Student Interaction. Parents also ranked this factor as the highest priority when choosing their current school.
- Parents considered high academic standards and varied educational experiences important factors but even though their current school did not

always reach the desired ideal standard, it was acceptable because it was close to their ideal and the other factors were favourable.

- The research suggests that most parents did not highly prioritise the Faith-based characteristics factor of a school in their school choice for either their ideal school choice or current school choice.

A comparison between ideal school choice and current school choice was not evident in the literature and is a distinctive contribution of this study to understanding reasons for school choice.

6.2.4 Faith Affiliation of Parents

This research study was encapsulated within the Australian Seventh-day Adventist school system. Inasmuch as the school's religious affiliation is SDA, the majority of students at all four schools involved in this research, ranging from 79% to 91%, identify as non-SDA. This phenomenon is in part what inspired this research. Why are parents, who are not affiliated with the faith tradition of the school, choosing to send their children to SDA schools? Furthermore, some parents are affiliated with other faith traditions, including other Christian, Islam, Buddhism, Daoism, Sikhism, Hinduism, Baha'i and Judaism. Other parents identified themselves as having no faith affiliation. What are their reasons for choosing an SDA school for their children? Are there differences in the reasons for school choice between these groups?

Therefore, to answer the question of whether there are differences in the reasons for school choice between parents of varying faith affiliations, the research revealed:

- There were some notable differences in the reasons for school choice between parents of varying faith affiliations; however, in many aspects of school choice parents were looking for similar factors.
- SDA faith affiliated parents rated the Faith-based Characteristics factor as Number 1 in their school choice decision-making considerations. This reflects on their focus that the school was an SDA school or a Christian school, where Christian values are taught and the availability of Chaplaincy/Counselling. However, for Other Faith affiliated parents and Non-Faith affiliated parents this was not considered as important in their school choice decisions.

- For Other Faith and Non-faith categories of parents, the Student Interaction factor was highly influential in their school choice decisions, rated as Number 1, although SDA parents rated this factor Number 2.
- SDA parents were less interested in the School Structure Characteristics, Academic Program/Profile and Student Interaction school choice factors than parents identifying with Other Faith and Non-faith affiliation groups.
- Parents affiliated with the SDA church would choose a home close to their school of choice for their children to attend or conversely, were willing to accept a longer commute to attend the SDA school of choice. Although parents with other faith or no faith affiliation may choose to live near an SDA school for their children to attend, it was for reasons other than it being an SDA school.
- SDA affiliated parents and other Christian parents who were committed to their children attending a Christian school are more likely to pay whatever the school fees were, whereas for other parents, school affordability was at their threshold and if fees were deemed too high, an alternative school may be considered.
- Parents, irrespective of faith affiliation, expressed the desire for their children to attend a school that taught values. There was no discernible difference between parents with a faith affiliation, whether SDA, Christian, other world faith, and parents with no faith affiliation and their desire for the teaching of values.
- There was a universal desire from parents that the school would support their child's well-being. There was no discernible difference between parents of the different faith affiliated groups or parents with no faith affiliation.
- Parents of all faith category groups chose a school they believed it would contribute to their child reaching their potential (academic and social).

The findings of this research examining whether there are differences in the reasons for school choice between parents of varying faith affiliations support but add to what is identified in the Australian literature review provided in Chapter 2: Literature Review. This research identified that for SDA parents the Faith-based Characteristics factor of a school was rated as the most influential factor out of five factors in school choice decision-making considerations. Other Faith parents rated this factor as fourth and Non-faith affiliated parents rated this factor as least important, indicating that this was not a highly influential factor in their school choice decisions. This finding is supported by the research of Beamish and Morey (2012, 2013) who found that the importance of being a Christian school was rated

seventeenth of twenty-nine factors and Kennedy et al. (2011) whose research ranked the religious denomination of the school as fifteenth of twenty-nine school choice factors.

Furthermore, this study identified similar results in the research of Beamish and Morey (2013) who discovered that for SDA parents a longer commute is acceptable. Although parents with Other Faith or Non-faith affiliation may have chosen to live near an SDA school for their children to attend, it was for reasons other than it being an SDA school. This concurs with Beamish and Morey (2013), Campbell et al. (2009) and McCarthy (2006) who found that some parents would move house to be closer to the school of their choice. SDA affiliated parents and other Christian parents who were committed to their children attending a Christian school would pay, within a rather large range, whatever the school fees were, whereas for other parents, school affordability was initial threshold bound. According to Kennedy et al. (2011) the affordability factor was rated well below other reasons of school choice for Catholic parents.

6.2.5 Urban Versus Rural

This research involved case study investigation of two urban schools and two rural schools within a specific faith-based school system. The research explored whether there were differences in parental reasons for school choice between urban and rural schools.

Therefore, to answer the question whether there are differences in the reasons for school choice between parents whose children attend urban schools and rural schools, the research revealed:

- Rural parents, generally, were willing to accept a longer commute than urban parents for their children to attend their school of choice.
- Both rural and urban parents valued smaller class sizes to enhance positive, individualised learning experiences.
- Urban parents considered the educational and physical structure of the school, the academic options, the perceived academic status of the school and the perceived student-school interactions, more important in their school choice decisions than rural parents.
- Rural parents appreciated a smaller school for their children to provide a more intimate setting.

- Attractive grounds and a natural setting were important factors in rural parents' school choice; attractive buildings, the layout of the school and well-maintained grounds were important factors for urban parents.
- Urban parents were less focussed on fees affordability than rural parents, but this was not consistent.
- It was clear from parents of both urban schools and rural schools that teaching values was a foundational consideration in their school-choice decision.
- Both urban and rural parents were concerned about their child's well-being and chose the school based on their perceptions of how well their child's well-being would be supported and the care, nurture and support they would receive.
- Urban and rural parents expressed the importance of their child's educational potential in their school choice decision, but urban parents emphasised academic outcomes for their child more than rural parents.

The findings of this research add to the limited research into rural school choice as advanced in the Australian literature review provided in Chapter 2: Literature Review. One such study, conducted by McCarthy (2016), indicated that rural and remote parents searched for a boarding school for their children that provided the teaching of values, a safe environment and academic opportunities. McCarthy's results align closely with the findings of this research relating to rural school parents. Akin to the findings of this research where rural parents were willing to accept a longer school commute, Abbott-Chapman et al. (2017), found that rural and remote parents within their study were willing to choose schools that they deemed offered better educational experiences that were further away than their local schools.

This research adds to the literature in that it compares school choice of rural school parents with urban school parents.

6.2.6 Sources of Information

This school choice research was also interested in the sources of information parents used that were influential in their decision-making process. The survey asked parents to rate fourteen items in terms of importance. These items in terms of importance from most important to the least importance were: *Reputation of school in the community, Interaction with school staff, Recommendation from others, Academic reputation, Child's own choice, Open Day, School website, NAPLAN results, Own or spouses experience at the school, Social*

media, Advertising, My School website, Closest school and *Always intended to send my child to an Adventist school*.

From this study it was observed that the top group of information sources were personal interaction with the school personnel and the school community; with a considerable number of interviewed parents stressing the Interview with the principal, Interaction with Staff and School Tour. These were followed by a number of online information sources. First was a set of online factual information sources then a set of social media and advertising sources. But it must be kept in mind that only the top four influences (personal interaction with school and its community) surpassed a mean parental rating of 2.5 on the survey 4 point scale, which indicates that it is only for these sources of information that the majority of parents thought these sources were very important. For all these parents, however, the rest of the information sources, particularly the online resources, were useful but not the most important.

For SDA respondents the survey item *Always intended to send my child to an Adventist school* rated very highly compared to the rest of the parents. Apart from this item, the importance of the rest of the items followed the same trend for the SDA parents as the other parents, though the information source rating in each instance was less than the other parents. This suggests that for these SDA parents the fact that it was an SDA administered school, in their minds, the school automatically manifested a number of positive characteristics. Parents were powerfully influenced by their personal interaction with school personnel and non-school personnel with knowledge of the school. For the SDA parents, friends and family significantly contributed to their choice. On the other hand, the other parents were most often influenced by parent word of mouth and community members.

Although both rural and urban parents followed the same relative pattern of the importance of the fourteen sources of information in their school choice decision-making there was a noticeable difference in the top four sources: *Reputation of school in the community, Interaction with school staff, Recommendation from others, Academic reputation.* Urban parents saw these top four information sources as significantly more important when considering schools for their child than the rural parents.

Therefore, when considering the sources of information that parents use in their school decision-making process, the research revealed:

- Overall, the most influential sources of information were the reputation of the school in the community and personal interaction with the school staff.
- Parents saw most of the online information sources as useful in their school choice decision, but these were not the most important information sources.
- Parents were certainly influenced by other people. SDA parents relied heavily on friends and family as important information sources in their decision-making. Parents of Other Faith or Non-faith affiliation groups were influenced in their school choice considerations by information obtained by recommendations from other people, their interaction with staff and the school's reputation in the community.
- SDA parents followed the same pattern in terms of the relative importance of the respective fourteen information sources as Other Faith and Non-faith parents, but the absolute importance rating for each source was lower.
- Urban parents were more influenced by a school's academic reputation, recommendation from others, NAPLAN results and Open Days than rural parents.

The findings of this research complement those in the Australian literature review provided in Chapter 2: Literature Review. In the age of technology numerous studies identified online sources of information such as the school's website, My School website and social media as useful sources of information for parents but to varying degrees of influence (English, 2004; Fahey, 2019; Independent Schools Queensland, 2019; Rowe & Windle, 2012; Wood, 2013). This research also identified that word of mouth and the recommendation of others was highly influential and this is also supported in the literature (Independent Schools Queensland, 2007, 2011, 2015, 2019; Rowe & Windle, 2012; Wood, 2013).

6.3 Theoretical Implications

A unique strength of this research was the use of both the social identity theory and secular good theory to reflect on the results of this investigation. Social identity theory posits that individuals choose a community that perpetuates their belief system or identity (Deaux, 2000; Green, 2018; Leaper, 2011; Pelz & den Dulk, 2018; Tajfel & Turner, 2004). Secular good theory helps understand school choice by suggesting that parents with varied religious affiliations or no religious affiliation choose a faith-based school because of the perceived benefits of the school that are not necessarily related to the religious aspects of the school

(Green, 2018; Pelz & den Dulk, 2018). Utilising these two theories can help with the understanding of why parents choose faith-based schools and better understand the complexity of the decision-making process.

Adopting the social identity theory lens this research suggests that SDA parents chose an SDA school because it was a part of their faith community and they were placated in the fact that the school would provide the context where their own belief system would be supported and perpetuated. Further, this lens also suggests the school choice reasons for parents that are affiliated with other Christian denominations. The Christian aspects of the school were seen to support their own Christian beliefs, some parents going so far as to discuss tenets of their faith with school leaders to ensure there was a close intersect between the school's faith foundation and their own. The social identity theory was also applied to parents with other world faith affiliation as well as non-faith parents. The theory states that parents will choose a school that promotes their own belief system or identity and values were clearly an important part of parental belief system and identity. Parents of Other Faith and Non-faith affiliations expressed their desire that the school would support their family values. Many parents expressed the importance of the teaching of values and that they chose their current school because they believed it would support their family values.

When this study's results are viewed through the secular good theory lens, parents, particularly those of other world faiths and Non-faith affiliation, chose a faith-based school, not because of its religious elements but because of other perceived benefits. Parents claimed that their school choice was based on aspects of education such as a nurturing and supportive environment, better academic outcomes, better resources and facilities, and positive discipline. This lens provides a legitimate and useful explanation for the large number of parents that chose a faith-based school who have no ties to the SDA religious tradition. It is also a useful lens with which to view SDA faith-affiliated parents and other Christian faith-affiliated parents in that they also seek a school with added benefits, not simply because a school is affiliated with a Christian tradition.

This research clearly highlighted that parents adopted both these theoretical lenses when evaluating the respective schools for their children. The two lenses enhance our understanding of why many non-SDA Christian parents, Other Faith parents and Non-faith parents choose SDA faith-based schools to educate their children. These theories together offer the potential of greater insight into the reasons parents choose faith-based schools than a single lens such as rational choice theory that does not consider the religious context of a

school, an approach which has been often used in school choice research. This multi-lens approach strongly resonates with the interconnected multi-stage parental school choice decision-making process that has emerged from this study.

6.4 Research Limitations

While this study has contributed to understanding the factors influencing parents to choose a school within a faith-based system, it is not without its limitations. It is imperative that any perceived limitations of this research are acknowledged and addressed as they can inform future research.

Firstly, similar to other studies, this research focused on a small number of schools. The research was conducted in only four of the forty-six schools of the ASA network, less than 10% of available schools within this faith-based school system. Even though this is a useful sample, the findings presented here could not be representative of all SDA schools and their unique demographics. Australia is a vast nation geographically and there are cultural differences between regions. This study was not broadly applied to all regions of Australia and therefore cannot state conclusively that the results found within this study will be the same as if every SDA school was surveyed. While this study did include urban and rural research within a specific geographical region there may be further differences in other regions that could contribute to the study of school choice.

Secondly, this research was conducted within a specific faith-based school system. Yet, it did not consider other faith-based school systems and why parents would choose schools within those systems. This research highlighted that many parents who chose an SDA school were from other Christian traditions, other world faiths or were affiliated with no faith. This research is limited in that it did not explore why parents choose other faith-based or non-faith-based school systems.

Thirdly, one limitation hinges around the study sample of the quantitative phase of this research. A total of 1879 families were enrolled at the four schools and 778 responded to the online survey. Even though this is a relatively large response rate it may not be indicative of all parental reasons for school choice. Inasmuch as this response rate can be statistically viewed as a representative sample, would the results from this study differ if more parents responded in the survey? Further, the survey was voluntary and this may have resulted in a somewhat biased sample.

Fourthly, another limitation emanates from the qualitative phase of this research. The survey asked for volunteers for interviewing to share their school choice experience. This resulted in over one hundred parents volunteering to be interviewed and these responses were forthcoming without compensation or reward for their time. Five or six parents from each school, twenty-one in total, were selected through purposeful sampling to gain a broader representation of parents. Sample sizes in qualitative research are generally small (Wiersma & Jurs, 2005) and these semi-structured interviews provide an opportunity for in-depth exploration into factors that influenced parents' school choice decisions (Charmaz, 2006; Howell Major & Savin-Baden, 2010; O'Reilly & Kiyimba, 2015; Yin, 2018). However, the data collected is really only reflective of this sample of twenty-one parents interviewed and therefore this is not a representative sample. The interviewees were volunteers and not a randomly selected group. As a result, the data may not have captured varied views of parents unwilling or unable to participate in the interview process. Different results may have been gleaned from these parents which may have impacted the findings, implications and recommendations.

Fifthly, another limitation connected with the qualitative phase of this research is that only one interview was conducted with each participant. Seidman (2006) suggests that three interviews with each participant ensures greater insight into the phenomenon being researched and warns the researcher who only uses one interview per participant that they "tread on thin contextual ice" (p. 17.). Using grounded theory, consistent with the recommendations of Seidman (2006), more than one interview with each participant would allow the researcher to clarify anything that needed further investigation or delve deeper into the topic. When the interview data was being analysed this researcher felt that further interviews with the original participants could have been useful in clarifying some of the information provided.

Sixthly, the researcher acknowledges, once again, the limitations of her position as an insider researcher, see Chapter 3: Methodology for an in-depth discussion of this. In as much as there are advantages of being an insider researcher there are also challenges that contribute to the limitations of this research. It is possible that the researcher's positionality within the school context being explored may have impacted the neutrality of the research. It is acknowledged that this researcher's own bias, such as the researcher's own beliefs and experiences, could have impacted research design, data analysis and ultimately, the research results. This is also a possible consequence of role duality where the researcher's role is well

known in one of the schools and teacher-parent power relationships which could result in the interviewee feeling obligated to provide information they believe the research wants to hear or even omitting information they feel is not wanted by the researcher. Insider bias, role duality and power relationships are commonly cited challenges of research and these could have crept into the research in spite of efforts to avoid these pitfalls.

Notwithstanding these limitations the valuable insights parents shared have contributed to the understanding of reasons for school choice in one faith-based school system, and the current research certainly adds to the understanding of why an increasing number of parents, many of whom are not affiliated with the SDA church, choose SDA schools to educate their children.

6.5 Research Implications

This research discovered that the parents surveyed were diligent and rigorous in the school evaluation process and all aspects of the school and its functioning are considered. Furthermore, school choice decisions were not based on isolated factors but rather many interacting and interdependent factors. The implications are that school administrators and school marketing directions may be wise to include all aspects of the school rather than emphasising only one or two particular aspects of the school. This research suggests that focusing on only a few positive aspects may not be the most effective approach to attracting prospective students.

This research identified distinct sequential stages in the school choice decision-making process. Once a decision was made to attend a non-government school the next part of the process was to review the school's contextual factors (school facilities and appearance, academic quality and varied programs and student interaction). This research noted that these parents made a decision based on how well these factors met their expectations. Parents continue to weigh up all aspects of the school and adjust their expectations and original thresholds. For example, parents will accept reasonable facilities rather than exceptional facilities, or a quality, well-rounded educational program rather than high academic results of the school. The school will be considered as long as most of the school contextual factors are within a parent's threshold. Implications to note for administrators is that schools should promote an overview of a quality well-rounded educational experience.

This research indicated that the parents' view of an ideal school profile largely followed the view of their current school profile. In both school profiles, parents considered

all five school choice factors: Context of School, Faith-based Characteristics, School Structure Characteristics, Academic Program/Profile and Student Interaction, as important in influencing school choice. Parents perceived that there was little difference between their ideal and current school in terms of importance in School Structure Characteristics, Faith-based Characteristics and Context of School factors. Parents, however, perceived that their current school fell somewhat short in terms of Academic Program/Profile and Student Interaction school choice factors. This discovery holds important implications for schools who need to be cognizant of parents' views of important school choice features when developing marketing strategies. Even though their current school was chosen, it did not meet all desired qualities and schools should continue to improve all their school offerings to continue to attract parents and reduce attrition rates.

This research highlighted that parents, independent of their faith affiliation, may choose a school if it is perceived that the school teaches values that are congruent with their own, be it Biblically based values or family values. Values sought after by parents include kindness, compassion, respect, manners, service, and inclusivity. An important implication for schools is that they must highlight what values are taught and emphasised at the school and how these values are being promoted to prospective parents.

This research unearthed some critical distinctions between factors influencing school choice between urban and rural parents. Urban parents placed a greater emphasis on academic outcomes than rural parents. This would imply that urban school administrators need to pay greater attention to academic outcomes/quality and promote these to prospective parents. Interestingly, this study reveals that rural parents placed greater emphasis on the natural setting of the school, while urban parents focused on the availability and quality of school facilities and resources. So, the respective schools need to focus on the elements that parents deem desirable.

This research also investigated sources of information that parents used in their search for a school for their child. Four distinct categories were identified: Interaction with the school, Research online, Influence of others, and Child agency. Parents differed in their reliance on these sources of information, but all parents relied on some of these to a certain extent. This research noted that parents' most important source of information to find out about a school is interaction with significant people: the principal, staff, current school parents and the local community. Prospective parents are influenced by human interaction in the school and what community members say about the school. Principals, the person

conducting school tours and teaching staff should not underestimate their impact and influence on school choice decisions when meeting parents, especially for the first time. Personal testimonies of current parents could be at the forefront of a school's promotional materials. Many parents used online resources but not as the sole source of information. The implications of this are that a school should not focus solely on online resources to promote the school. These findings have practical implications for all faith-based schools, particularly in relation to utilising the most widely impactful sources of information to their full advantage.

Inasmuch as this research is based on one faith-based school system, the findings could be applied to other faith-based school systems. As a result of this research other ASA schools and other faith-based school systems have a useful resource to market their schools effectively. Drawing on the findings of this research, faith-based schools could use this research to develop relevant educational directions to ensure their schools are meeting the needs and desires of their consumers: parents. Targeted marketing strategies and appropriate future planning can now provide the educational landscape that parents desire.

Some SDA schools are growing in enrolments but there are other SDA schools whose enrolments are stagnant or even declining. Understanding what parents want in a school could help schools struggling with enrolments grow student numbers. Adapting current policy to target specific aspects of parental concerns and interest could help enhance enrolments. This could also be useful for other faith-based schools with struggling enrolments.

6.6 Research Recommendations

The governing body, Adventist Schools Australia, oversees schools in every state of Australia, however, this research was limited to four Seventh-day Adventists schools within one geographical region. It could be useful for ASA to conduct research incorporating every school in the system to identify demographic, regional and other differences pertinent to providing parents a school that suits their needs.

This research identified the reasons of choice from different faith groups of the select SDA schools. Included in the research specifically were SDA parents, other faith parents which included parents who affiliated with other Christian denominations or other world faiths. It also included the impressions of parents who identified as non-faith. Further research could include the reasons why some SDA parents choose to send their children to

other schools and not an SDA school at all, and also those who choose to withdraw their children from an SDA school during their enrolment. Further study could ask why some SDA parents choose to home-school their children rather then send them to an SDA school.

Answers to these questions should be of particular interest to ASA as SDA schools were initially established to provide schooling for SDA children. Retaining this specific demographic would support this initial aim.

An important recommendation is that other faith-based school systems conduct research into factors impacting parental school choice pertinent to their unique school philosophy. This research would be useful to understand parental desires and needs for their children's education that are unique to their demographic. When these are better understood, school directions can be planned accordingly, and marketing can be better focused targeting what parents want.

This research was conducted within a specific faith-based school system. Yet, it did not consider other faith-based school systems and why parents would choose schools within those systems. Another recommendation is to conduct research into why parents choose other faith-based school systems, such as Catholic schools or Anglican schools.

Additional and more pointed research could be undertaken to understand the sources of information that parents use to help with their school choice decisions. Which sources are mostly used? Which sources are more impactful? Which sources could be used by schools to better advantage?

This research used a survey to gain quantitative data. The survey asked parents to rank the importance of specific items that would influence their *ideal* school choice and their *current* school choice. Even though this was a useful comparison, a recommendation for future research would be to forego *ideal* school choice considerations and only include questions related to their *current* school choice decision.

The use of surveys is a convenient and time-efficient method to access quantitative data from a large sample of parents. Still, interviews provide a greater depth of understanding of school choice factors. It is recommended that any future research also incorporates the greater use of qualitative methods in the form of interviews.

6.7 Concluding Comments

The mission of all faith-based schools is to provide quality education for students that is embedded in a positive faith experience. This research highlights the complex and synergistic process that parents experience when choosing a faith-based school. This research is unique in that it revealed that school-choice decision-making was interactive and dynamic. It is clear from this study that parents consider school choice as an important and serious issue and not taken lightly. School principals and school governing authorities can be encouraged that multiple aspects of a school are considered and weighed up before a school choice decision is made. A significant finding of this research is that parents chose a school if the school was perceived to uphold their family values and provide their children with a nurturing and supportive environment where educational potential rather than academic results was the focus of the educational program.

Aspects of this research have been published as a journal article, Research from the inside: One teacher's research journey within a school setting, (Henley, 2021), see Appendix F, and a pending book chapter. Presentations of this research have also been shared at two faith-based education conferences. These publications and presentations will help disseminate findings of this research to a wider audience. Further, other faith-based school leaders can incorporate relevant findings to provide quality school choice in Australia and potentially internationally.

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APPENDIX A: HUMAN RESEARCH ETHICS APPROVAL

Human Research Ethics Committee
research.ethics@avondale.edu.au | +61 4980 2121

Avondale UNIVERSITY COLLEGE

26 March 2020

Vladka Henley
62 Bronzewing Drive
ERINA NSW 2250

Dear Vladka

ETH.2020.005

The Avondale Human Research Ethics Committee considered the following resubmitted proposal:
Factors Influencing Parental School Choice

I am pleased to inform you that the conditions for approval have now been met, and the committee has agreed the proposal satisfies the requirements for ethically acceptable research as per the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research. As such, the application has been approved.

Approval includes the following documents as attached:

- ETH.2020.005 Application Form v3
- Interview Information Statement
- Interview Participant Consent Form
- Interview Protocol Checklist
- Interview Log Template
- Parent Interview
- Parent Survey v2
- Survey Information Statement

I confirm that the Avondale Human Research Ethics Committee is constituted according to the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research 2007 and operates in compliance with applicable regulatory requirements.

Attached to this letter is an Outcome of Consideration of Protocol form for your records.

Yours sincerely

Brad Watson.

Dr Brad Watson
Chair, Avondale Human Research Ethics Committee

APPENDIX B: SURVEY

Section 1 - General Information

* 1. What school does your child attend?

- ○ Blue Hills College
- ○ Central Coast Adventist School
- ○ Macquarie College
- ○ Kempsey Adventist School

* 2. How many children do you have at this school

* 3. In what year/grade are they enrolled? Tick all that apply.

- ☐ Pre-Kindy
- ☐ Kindy
- ☐ Year 1
- ☐ Year 2
- ☐ Year 3
- ☐ Year 4
- ☐ Year 5
- ☐ Year 6
- ☐ Year 7
- ☐ Year 8
- ☐ Year 9
- ☐ Year 10
- ☐ Year 11
- ☐ Year 12

* 4. Please indicate your faith affiliation.

- ☐ Seventh-day Adventist
- ☐ Non-faith background
- ☐ Other faith background (please specify)

* 5. What is your gender?

Section 2 - Factors of School Choice

Thinking about the factors that may influence you in choosing an ideal school for your child, please indicate using the scale provided how important these factors are to you. (Please note: the same questions will be asked about factors for choosing THIS school in the next section.)

* 1. School Domain A

	Extremely Important	Very Important	Somewhat Important	Not Important
Christian school	○	○	○	○
Adventist school	○	○	○	○
Co-educational school	○	○	○	○
K-Year 12	○	○	○	○
Small class sizes	○	○	○	○
Size of the school	○	○	○	○
Appearance of buildings and classrooms	○	○	○	○
Appearance of the school grounds	○	○	○	○
Integration of computer technology into curriculum	○	○	○	○
Technology and science facilities	○	○	○	○
Library facilities	○	○	○	○

* 2. School Domain B

	Extremely Important	Very Important	Somewhat Important	Not Important
Artistic and musical opportunities				
Sporting opportunities				
Range of subjects offered				
Inclusion of project-based learning				
Provision for special needs				
Talented students program				
Range of camps and trips				
Quality of teaching				
Academic results				
Well-rounded education				

* 3. School Domain C

	Extremely Important	Very Important	Somewhat Important	Not Important
Availability of counselling and/or chaplaincy				
Nurturing environment				
Teaching of Christian values				
Wearing of uniform				
Appearance of students				
Behaviour of students				
Behaviour management				

* 4. School Domain D

	Extremely Important	Very Important	Somewhat Important	Not Important
School fees affordability				
Proximity to home				
Transport accessibility				
Before/after school care				
Early learning centre/Pre-Kindy				

5. Please indicate the **three** main factors (from the lists above) that would influence you in choosing **an ideal school** for your child.

Section 3 - Factors contributing to choosing THIS school

This question relates to THIS school. What factors influenced you in choosing THIS school for your child? Please indicate using the scale provided how important these factors were to you. Please answer all questions even if your answers are similar to the previous section.)

* 1. School Domain A

	Extremely Important	Very Important	Somewhat Important	Not Important
Christian school	○	○	○	○
Adventist school	○	○	○	○
Co-educational school	○	○	○	○
K-Year 12	○	○	○	○
Small class sizes	○	○	○	○
Size of the school	○	○	○	○
Appearance of buildings and classrooms	○	○	○	○
Appearance of the school grounds	○	○	○	○
Integration of computer technology into curriculum	○	○	○	○
Technology and science facilities	○	○	○	○
Library facilities	○	○	○	○

* 2. School Domain B

	Extremely Important	Very Important	Somewhat Important	Not Important
Artistic and musical opportunities				
Sporting opportunities				
Range of subjects offered				
Inclusion of project-based learning				
Provision for special needs				
Talented student program				
Range of camps and trips				
Quality of teaching				
Academic results				
Well-rounded education				

* 3. School Domain C

	Extremely Important	Very Important	Somewhat Important	Not Important
Availability of counselling and/or chaplaincy				
Nurturing environment				
Teaching of Christian values				
Wearing of uniform				
Appearance of students				
Behaviour of students				
Behaviour management				

* 4. School Domain D

	Extremely Important	Very Important	Somewhat Important	Not Important
School fees affordability				
Proximity to home				
Transport accessibility				
Before/after school care				
Early learning centre/Pre-Kindy				

* 5. Please indicate the **three** main factors (from the list above) that influenced you in choosing **THIS** school for your child.

* 6. Was there something specific about Adventist education that attracted you to this school?

If yes, could you please provide more detail about Adventist education that attracted you to this school? Please answer in one or two sentences.

Section 4 - Process of School Choice

* 1. How important were the following in **influencing** you in your decision to send your child to **THIS** school?

	Extremely Important	Very Important	Somewhat Important	Not Important
Recommendation from others	○	○	○	○
Open Day	○	○	○	○
Interaction with school staff	○	○	○	○
School website	○	○	○	○
Social media	○	○	○	○
Advertising	○	○	○	○
Reputation of school in the community	○	○	○	○
Own or spouse's personal experience at the school	○	○	○	○
My School website	○	○	○	○
NAPLAN results	○	○	○	○
Academic reputation	○	○	○	○
Child's own choice	○	○	○	○
Closest school	○	○	○	○
Always intended to send my child to an Adventist school	○	○	○	○

Section 5 - Interview Interest

1. If you would be willing to take part in an interview to further expand on these concepts, please provide your details below. The interview will take less than an hour, will be conducted at this school, at a day and time convenient to you. It may be possible to conduct the interview over the phone or through video conferencing. Thank you for your willingness to help support this important research.

Name	
Email Address	
Phone Number	

APPENDIX C: SURVEY INFORMATION STATEMENT

INFORMATION STATEMENT FOR SCHOOL CHOICE RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS (SURVEY)

Date: August 2020

Dear Parent,

You are invited to participate in a research project exploring the reasons for school choice. This research will form the basis for a PhD study on this topic. Participation in this study involves completing and returning the anonymous on-line survey via the link in this email.

As a parent at a school within the study sample your participation is highly appreciated and valued.

Completion of the survey should take no more than 10 minutes. Additionally, you may volunteer to potentially take part in an interview further exploring school choice, with potential participants approached directly.

Participation in this survey is entirely voluntary and you may choose not to participate at any time. The survey is completely anonymous and no identifiable data is collected or retained. Data will be reported in aggregate form and a copy can be made available to participants, if desired.

By completing the survey you are giving consent for your responses to be included in this research.

Please complete the survey by clicking on the following link:

https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/centralcoastadventist

If you have any questions regarding the nature of the study or research procedures, please contact Vladka Henley on 02 4367 1800 or vladka.henley@ccas.nsw.edu.au

This research project has been approved the Avondale University College Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC). Avondale University College requires that all participants be informed that if they have any complaint concerning the manner in which a research project is conducted it may be given to the researcher, or if an independent person is preferred, to Avondale University College's HREC Secretary, Avondale University College, PO Box 19, Cooranbong, NSW, 2265, or phone 02 4980 2121 or fax 02 4980 2117 or email: research.ethics@avondale.edu.au

Thank you so much for your assistance with this project.

Kind regards,

Vladka Henley

PhD Student

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APPENDIX D: INTERVIEW INFORMATION STATEMENT

INFORMATION STATEMENT FOR SCHOOL CHOICE RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS (INTERVIEW)

Date: July 2020

Dear Parents,

You are invited to participate in a research project exploring the reasons for school choice. This research will form the basis for a PhD study on this topic. Participation in this study is entirely voluntary and you may choose not to participate at any time. Your involvement is completely confidential and no identifiable data is collected or retained. Data will be reported in aggregate form and a copy can be made available to participants, if desired.

As a parent at a school within the study sample your participation is highly appreciated and valued.

By participating in this interview you are giving consent for your responses to be included in this research.

If you have any questions regarding the nature of the study or research procedures, please contact Vladka Henley on 02 4367 1800 or vladka.henley@ccas.nsw.edu.au

This research project has been approved by the Avondale University College Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC). Avondale University College requires that all participants be informed that if they have any complaint concerning the manner in which a research project is conducted it may be given to the researcher, or if an independent person is preferred, to Avondale University College's HREC Secretary, Avondale University College, PO Box 19, Cooranbong, NSW, 2265, or phone 02 4980 2121 or fax 02 4980 2117 or email: research.ethics@avondale.edu.au

Thank you for your assistance with this project.

Sincerely,

Vladka Henley

PhD Student

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APPENDIX E: INTERVIEW PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

INTERVIEW PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

Reasons for Parental School Choice

Researcher: Vladka Henley

I agree to participate in the above research project and I give my consent freely for involvement in this interview.

I have read and understand the information provided in the Information Statement.

I understand that the project will be conducted as described in the Information Statement, a copy of which I have been given to keep.

I understand I can withdraw from the project at any time and do not have to give any reasons for the withdrawal. I will not be disadvantaged in any way by my withdrawal.

The procedures required for the project and the time involved (approximate time of 1 hour) have been explained to me. I have had the opportunity to ask questions and have had them answered to my satisfaction.

I consent to:

- ☐ Participate in an interview that will be audio-tape recorded.

I understand that my personal information will remain confidential to the researcher.

Name: _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

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APPENDIX F: PUBLISHED JOURNAL ARTICLE

Teaching & Professional Practice

TEACH[R]

Research from the inside: One teacher's research journey within a school setting

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Key words: Bias, insider research, qualitative research, reflexivity, positionality

Abstract

In a secular society such as Australia, why are more and more parents sending their children to faith-based schools? This question led me to pursue PhD research exploring the reasons why parents choose faith-based schools. As I began my research I was confronted with unexpected complexities of researching my own setting. Researching one's own professional context or occupational setting is known as insider research and this type of research is becoming increasingly common, especially in the field of Education. This paper explores some of the experiences I encountered as an insider researcher, and I present typical advantages and challenges associated with insider research. I also provide a discussion of the importance of reflexivity for insider researchers. By acknowledging the issues inherent with insider research, the usefulness of studying one's own setting will be evident. I conclude that teacher-driven insider research is valuable to understanding of the practice of Education.

"As I began my research I was confronted with unexpected complexities of researching my own setting"

Introduction

There has been a rise in the popularity of faith-based schools in Australia over recent years and this seems to be counter-intuitive given that western culture, and Australian culture in particular, is considered secular and has been since Federation, 1901. According to the Australian Bureau 34.4% of students in 2020 were enrolled in non-government schools. Furthermore, according to Independent Schools Council of Australia (2020), 84% of all non-government schools had a faith affiliation in 2019.

My interest in parental reasons for school choice stemmed from my fifteen years teaching in a faith-based school system. During this time I heard, anecdotally, many and varied reasons parents gave for sending their children to a faith-based school. Reasons such as desiring a caring environment, the explicit teaching of family values, academic rigour and value for money were commonly expressed by parents. These sentiments came from parents with a faith-based background but also, interestingly, from parents who claimed they had no faith affiliation. From these informal interactions I began my PhD research. Expanding from investigating only the school where I was employed as a teacher, I included three other schools from the same faith-based school system. Two schools were from urban regions and two were from rural regions.

The research question I chose is a critical element that guides my entire research: An exploration into the factors that influence parents when choosing a faith-based school. The research question chosen was intimately related to my work as a secondary teacher within a faith-based school system. Flick (2009) purports that research questions,

> do not come from nowhere. In many cases, their origin lies in the researchers' personal biographies and their social context. The decision about a specific question mostly depends on the researchers' practical interests and their involvement in certain social and historical contexts. (p. 98)

The research question drives the research design and I decided that a mixed methods approach would be used, both quantitative and qualitative methods, to help answer the research question. The mixed methods process would enable me to glean a more comprehensive understanding than using a single method (Biesta, 2017; Coe, Waring, Hedges, & Arthur, 2017). Furthermore, incorporating both quantitative and qualitative phases in research provides greater insight into a phenomenon than either could do alone (Bryman, 2012; Creswell & Creswell, 2018). A survey was used to collect quantitative data where respondents could opt in to

participate in interviews to delve deeper into their school choice decisions. Using purposeful sampling twenty-one parents were invited to participate in semi-structured interviews to collect qualitative data. This paper will focus on insider research as it related to my experience in the collection of qualitative data.

Insider research

Insider research is research that is conducted within the researcher's own context or setting. Sikes and Potts (2008) clarify that this research is from "an individual's own professional or occupational group" (p. 3). Greene (2014) explains that insider research "is that which is conducted within a social group, organization or culture of which the researcher is also a member" (p. 1). Insider research has become increasingly more common especially in the area of educational research (Herr & Anderson, 2015; Mercer, 2007). Greene (2014) asserts that this rise is a consequence of professional doctorates such as Doctor of Education, as opposed to PhD programs, where teachers are involved in researching their own educational institutions.

Outsider research, on the other hand, is research conducted by a researcher that has no connection with the setting being researched. Indeed, Brannick and Coghlan (2007) describe outsider researchers as "onlookers" where their "relationship to the setting is detached and neutral" (p. 60). There is a certain objectivity implied here that is seen as a type of protective armour against the pitfalls of subjectivity in research that is inherent within insider research.

It is important to appreciate that it is possible for a researcher to be an insider researcher as well as an outsider researcher simultaneously or fluidly during the course of their research (Halilovich, 2014; Hellawell, 2006). Hellawell (2006) states that "there may be some elements of insiderness on some dimensions of your research and some elements of outsiderness on other dimensions" (p. 490). This is certainly evident in my research. For example, I am an insider within the school where I am employed, but an outsider to the other three schools that are part of the research. I am also an insider to the parents that are affiliated with the same faith as I. This also makes me an outsider to parents who have another faith affiliation or no faith affiliation.

Positionality is closely tied to the understanding of what it means to be an insider researcher. Jacobson and Mustafa (2019) interpret positionality as the "position from which we see the world around us" (p. 1) and that it impacts all aspects of research. It is suggested that the positionality of the researcher changes during the qualitative research process. It is accepted by many scholars that researcher positionality is rarely static and indeed is fluid along the research continuum (Atkins & Wallace, 2012; Hellawell, 2006; Hoare, Buetow, Mills, & Francis, 2012; Mercer, 2007; Ross, 2017). Herr and Anderson (2015) explain the positionality of a researcher as "a continuum of positionalities" (p. 41) or "gradations" (p. 52) and assert that "each of us as researchers occupies multiple positions that intersect" (p.55).

Much is discussed in the literature about the advantages and the challenges of insider research (Atkins & Wallace, 2012; Brannick & Coghlan, 2007; Greene, 2014; Hellawell, 2006; Mercer, 2007; Sikes & Potts, 2008; Unluer, 2012). Some of these advantages and challenges will be discussed in this paper as I encountered them in my research.

Advantages of insider research

There are strong arguments in the literature that outline the advantages of being an insider researcher. Three common advantages of insider research include easier access to participants, cultural understanding and intimate organisational knowledge that it affords (Chavez, 2008; Greene, 2014; Mercer, 2007).

Writers such as Atkins and Wallace (2012), Greene (2014) and Mercer (2007) claim that being an insider can provide **easier access to participants**. In this research being an insider, a member of the school system, certainly provided easier access to each school. Each school principal was amenable to my request in accessing parents to participate in interviews. In fact, each principal gave me access to their personal assistant or receptionist who supported me in contacting parents. Some personal assistants even went so far as to email interview reminders to parents. I was also able to negotiate the use of an interview room at each school with ease with the help of the personal assistant or receptionist. This way there were no double bookings of the room and each parent was escorted into the room efficiently.

Atkins and Wallace (2012) state that participants are more likely to participate with research and participants may disclose more because they feel comfortable with an insider researcher. This was certainly the case in the school where I work. The number of parents that were agreeable to participating in interviews at my school was the most of all schools, almost double the number of the other urban school which had similar student numbers. The rural schools in my research had less students enrolled and also had less parents opting into the interview process. However, there were enough parents to conduct useful qualitative interviews. Some parent participants seemed more comfortable discussing their school choices with me because they knew that I was a teacher within the school system. Many were enthusiastically open about the

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nuanced responses could be missed by an outside researcher who does not have intimate organisational knowledge.

reasons for their school choice; others needed some prompting to open up about their experiences.

Another important advantage of being an insider researcher is the **cultural understanding** that it provides (Atkins & Wallace, 2012; Greene, 2014; Heslop, Burns, & Lobo, 2018; Unluer, 2012). Chavez (2008) explains that "Insiders can understand the cognitive, emotional, and/or psychological precepts of participants" (p. 481). In this research it was certainly advantageous to understand the faith-based culture of the schools. I understood the context of the schools I was researching. I knew the historical context of each school and I was certainly aware of the faith-based culture of the schools. I found that I was able to relate to parents that were faith-based themselves and to understand intimately why they chose the school. I was also able to probe deeper to understand why parents of other world faiths and parents that were not affiliated to any faith chose the school for their child. I was able to use faith-based language with those parents who were familiar with the language, but I was also aware that I needed to avoid faith-based jargon with those parents who were unfamiliar with faith-based language. Understanding the culture of the school allowed me to garner information that would seem foreign to someone outside of the faith-based culture of the school.

Also, another advantage of insider research is the **organisational knowledge** that it grants (Floyd & Arthur, 2012; Greene, 2014; Ross, 2017). Mercer (2007) explains that insider researchers have a better understanding of the setting and context of their research and importantly a knowledge of useful avenues of enquiry (p. 6). Chavez (2008) adds that insider researchers "possess a more profound knowledge of the historical and practical happenings of the field" (p. 481). There is no need to orientate oneself about the research environment or its operational structure. As an insider, a teacher within the school system, I understood the organisational structure of the school and this was useful in ascertaining who to contact to enable the research to be conducted. I had easy access to the appropriate staff who would provide me with access to interview rooms and facilities that I may need during my visit. I was able to work within the school's daily program as I was acutely aware of school schedules and time constraints. I was also able to schedule all parent interviews during school hours and some parents were grateful for being able to conduct their interview soon after drop off in the morning or close to pick up in the afternoon. Others were happy to come during the school day, when available. I was able to discuss the year levels of children and where this fitted in with their school choice decisions. I was able to discuss reasons of choice with parents if they differed between primary school and high school. Some parents of primary school aged children had different reasons for choosing a primary school to a high school.

Understanding the organisation of the school system I was able to probe deeper into the reasons why parents would have different reasons for choosing primary school versus high school. These nuanced responses could be missed by an outside researcher who does not have intimate organisational knowledge.

My experience of insider research was that there were advantages to my research, including the practical aspects of access, cultural understanding and organisational knowledge. Sikes and Potts (2008) summarise these advantages well,

> … inside researchers readily know the language of those being studied, along with its particular jargon and are more likely to empathise with those they study because of in-depth understanding of them… are often more willing to discuss private knowledge with those who are personally part of their world, are often more likely to understand the events under investigation… Inside researchers find that those they study are often more likely to volunteer information to them than they would to outsiders (p. 177).

Challenges of insider research

Equally strong arguments are provided in the literature that outline the challenges that insider research brings to qualitative research. Three commonly cited challenges are bias, role duality and power relationships (Atkins & Wallace, 2012; Brannick & Coghlan, 2007; Greene, 2014; Ross, 2017; Unluer, 2012).

Insider **bias**, where a researcher's own beliefs and experiences can influence results, is an important consideration. Preconceptions and assumptions can creep into analysis of research and taint conclusions. Greene (2014) reminds the researcher that "The insider researcher must then be wary of projecting one's own views onto participants, or the data analysis" (p. 4). Patton (2002) claims that neutrality, the absence of bias, is not easily attained but that "all credible research strategies include techniques for helping the investigator become aware of and deal with selective perception, personal biases, and theoretical predispositions" (p. 51). Seidman (2006) exhorts researchers to "let the interview breathe and speak for itself" (p. 117). Throughout the interview process I made a concerted effort to avoid potential biases from entering research results by allowing the interviewee to speak with little interruption or direction from the researcher.

However, I concede that bias may not have been completely eliminated. I had to be conscious of

assuming I knew what the interviewees meant when they were sharing their experiences. I became aware that the parent, at times, needed to explain what they meant in more detail. For example, it became clear that the term 'values' was used differently by parents and there was no consensus on the meanings intimated by parents. It was important that I probed the interviewee to gain a clear understanding of what they actually meant when using the term 'values' in the interview, rather than place my own interpretations on meaning.

Role duality is another challenge of which insider researchers must be aware. Brannick and Coghlan (2007) warn that "… insider researchers are likely to encounter role conflict and find themselves caught between loyalty tugs, behavioural claims, and identification dilemmas" (p. 70). Role duality, in this research being researcher-teacher, was certainly a consideration in my research. I was the researcher in one role and a teacher in another role. My role in one of the schools being researched was well-known. Naturally, some parents of the school have had direct interaction with me as a classroom teacher and Year Advisor. I had taught and/or been the Year Advisor for three of the parents interviewed. This was a challenge for me with familiarity with some parents. Inasmuch as this can be an advantage in creating easy rapport, I was keenly aware that the participant may assume that I would have certain knowledge and not provide the explicit detail needed. This did happen at times with statements such as "you know" and "you know what I mean". However, being aware of this potential issue, I was able to ask the participant to explain elements that had been only vaguely mentioned. Occasionally, this familiarity was felt with some parents wanting to chat about their child or school issues that were unrelated to my research. When this occurred, I gently had to redirect discussion back to the research.

The challenge of role duality was not as acutely felt in the other three schools under research. I was not a teacher at those schools, however, in my introduction letters I did identify myself as a teacher and PhD researcher. This insider duality did become an issue when a parent would deviate from the topic of school choice and divert the conversation to problems they had encountered at the school as they thought that I was in a position to help them resolve it. This happened with at least one parent from each school. In this situation I encouraged the parent to directly contact the appropriate staff member at the school and redirected the interview back to my research.

Power relationships can exist between the researcher and those being researched. This may result in a situation where the participant may feel obligated or coerced to give information that they feel the researcher wants to hear. Greene (2014) encourages insider researchers to "work at impression management to establish respect and avoid a power struggle with participants" (p. 6). To mitigate this potential issue, it was important that each participant understood their personal agency. I was intentional in stating to each parent that they should only answer questions they feel comfortable answering and they can discuss whatever they would like to discuss about their school choice experience. I also clearly articulated that the participant was able to withdraw from the interview at any time. Another example of the problem of power relationships in this type of research is that interviewees can also omit information that they feel may compromise them in some way. However, the parent interpretation of power relationships can be difficult to ascertain but should be acknowledged as a possibility. Data was also collected from schools where parents had no direct connection to me. In this situation there was a researcher-respondent relationship rather than researcher-parent relationship. I addressed any potential concerns by explaining the purpose of the research to the participant and how confidentiality would be preserved.

Bias, role duality and power relationships are a few of the challenging aspects of insider research. As an insider researcher I encountered these in the qualitative phase of my research and used various techniques to maintain research integrity. However, rather than avoid or discount the complexity this added to my research I negotiated my positionality within the research and began to reflect on its impact and practise reflexivity.

"Another example of the problem of power relationships in this … research is that interviewees can also omit information that they feel may compromise them"

Reflexivity

Acknowledging the challenges of insider research allows the researcher to consciously reflect on positionality and the research process. Holmes (2020) points out that positionality acknowledges the researcher's worldview and how this impacts their research. Hellawell (2006) suggests that recognising one's positionality is a necessary component of insider research, stating "this ability objectively to stand outside one's own writing, and to be reflexive about it, and about one's own relation to it, are some of the hallmarks of a good thesis" (p. 483). Reflexivity can be a useful tool to understanding and recognising the dichotomy of insider/outsider research. Creswell (2007) explains that reflexivity "…means the writer is conscious of the biases, values, and experiences that he or she brings to a qualitative research study" (p. 243). Hellawell (2006) and Greene (2014) urge researchers to practice reflexivity in their research. Brannick and Coghlan

(2007) add that reflexivity is intimately involved with exploring and dealing with the relationship between the researcher and the researched. Jacobson and Mustafa (2019) provide a useful reflexive tool, a Social Identity Map, to help researchers identify their positionality. Their Social Identity Map provides tiers with categories to fill in to help researchers recognise "how we approach, investigate, and analyze data" (p. 8). Furthermore, the authors point out, "Mapping our social identity is by no means the end to understanding our positionality but instead is a starting point and a tool to help researchers be explicitly reflexive about their positionality" (p. 3). The Social Identity Map is only one method of supporting reflexivity within research.

I appreciate that reflexivity is not always easy, but I have attempted to be reflexive in my research. This was done by contemplating and acknowledging my position within the research and identifying methodological considerations (Greene, 2014). I acknowledged my position as a teacher in one of the schools within the study. I recognised the bias at the beginning of the research by acknowledging that I am a member of the faith-based organisation that is aligned with the research. Although there may have been concerns about impartiality and participant relationship before the start of the research, in practice, an insight into the faith-based worldview and having a status of membership worked to the advantage of participant relationships. Oftentimes, trust was established quickly on grounds of mutual understanding of the school system or faith connection. I also used the Social Identity Map to visualise and better understand my positionality within my research. This method certainly allowed me to reduce some of the challenges such as bias and assumptions whilst conducting interviews. While strict boundaries of protocol were maintained, I am confident that interviews were conducted in a relaxed atmosphere where every effort was made to ensure participants felt valued.

> *a neutral qualitative researcher is a fallacy and there is no denying the subtle, and sometimes not so subtle, influence of researcher's identity and worldview*

Conclusion

This paper is not meant to provide an exhaustive literature review of insider research. It is not meant to provide significant methodological considerations pertaining to insider research. Nor is it meant to report on the results of my research conducted as insider research into school choice in a faith-based setting. The purpose of this paper is to simply share my experience of educational research as an insider and to contemplate where this research sits within my context. My musings may certainly not be typical of another researcher's experience, even within the same context, researching the same question. However, it is my desire that my insider research into school choice will make a significant contribution to understanding parental reasons for sending their child to a faith-based school.

The purpose of this paper is to reflect on and share my experience as an insider researcher. Understanding the concept of insider research or "practitioner enquiry" (Hellawell, 2006, p. 484) is particularly pertinent to my research as a teacher enquiring about parental reasons for school choice perceptions within a faith-based school system where I am employed. I have provided a discussion of three advantages and three challenges that I experienced in the course of my research. I also assert, however, that despite all efforts to the contrary, a neutral qualitative researcher is a fallacy and there is no denying the subtle, and sometimes not so subtle, influence of researcher's identity and worldview (Holmes, 2020). Finally, as Herr and Anderson (2015) aptly claim and I concur, "… that knowledge production from all positions is valid as long as one is honest and reflective about one's multiple positionalities" (p. 48). Rather than being afraid of an intimate connection with one's own research setting, I hope that this discussion provides valid reasons as to why research into one's own setting is useful and, indeed, valuable to academic discourse.

As I reflect on my own research process, I can say that researching my own setting, in this case the school system where I am employed, has been an enjoyable experience, that has contributed to my own professional development. My research has certainly benefited from the advantages of researching my own setting, but it has also forced me to appreciate and overtly acknowledge the challenges that are inherently embedded within this type of research. I hope that my journey with school-based insider research provides a springboard for further interest in teacher-driven research within your own school setting. TEACH

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