Chapter Three

In Their Own Words:

Parents Celebrating Teachers and Adventist Education

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Abstract

In Australia, over one-third of school enrolments are in non-government schools and a large proportion of these are in faith-based schools. Why do parents choose to send their children to fee-paying schools when there are free government schools available for all children? Further, in Australia's secular society, why do parents, and many non-faith parents, choose faith-based schools to educate their children? Parents choose faith-based schools for many reasons and this chapter presents the qualitative findings from interviews with parents. While exploring their reasons for choosing faith-based schooling for their children, many parents shared positive perceptions of Adventist education, and how schools and teachers had favourably influenced their choice. In their own words, parents provide a window into their experiences, perceptions, and affirmation of Seventh-day Adventist education and the teachers who are the face of Adventist education: truly, a celebration of teaching.

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Introduction

This chapter was borne out of research into why parents choose to send their children to Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) schools. During qualitative data collection in semi-structured interviews with parents, many personal stories were shared about how teachers and schools had positively influenced their choice. This chapter outlines the context of school choice in Australia before briefly discussing literature relating to faith-based school choice. It then discusses the importance of interviews for gleaning information rich with depth and detail. Finally, the purpose of this chapter, and an important contribution to the celebration of teaching, parents' personal stories will be shared of how transformative and impactful Adventist education and teachers have been in revealing Jesus.

Context

The right of a parent to choose a school for their child is a fundamental human right, stipulated in Article 26 (3) of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (United Nations, 1948), which states 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." This covenant was ratified by the Australian government in 1972 (Hogan, 1984), guaranteeing this right to all Australian parents. Hence, Australian parents can freely choose where their children are educated.

Australian parents have numerous schools from which they can choose. In Australia, schools fit into two broad categories: government schools and non-government schools. Government schools are also known as public or state schools. These schools are fee-free and open to all children in Australia. Non-government schools are also known as private or independent schools. These schools can be a part of a faith-based system or espouse a particular educational philosophy (Independent Schools Council of Australia, 2017). The fee structure for non-government schools varies widely. SDA schools are part of the faith-based non-government school sector.

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 Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) (2021) reported that there has been an increase in non-government school enrolments from 31% of all school enrolments in 2001 to 34.9% in 2021. According to Independent Schools Australia (ISA), 84% of all non-government schools in 2020 had a religious affiliation (Independent Schools Australia, 2021). Enrolments in SDA schools in Australia comprised 2% of all non-government school enrolments in 2011 (Independent Schools Council of Australia, 2012), with a modest increase to 2.3% in 2020 (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:

> 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 Australian Constitution Act, s 116)

However, Habermas (2008) discussed the phenomenon of post-secular society in Western nations, including Australia, and identified a resurgence in religious consciousness that challenges the traditional concept of secularism.

Building on Habermas' argument, Moberg and Granholm (2012) asserted that within post-secular society there is a "resurgence and growing public visibility and awareness of religion" (Moberg & Granholm, 2012, p. 98). They further claimed that religion permeates a wide arena 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. (Moberg & Granholm, 2012, p. 107)

Natsis (2016, p. 66) applied these concepts to educational settings to suggest that secondary students in post-secular Australian society have an "intrinsic spiritual awareness."

It is plausible, then, that a resurgence of religious awareness has contributed to an increase in the number of faith-based schools and increased enrolments in faith-based schools, including SDA schools, in post-secular Australian society.

Seventh-day Adventist Schools in Australia

Adventist Schools Australia (ASA) is the body that provides strategic direction to SDA schools on behalf of the Seventh-day Adventist church in 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 Seventh-day Adventist church, currently educating over two million students (Adventist Schools Australia, 2022)

The principal focus and purpose of SDA schools is to provide quality Christian education within the Seventh-day Adventist faith. ASA has stated that "Adventist education is built on the belief that each student is unique and of immeasurable value" (Adventist Schools Australia, 2020). The National Director of ASA, Dr Daryl Murdoch, stated that "Adventist schools in Australia have the privilege of revealing Jesus and His love with their communities…" (Adventist Education Australia, 2021, Our National Director section, para. 1):

> Our schools… give a message of hope and love where there is often doubt and despair. Our staff are the hands and feet of Jesus and I am extremely proud of the positive difference they make in the lives of students, young children and their families. (Adventist Education Australia, 2021, Our National Director section, para. 2)

The focus and purpose of Seventh-day Adventist education is couched in the Biblical model of Jesus as the Master Teacher. The Bible provides stories of Jesus teaching in synagogues (Luke 4:15), teaching large crowds of people (Luke 5:3), and teaching his disciples (Mark 9:30-32). He is often described as having compassion for

those listening to him (e.g., Matt. 15:32). In several places, Jesus is called Rabbi or Teacher (John 1:38; John 20:16). He even chided his disciples when they dismissed children who had been brought to him by parents:

> Some people brought children to Jesus for him to place his hands on them, but the disciples scolded the people. When Jesus noticed this, he was angry and said to his disciples, "Let the children come to me, and do not stop them, because the Kingdom of God belongs to such as these. I assure you that whoever does not receive the Kingdom of God like a child will never enter it." Then he took the children in his arms, placed his hands on each of them, and blessed them. (*Today's English Version* [TEV], 1976/1988, Mark 10:14)

While exploring the topic of school choice in interviews with parents, parents were asked to share their reasons for choosing an SDA school for their children. Many parents proffered their experiences, stories, and perceptions of Adventist education. *Is the focus and purpose presented by Adventist Schools Australia the reality in the experiences of students and their families?* Their stories reported later in this chapter will help answer this question.

The following section will provide a brief overview of the literature relating to factors that contribute to faith-based school choice.

Literature Review

A review of the literature identified few studies of school choice that delved specifically into factors in parental choice of faith-based schools. Indeed, while 84% of non-government schools have a religious affiliation (Independent Schools Australia, 2021), very few studies focused solely on factors of faith-based school choice. Some studies included faith-based schools with other non-government schools (Cahill, 2009; Campbell et al., 2009; Fahey, 2019; Independent Schools Queensland, 2019; Warren, 2016), but did not focus on faith-based school choice. Despite this limitation, the findings of these studies are useful for understanding aspects of faith-based school choice. For example, Independent Schools Queensland (2019) found that a school's religious affiliation ranked thirty-fourth of forty-three factors affecting parents' school choice with 29% of parents ranking this factor as highly or totally important in their decision.

The few studies that focused solely on faith-based school choice (Beamish & Morey, 2013; Kennedy et al., 2011; Wood, 2013) revealed a variety of factors that contributed to school choice decisions. Beamish and Morey (2013, p. 33) reported that religious reasons were a notable factor in faith-based school choice with "a clear majority of parents having aspirations for their children to be committed Christians" and intending that their choice of school aimed to support the faith development of their child. Kennedy and colleagues' (2011) mixed methods study found that Catholic parents reported numerous factors that affected their school choice, including care for their children, the teaching of Christian values, and quality teaching:

> … teachers not only provide academic standards but are also responsible for setting the caring tone and underpinning Christian values. Catholic parents/guardians do consider the fact that the school is Catholic to be important, but only after these other choice issues are taken into account. (p. 17)

Wood's (2013) qualitative study of factors influencing parents' choice of a Catholic primary school also showed varied reasons for school choice, including finding a good fit for their child. Interestingly, for some parents, the choice of a Catholic primary school was aspirational in terms of social standing.

Numerous studies of parental school choice more broadly report that parents who choose non-government schools are attracted to the philosophical, traditional, or faith-based values of the chosen school (Beamish & Morey, 2013; Independent Schools Council of Australia, 2008; Warren, 2016). Beamish and Morey (2013, p. 29) found that parents wanted a school "that had a value system that paralleled their own" and believed that the school should play a supporting role in reinforcing these values. A similar account was found by Warren (2016) whose research identified that many parents who chose a Catholic school for their children did so for its religious values.

Similarly, English (2004, p. 55) found that all parents interviewed in her study of a single faith-based school felt that it was important that their children be "exposed to appropriate values" 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. (English, 2004, p. 59)

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; Independent Schools Council of Australia, 2008; Independent Schools Queensland, 2019; Kennedy et al., 2011; McCarthy, 2016; Wood, 2013). Beamish and Morey (2013, p. 28) 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 around half of all families "looking for a school to nurture and support their children." 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 the child's emotional needs were the main focus for parents when selecting a school. Some parents interviewed for the study also reported avoiding sending their child to the local government school(s), which were not seen to provide the same level of support and care that the local Catholic schools could (Wood, 2013).

Adding to these findings, English (2004, p. 56) investigated the reasons parents chose to send their children to a newly established Christian school 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". Goh (2007) later reported a similar finding, that parents were looking for a primary school environment that ensured the safety of their children.

A desire for high-quality teaching has also been reported by parents as a factor in school choice, with the Australian government claiming in 2008 "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.

In their study of parental school choice in the Catholic faith-based school system, Kennedy and colleagues (2011, p. 17) highlighted that "the most highly valued factor in school choice is teacher quality." They reported that teaching quality ranked highest among school choice factors, with the endorsement of 96.4% of participating parents. This finding was confirmed by Beamish and Morey (2013, p. 27) who found teaching quality to be a high priority among parents considering school choice:

> 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.

It is clear from the literature reviewed in this section that several factors are important to parents when making a faith-based school choice, including the teaching of values; providing a caring, supportive, and safe environment for children; and teaching quality.

The following section will discuss the purpose and value of qualitative interviews. Parent responses from these interviews provide a window into their experiences and perceptions during school choice decisions. Overall, parents' experiences during this journey affirm Adventist education and the teachers who are the face of Adventist education.

Interviews

In-depth interviews are a key tool for qualitative data collection. Patton (2002, p. 341) proposed that the process of interviewing is based on the assumption "that the perspective of others is meaningful, knowable, and able to be made explicit." Mears (2017, p. 183) described in-depth interviews as:

> … 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.

Interviews enable researchers to explore and gather "experiential narrative material… for developing a richer and deeper understanding" (Van Manen, 2015, p. 66). Seidman (2006, p. 9) stated that "(a)t

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." Semi-structured interviews are conducted as "guided conversations" (Yin, 2018, p. 118) that 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). Importantly, interviews can yield rich and detailed information that is invaluable to a researcher (Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

The following section shares the unsolicited descriptions of experiences that parents divulged during interviews about school choice. The depth and detail of their stories, the vivid recollections, and even the emotional tears that occasionally fell during these interviews, attest to the power of the interview process for gaining a deeper understanding of people's experiences. Certainly, these interviews provide insight into the positive impact SDA education has had on participating families. The section will focus on reporting the factors parents identified as most impactful on their school choice experience: the teaching of values, a supportive and caring environment, a safe environment, individual attention, special needs, the child's happiness, and diversity and inclusivity.

In Their Own Words

While exploring parents' reasons for school choice, it became clear that parents carefully considered their school options and the reasons for their final choice of school were complex and based on multiple factors. Parents described lengthy deliberation on key factors and analysis of their responses indicated that a dynamic, synergistic process contributed to school choice.

This section presents perceptions and affirmations of Adventist education and teachers that were freely shared by parents during interviews. The names of participants have been changed to protect their privacy and the schools at which their children were enrolled remain confidential. These identifiers are not important. What is important is the experience shared. Their words are faithfully recounted, other than the removal of occasional repetition typical of speech. Some longer quotes are shared to provide deeper insight.

The Teaching of Values

Shaun was looking for a school that would teach his pre-kindergarten-aged son values such as patience and resilience. He was impressed by stories from other parents about the positive values that were taught at the school where he eventually enrolled his son. He specifically mentioned the school's positive teaching approach:

> *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 particular student was doing what they were doing and, and those are the kinds of things that we were looking for.*

Kelly disclosed that she wanted her child 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 has two primary-aged children and wanted a school that aligned with her family values. She feels the school she chose contributed 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 mould them, especially the boys, into gentleman, which I found was good.*

Some parents discussed the school's teaching of values as synonymous with their child becoming a good person. James mentioned that he wanted the school to teach his young 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 agreed that her school and the teachers promote the values she holds and help her children to 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 to show compassion and empathy.*

Jennifer believed 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 the behaviour management policies that they put in place but also just, like, values in life. I think it's just 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.*

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, with a young child in kindergarten, described many values that the school was teaching, including *"service to others."* Gavin added that *"we're here to help others, not just to benefit ourselves,"* and Jennifer 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 commented on the school tradition of a service trip at the end of Year 12 and hoped that it would be available when her daughter completed 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 of thing and I'm hoping that that still happens with [my daughter]. Or they go 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.*

Brian is an Indigenous grandparent with a familial link to many of the students at the school. He explained the desire of the local Indigenous community to learn the spiritual aspect of Christian values. He explained that Christian values provide *"a connection to country, a connection to nature."*

Interestingly, Susan, a non-faith parent, also discussed the importance of Christian values being taught at the school. She wanted her children to be exposed to Christian values and beliefs because she recognised that much of Western society is based on Christian principles and her children would be disadvantaged in life if they did not understand them:

> *I think the faith element helps guide the values and the principles in the community… So, they need to be exposed to it. You know, I want them to learn about it. I think so much of the 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.*

Supportive and Caring Environment

Many parents mentioned that they wanted their children to be nurtured and cared for in a supportive educational setting. Abigail identified teachers as being supportive, with *"the nurturing teachers and that sort of thing, that's really been super impressive."* She believes that her school focuses on the care and nurture of its students more 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.*

Amber explained that a friend referred her to the school by highlighting that *"They really support the kids."* This appraisal encouraged her to consider the school for her daughter and to enrol her at the school. In the interview she opened up and shared how her daughter struggles with anxiety and how her teacher was 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 she knows how to support my daughter in the best way possible and make her feel comfortable within the environment.*

Kelly was adamant that teachers provide the nurture, support, and care her children need at school: *"I knew that they would care about my kids, they'd look out 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 concluded that her initial perception of care and support the school would provide for her children has been their reality.

Shaun remembered that it was the care and support for students that helped him in his decision-making process. He recounted a story that he claimed was *"the icing on the cake"* in their choice of school. During their school tour, he noticed emu prints on footpaths around the school and enquired about them. He was told that 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 struggled with mental health issues. 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 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 I really fell in love with the school because [my son] needed extra support.*

Julia found that her initial perceptions of the care her son would receive has been her son's experience. *"Teachers are very kind"* she claimed. She became very emotional when recounting a time her son was 'missing' and the support and care he 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: [my son] 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, 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 more examples of the care, nurture and support her sons receive.

Amanda asserted that teachers showed 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."* 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.*

Safe Environment

Several parents identified the school they had chosen as being a safe environment for their child. When Julia wanted to enrol her son at the school, she specified that her children felt safe at the school: *"And we were very impressed because the culture of the school, it's incredible ... We felt very safe."* This confidence in the school's safety was important in their choice because of their son's mental health concerns, and they also enrolled their second son: *"And you know, he feels safe. Both of them feel safe."* Similarly, James discussed the school's safe environment: *"It's a safe environment... 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."* Brian's evaluation of the school as safe reflected the local Indigenous community's perceptions of the school: *"They say that it's a safe environment."* He further explained what this meant to parents and the community: *"It's a safer place than in other schools. Other schools it's just full-on bullying, swearing, all that type of thing, you know."*

The school's anti-bullying program was an attraction for many parents. When considering the school for his son, Shaun was impressed with its open discussion of bullying. He noted that, in comparison with another school option, the school's anti-bullying stance was attractive and a key element in their school choice:

> *The other thing that we focused on was there was a lot of stories around bullying and, again, using the very small benchmark we have here in the other school to the ones that we've got at this school, it was chalk and cheese. But here 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 he 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." [he said]. There is no 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.*

Naveen heard about the school's anti-bullying stance from friends and wanted this for his daughter: *"So, 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 any way."* This was important to him as a member of a migrant family who wanted to ensure her well-being: *"So, we wanted to make sure that it doesn't affect her mentally."* Gavin also wanted an environment where his children were supported 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:

> *So, the system that was here was almost like a buddy system instead of a bully system. The kids from the higher classes would look after the kids from [his son's] class because that's what they've been taught. So, it was something that flowed down, 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.*

Individual Attention

A number of parents mentioned the importance they placed on their child being treated as an individual by the school, and receiving individual attention. Megan did not want her son 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 wanted 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. She added that the teachers get to know the students individually and that her children had thrived because their teachers know how they learn best:

> *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, writing, 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.*

Amanda was concerned that children can *"just get lost in the mix"* at many schools. Friends had shared positive experiences with the school and after enrolling her child, Amanda found that teachers did focus on each child: *"You know they teach hundreds of kids, but for here it seemed like the individual was important as well…"* Susan discussed her initial impressions when visiting the school: *"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…"*

Naomi believed that the individual attention her child received would prevent her child going unnoticed and being 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."*

Special Needs

Some parents who identified their children as having special needs, including children with learning disorders, Attention Deficit Disorder/ Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADD/ADHD) or Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), commented on the support provided to improve their child's well-being. Amber reported that the school's ability to support her daughter with special needs was a reason for

enrolment. She felt that the support for her daughter had reduced her anxiety, with her teacher *"know[ing] 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 that she had been dissatisfied with their previous school's limited support for her children's special needs. She reported that the staff immediately began to provide an overview of the services they had in place that 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's when we decided … so, 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 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 how to best meet his needs and said … "this what we're putting in place…How can we support him?" And I think then an English teacher followed up too for this particular child and said I just want to know that I'm doing the right thing by him, can I clarify? And we're just impressed by that.*

When Susan was looking for a school for her child, it was a priority to find a school that could 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."*

Child's Happiness

Some parents discussed the importance of their child's happiness at school for their school choice. For Megan, this priority drove her school choice decision:

> *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 high-school-aged children travel to school by bus with an hour commute and she is concerned with the fatiguing impact of this travel time. However, when her son was given the option to move to a school closer to home, he declined:

> *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… and he said no, no, no, no [emphatically]. So, I see they're happy.*

Sarah added: *"They're very happy at this school…And if our kids are happy, then we're happy."* Susan agreed with Sarah's sentiments, *"So, if they were happy, I was happy."*

Jennifer, at the same urban school as Susan, also recognised the importance of her children's happiness at school and its importance for their overall well-being and mental health. She mentioned that while the school is not the most affordable non-government school in the area, she keeps 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…*

Diversity and Inclusion

Julia was impressed that the school her sons were enrolled in was openly inclusive of families of other faiths, finding this a particular 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.

Shaun has a young son at school and a preschool-aged daughter, adopted from overseas. 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. She's Chinese Malay ... Knowing that was actually my first question… what's the cultural diversity in the group? 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 commented that he had seen evidence of segregation of students from various cultures at a different school that he had considered, but when his family had toured 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 ethnicities 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 crucial, and the school's diverse student body was decisive in his school choice. James saw the cultural diversity of the school as genuinely representative of the region's wider community:

...definitely there is representation, particularly in terms of different religions and obviously nationalities ... Which is wonderful. It's representative of, you know, who we are in real life.

Amber also saw the positives of a culturally diverse school for her 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 cultures at school:

> *I think having different ethnicities within a school is really, really good. Culturally, it opens kids up to different cultures, different traditions, you know, things like that. 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. So, I think that's definitely something that a lot more schools are definitely starting to encourage is, you know, different ethnicities. I think it's good that this school supports a lot of kids from difficult backgrounds.*

Brianna observed with interest that parents from a range of backgrounds and experiences have chosen to send their children to this school:

> *…the best way I can describe it, 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 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, I just remember, like, sitting there and going to my husband and, in our discussion, that you look around everyone here. It is so diverse but the sense was every parent or guardian that is sending the kid here or children here want something better.*

Susan noted the inclusivity of the school as a key factor in her school choice: *"Everyone we met was really lovely, really inclusive."* Megan shared a poignant experience of inclusivity at her children's school:

> *When we were in the waiting room, there was a Muslim family there and there [were] Sikhs walking in from outside. And I sort of thought, yeah, this is going to be an inclusive school and, I think, one day I was having a lot of trouble with some religious lessons that were going on. And I, I spoke to one of the other parents who's a Sikh and I just said, "how do you do this? I'm like an atheist and I'm struggling. Like how do you cope when this sort of thing is happening?" [He replied], "We look for where our values are similar." And I thought if he is*

> *able to be included and his children to feel welcome here just by having a very obviously different religion, and they're inclusive of that, and they're going, then, what's my problem?*

Consistent with Megan's experience, Amira found her school welcoming and respectful of families like theirs with a Muslim background:

> *We found there 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. They always provide a place for us, too, if you want to pray or something like that. So, appreciation and respect is the main issue for us.*

Conclusion

Earlier in this chapter, the question was asked whether the focus and purpose of Adventist schools to reveal Jesus, was reflected in the experience of the families whose children attended them. The unsolicited responses of many parents suggest the answer is a resounding "yes." However, not all experiences of parents and students reflected this ethos, with some experiences being less positive. During parent interviews, a few parents highlighted negative aspects of their experience with their child(ren)'s current school.

Overall, Jesus was revealed in the positive interactions experienced and shared by parents and their children with Adventist school teachers. Parents' accounts reveal Jesus, the Master Teacher, in the unique educational setting of Seventh-day Adventist schools. The uniqueness of this setting is evident in its teaching of values as well as its provision of supportive, caring, and safe environments. Parents also regarded Seventh-day Adventist schools as effective in providing individual attention, responding to children's special needs, promoting children's happiness, and encouraging diversity and inclusion.

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