Parental choice of school by rural and remote parents

Michael McCarthy
Australian Catholic University, Brisbane

Parental choice of school is an under-researched area in the Australian educational literature. Moreover, research in this area tends to focus on school choice with respect to government policy and market influences. This paper presents the findings from doctoral research which explored the ways in which parents living in rural and remote areas selected a secondary boarding school for their child. In particular, the paper shows the complex psychical constructions undertaken by non-Indigenous parents in their defining of 'good' schools, which subsequently underpin their selection of school. The confluences of geography, school culture and race on the parental choice of school process are explored.

Introduction

In recent years, there has been a growing concern around school choice, giving rise to government initiatives focused on giving parents greater scope of options for choosing a school for their children (Australian Catholic University, 2011). However, there is a lacuna in the research, particularly in Australian education research, with regard to the ways in which parents engage in the school choice process. Furthermore, there is a paucity of literature in the area of parental choice of school by parents living in rural and remote areas. This is an important nuanced view of parental choice of school given the social, cultural and geographical diversity of rural and remote Australia. 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. For the most part, rural and remote parents have limited school options which often necessitate enrolling their children in distant boarding schools. This suggests that parents living in rural and remote areas may construct notions of education which inform their school choice in particularised ways.

The purpose of this article is to present the findings from doctoral research which explored the ways in which non-Indigenous parents living in rural and remote areas in north-west Queensland chose a secondary boarding school for their children (M. McCarthy, 2013). The study also explored the decision-making of Indigenous parents, which will feature in a subsequent article. Specifically, this article will discuss the parents' constructed notions of 'good' schools and the ways in which this shaped their engagement with the school choice process.

Parental choice of school in Australia

School choice as a political idea is a feature of the educational landscape in the same way as in other countries. However, genuine school choice does not exist in Australia as it does in countries such as the United Kingdom and parts of the United States and Europe. Over the last three decades, there has been increased government funding for non-government schools, which has resulted in the expansion of school options available to

parents. Parents can 'choose' between a fully-funded government school, a partially funded [non-government] Catholic or Independent school, or unsubsidised home schooling (Buckingham, 2001; Donnelly, 2012).

The distribution of school funding by state and federal governments is central to the arguments around school choice in Australia. It is argued that increases in government funding to the non-government school sector has created an education market based on neo-liberal education policy (Angus, 2015). Such a policy is fundamented on a belief that that the economy should be free to operate as an open market, with limited government intervention and significantly decentralised (Campbell, Proctor & Sherrington, 2009). This, it is argued, has resulted in the commodification of education, peripheralised public education, and embedded the potential for social class creaming by extending so-called choice to those who can afford it (Campbell et al., 2009).

Proponents of school choice suggest that a competitive education marketplace has the potential to raise educational standards, when considered from an economic theory perspective. It is suggested that with the expansion in educational options available to parents, schools are subsequently placed under increasing pressure to lift education performance (Australian Catholic University, 2011). Indeed, evidence in Australia suggests that parents do exercise choice. Between 2012 and 2013, the non-government school sector recorded an enrolment increase of 1.8 percent (Independent schools at 2 percent; Catholic schools at 1.7 percent). The government sector saw an increase of 1.4 percent in the same time period. 35 percent of Australian students attend a non-government school (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2013).

The operation of an education market is realised in metropolitan and large regional areas of Australia where a large array of school options exist, though this is less the case in rural and remote areas. Furthermore, school choice is an unfamiliar exercise in many remote locations where there is often a single, government provision of education. In respect of secondary school choice, parents living in many rural and remote areas have very limited or no choice (Pearson, 2011). Indeed, in most rural and remote areas, parents must opt either for distance education, home-schooling or boarding school. Thus, the school choice landscape in Australia is one shaped by geography, and the permutations of the school choice politics has very little relevance to those living in locations where school choice is non-existent. Nevertheless, parents living in these locations are still required to make decisions around their child's education. It is the author's proposition that these parents' relative geographical isolation combined with the various limitations of their local contexts powerfully shape their constructions of education, 'good' schools, and their aspirations for their children (Morgan & Blackmore, 2013).

Parental choice of school in the literature

A review of the literature in the area of parental choice gave rise to a number of themes which formed the basis of further exploration for the study. These areas were: school choice imperatives, social class, school culture, and race.

Parents make decisions about schools through consultation with two broad imperatives of choice: instrumental-academic imperative, and the intrinsic-personal/social imperative (Bagley, Woods & Glatter, 2001). Each will be considered in turn.

Instrumental-academic

Parents choose a school on the basis of a school's capacity to offer their child quality education. This might be reflected in a school's academic record or reputation. The need for quality education by parents from an instrumental-academic perspective is motivated by their desire for their children to be able to participate in civic and economic life beyond school (van Eyk, 2002). These so called advantages can be defined as positional goods: children, through their attendance at a selected school, are offered certain degrees of social capital which offer assurances for their post-school future. There is an economic rationalist, utility maximisation present in this aspect of the choice process which assists parents in their definitions of 'good' schools (Collins & Snell, 2000; Schneider & Buckley, 2002). It is often assumed that the instrumental-academic capacity of a school is an indicator of school quality (Australian Government, 2005). Indeed, there is some evidence that suggests that perceptions of school quality are closely correlated with a school's academic performance (Gibbons & Silva, 2011).

Intrinsic-personal/social

Parents choose schools which offer their children non-curricular experiences, or opportunities to obtain self-goods which, for all intents and purposes might be considered 'formative'. These experiences are focused on the inculcation of particular values, the development of life skills (such as independence) and these schools meet the emotional and personal needs of children. This can be summarised as a consideration of the special needs of the child by the parent where the emotional and psychological safety and or wellbeing of their child are important considerations in the choice process (Gibbons & Silva, 2011; A. McCarthy, 2004). The emotional and psychological safety needs of children are attended to by schools which offer pastoral care, cultures of support and safe havens from the threatening and de-stabilising elements of the world (Freund, 2001; A. McCarthy, 2004; Theobald, 2005).

The influence of social class in the parental choice of school process is evident in the literature (Ball, Bowe, & Gerwitz, 1996; Bodovski, 2010; Campbell, 2007; Williams, Jamieson, & Hollingworth, 2008; Yates, 2000). It is asserted that a family's attitude to education is shaped by their personal experience which arise from their social class position (Ball & Nikita, 2014; Bodovski, 2010). The extent to which families resit or conform to the education meritocracy helps determine their attitudes to education. The level of resistance or conformity contributes to the degree to which education is valued (Gorman, 1998). Indeed, the Australian 2020 Summit Final Report (2008) acknowledged the seeming class divide in education, brought about by increased funding to the non-government school sector (Australian Government, 2008). Further evidence from the analysis of the *Programme for International Student Assessment* [PISA] (2003) suggests that

schools with a composition of students with higher SES have higher performing students, regardless of individual students' socio-economic status.

The maintenance of the social class position of a family may be one of the areas of shaping the school choices by parents. Some parents choose schools on the basis that this choice will ensure their child maintains their class status into adulthood. This is most evident among the middle class (Bagley et al., 2001; S. Ball & Vincent, 1998; Bosetti, 2004; Collins & Snell, 2000; Freund, 2001; Jackson & Bisset, 2005; Morgan, Dunn, Carins & Fraser, 1993; Reay & Ball, 1998). Therefore, the notion of a 'good' school may be directly related to a family's social class position, and this shapes the ways in which parents select schools for their children (Collins & Snell, 2000; Xiaoxin, 2013).

A school's identity, as expressed through its culture, is also a feature of the parental choice of school process. When discussing the cultures of organisations such as schools, reference is made to the basic assumptions, beliefs and values of the organisation, expressed both tangibly and intangibly (Geertz, 1993; O'Donnell, 2001). The intersection between the school's culture and the values espoused by the family is a relevant component of school selection. This, therefore, expands the notion of a 'quality' school, to not only refer to the level of academic outcomes produced by the school, but encompasses the extent to which a school is able to prepare a child for later life, future civic participation, and fulfil the potential of the child (Groundwater-Smith, 2001; Independent Schools Queensland, 2007; Jackson & Bisset, 2005). The increasing enrolment into the non-government school sector (Catholic and Independent) is indicative of the assertion that parents are seeking out schools which promote the idea of a 'functional community' (Coleman, 1988). Indeed, a study by Kennedy, Dorman & Muholland (2011) found that teacher quality, teacher-student relationships, level of care and concern, and student-student relationships were top considerations of parents who chose a Catholic school.

Notions of race can also shape the school choice decision-making of parents. Schooling may be considered a part of the process of a child's socialisation into particular class values in an attempt at social reproduction. This reinforces the assertion that race, ethnicity and school population demographics may be a factor of influence in the parental choice of school process (Schaverien, 2004; Sikkink & Emerson, 2008; Theobald, 2005). Saporito and Lareau (1999) suggest that the school selection process is heavily influenced by considerations of race, most strongly for white families, and less so for black families. Indeed, white families make primary judgements against the preeminent criteria of race and ethnicity, which leads to the deselection of particular schools (Hsieh & Shen, 2000). The idea of 'white flight' and its corollary 'white avoidance' has been an assertion of international studies of school choice (Bagley, 1996; Bagley et al., 2001; Karsten, Ledoux, Roeleveld, Felix, & Elshof, 2003). There is little empirical evidence of this phenomenon in Australia, with the exception of the work of Ho (2011) and Gulson (2006) which purport that race and ethnicity influences school enrolment patterns.

Context of the study

The research site for this study was a secondary co-educational Catholic boarding school located in north-west Queensland, Australia. The school was an amalgamation of three Catholic schools (a primary school, and a girls' and a boys' secondary boarding school) established in 1998. Between 1998 and 2010, the school experienced fluctuations in boarding enrolment. Most notably, there was a decline in the enrolment of non-Indigenous students from the traditional feeder rural and remote locations, and an increase in demand for enrolment by Indigenous students from rural and remote areas (M. McCarthy, 2013).

Methodology

The purpose of the study was to explore the ways in which non-Indigenous parents living in rural and remote locations selected a secondary boarding school for their children. Therefore a case study methodology was adopted to explore the tacit knowledge underlying the parental choice of school process in order to illuminate the reasons for the changing enrolment patterns at the research site school.

Data gathering strategies and analysis

Focus group and one-on-one semi-structured interviews were conducted with a total of thirty-six (n=36) participants which included parents from rural and remote communities, principals of the research site school, and education system-level representatives. Two systematic approaches to the analysis of data were used in this study. Content analysis was the first approach used during the preliminary exploratory phase in order to identify preliminary categories and themes in the data. The second approach utilised was the constant comparative method in the generation of theory.

Findings and discussion

The research questions which focused this study were:

1. How does rurality/remoteness influence parental choice of boarding school?
2. How do parents living in rural and remote areas inform their choice of boarding school for their child?
3. How does school culture influence rural and remote parents' boarding school choice?
4. How does race influence the boarding school choice process for rural and remote parents?

A second order interpretation, utilising an axial-coding process, yielded five (5) themes. Each of these will be discussed.

Access to 'experiences' is vital

Parent participants defined 'experiences' as those 'extra-educational experiences' and opportunities for the development of social skills. Extra-educational experiences were articulated in the data for the most part as non-curricular opportunities. This emphasis demonstrated a relationship between the notion of access and rurality/remoteness. For these parents who lived in rural and remote locations, their access to secondary education options for their children were limited and this was considered a disadvantage to their children. Parents of this study had three options for their child's secondary education: home schooling, distance education or boarding school. The choice to send their children to boarding school was one motivated by giving their children exposure to experiences which were unavailable to them due to their geographical location. The desire for and access to a 'good' education was defined variously. While parents expressed a need for a particular standard of education, the curricular offerings nor the academic reputation of the research site school were inspected closely by parents. Indeed, there was a general and implied expectation that the school would provide their children with an education but, as one parent stated: "there's just so much more to it than academic results". The emphasis by parents was on an experiential dimension of school life and was grounded in their own personal negative experiences of education in a remote setting:

> Well because they had to have options and they had to have independence and because [husband's name] regretted the fact that he had lots of opportunities when he left school but it was the done thing for him to come home. And that was very much his family thing. He resented that, so he was quite passionate about them learning things that they wanted to learn and giving them opportunities, and we're still doing that (Parent Participant, Angela).

Thus for parents living in rural and remote areas, education is a broadly defined concept, which not only includes academic opportunity, but also access to school contexts which offer their children extra-educational experiences or, as one parent stated, an opportunity to "see what's out there". For these parents, enrolling their children in a boarding school gave their children access to the kinds of experiences they desired for them.

The development of social skills would address for parents the inevitable social insularity and isolation experienced by their children while at home. For the parent participants of this study, school offered their children the chance to develop these skills by broadening their social horizons which contributed to their psychological health and well-being. Parents highlighted that boarding school offered their children unique opportunities to engage with peers, develop a sense of independence, deal with conflict and participate in a range of activities that allowed their child to experience 'the other world'. Specifically, parents wanted their children "to have an experience other than station life and we felt really strongly that they need to know other children…" (Parent Participant, Sandy). Thus, their concerns for their child's social development were closely related to their geographical isolation. The data suggest that their child's social development was a key concern for non-Indigenous parents in choosing a school for their child, and this often superseded other aspects of schools' offerings:

> Maybe not the facilities but what was on offer for children after school so that when you send a child from the bush and they've had not much socialisation and they don't really know how to become involved in things, I think that's really important. Those children need to be encouraged forward, shown how to get involved, because they don't know because they've never had to. That was probably one of the big things that I would have liked to see in a boarding school (Parent Participant, Louise).

The rural location of the research site school offered parent participants' children contextual familiarity which was considered an enabler of social skills development. For the parents, the research site school offered their children opportunities for the development of social skills in an environment that reflected their home contexts, which eliminated the perceived dangers of sending their children to boarding school. Parent participants emphasised a strong desire for their children to develop a sense of independence, responsibility and work ethic.

These social skilling experiences offered by the research school were seen by parents as intimately connected with the holistic development of their child; that these experiences "were of great benefit to them". The data indicated that it was less about the quality of the activities and more about the social implications these activities had for their children. These non-Indigenous parents living in rural and remote areas have a concern for their child's capacity to operate independently in the post-school world, and the decision to send their child to boarding school helped to address this concern: "And then he'll be able to be an independent person because he's been able to do school without parents around all the time" (Louise, Non-Indigenous Semi Structured Interview, ll.112-113).

Schools must be a place of 'safety'

Parent participants expressed the idea of safety such that the term was defined as physical, psychological and emotional safety. The importance of safety was inextricably linked to the geographical distance that was between the parents and their child at boarding school.

The physical environment of boarding schools was a consideration of parents insofar as this indicated something of the level of physical safety their child would be afforded. Parents considered the conditions of the dormitories, its layout, the number of students within the living space, as well as the location of the supervisor in relation to their child.

In addition, the psychological well-being of their children was something considered by parents in their selection of boarding school. Indeed, schools that were populated by students with similar backgrounds (i.e. rural, farming family) were considered to offer children a level of security which contributed to their transition into the boarding school environment. Psychological safety was also articulated by parents with reference to the boarding house as a "term time family" and "home-away-from-home" (Focus Group Participant). The boarding house needed to operate as a family proxy, which offered children similar degrees of safety and security found in the home environment.

The notion of emotional safety for parents was articulated through their perceived positive relationship between safety and happiness. Indeed, their child's happiness was emphasised over academic success, sporting achievement and other experience, though these positive experiences were also seen as engendering happiness. For the parent participants, their child's happiness was considered "the bottom line" (Focus Group Participant) and this was contingent on their experience of success in other areas of school life: "Because in the end, they have to be happy there. They're never going to do well if they're not happy" (Focus Group Participant). All parents considered their child's happiness as very important in the school selection process. Furthermore, one parent's hopeful outcome for her children's education was that they be "happy and fulfilled... happy in who they are as people" (Non-Indigenous Parents, Focus Group[a], ll.1053-1054). For parent participants, happiness was not the result of school success, but rather an inherent experience of boarding school.

The cogency of the 'grapevine'

Parents seek out a variety of sources of information about school in the process of school choice. There are two broad categories of information available to parents: cold and hot knowledge (Ball & Vincent, 1998). 'Cold' knowledge describes the information made available to parents by the school. 'Hot' knowledge refers to the information about schools gleaned from parents' own informational networks and is referred to as the 'grapevine'.

For the parent participants of this study, the 'grapevine' was a cogent source of information, and they accessed this information from three discernible networks: (i) parents who had or were in the process of making school selection; (ii) family and close friends; and (iii) key people in their local communities, such as the Catholic priest and the local primary school principal.

It was information from the other parents and families and close friends which was used to confirm selection of a boarding school. Mothers tended to be the seekers of information, and other mothers were the sources. However, the 'grapevine' was not the definitive source of information for these parents. They undertook a process of filtering and evaluating the information received in order to determine its veracity, as the following comment illustrates:

> Well I think we would have had a look at it ... dug a bit deeper to see why [what] the reasons were ... if we were actually considering the school, you know we would have dug a bit deeper to see what the issues were whether it was the child [from whose parents the negative reporting came] was the problem or whether it was the school ... You know like, to be fair, there are things that kids come back with, and it's not really the school's fault, it's the kids themselves that create the problems sometimes ... had it been [research site school] with a few issues we would have looked into that and seen what was going on and asked the question basically ... I was sort of happy with them going there (Interview Participant, Laura).

The 'grapevine' was used by parents to confirm a predetermined school selection, rather than the definitive source of information which led to selection and deselection of particular schools. Indeed, negative information from the 'grapevine' moved parents to further inspect its dependability in order to confirm the trustworthiness of the 'grapevine'.

The inculcation of values and 'medicinal religion'

The culture of the Catholic school was relevant to parent participants insomuch as the school inculcated particular values in their children. The culture of a school was variously understood and expressed by parents. A number of the participants were clear to distinguish between religious education and Catholic education. For them, the Catholic religion was not a vital element of their child's participation at school. Rather, Christian values were emphasised, as well as a perception that Catholic education offered something unique.

A feature of the data was the belief by parents that the Catholic school experience allowed their child to receive opportunities for education in values, understood by parents as a "good grounding" (Interview Participant, Barb). One parent participant stated that the school is "a school because of the whole tapestry" (Focus Group Participant) as opposed to the sum of its achievements and achievers, and that this is an important element of what constitutes a quality school. Another parent stated that the school "made the girls, you know, people that I am proud of, sort of thing. And [school name] had a lot to do with that" (Focus Group Participant) which further underscores the value development dimension of Catholic education. Indeed when parent participants were asked what the hopeful outcome of the child's Catholic education was, most emphasised "greater empathy", "greater understanding of what Christian values are and I think he lives by them better" and "Christian values" (Focus Group Participant). This reinforces that the education in values dimension of Catholic education is an aspect of the choice process for parents.

The data indicated that traditional religion was unimportant in the choice process, as were the transmission of key Catholic-Christian teachings. Indeed, there was ambivalence if not an absence of reference to the quality and substance of religious education. Moreover, those participants who stated that the Catholic affiliation was important for them during the choice process did not emphasise the importance of Catholic teaching and religious education. There is conspicuous absence in the data of any emphasis by parents on the on-going religious participation or affiliation of their child. Many of the participants had limited to no expectation that their child would participate in Catholic church life post-school.

Furthermore, the exposure to Catholic ritual and other Catholic cultural experiences were believed to have some level of 'medicinal' influence on participants' children. That is, there was a sense that parents did not concisely articulate how their children would benefit, but they knew that they would:

> It's hard to know if they've benefitted. But I don't think it did them any harm. I'm sure other Church schools have really good values and that sort of thing. You know, I don't think it hurt that they were working the projector in Mass. [Child's name] became an altar boy type thing and they did all that sort of thing, and I don't think that hurt them one little bit (Interview Participant, Sandy).

The data indicated that enrolment in a Catholic school afforded participants' children a stronger foundation from which to deal with the post-school world. This reinforces the 'medicinal' nature of Catholic education for these participants: that their exposure to particular values immunised their children against the vagaries of the outside world. A corollary of the desire for post-school readiness in the data was the idea that enrolment in a Catholic school was going to offer the participants' children a basis for 'belief' which, while not self-evident to their children now, may pay dividends in the future. While the 'Catholic dimension' to their choice of school may have been downplayed by parents, there was a sense that they had made an investment in their child's future personal stability.

School choice and race

For the parents in this study, race was a consideration in the choice process and the racial composition of a school has a variety of implications, and these were carefully considered by parents as they made their school choice. Specifically, the level of Indigenous student enrolment at the research site school was cited by parents and, while this did not lead to the deselection of the school, there was a clearly articulated tipping point of Indigenous enrolment which would have influenced their decision-making differently. The racialised thinking of the parent participants were defined according to two sub-themes: the experience of differential treatment; and (ii) the erosion of school quality.

For many of the parent participants their racialised thinking about the selected school was articulated in terms of differential treatment of students. Some parents intimated that Indigenous students received advantages at the research site school and these same advantages were not extended to their children.

The perceived financial advantages offered to Indigenous students were contrasted with the struggle of non-Indigenous parents to meet fee commitments, further highlighting the perception of inequity:

> Number one I think they [their children] can get resentful because they know that their [Indigenous] friends who live in the same area get flown home every holiday because they're on Abstudy. They get pocket money that our children don't get; they only get what Mum and Dad can give them, so there is resentment ... And it usually just washes over them and they just don't care. They do get resentful (Interview Participant, Sandy).

A Principal participant also suggested there was a prevailing attitude among members of peak parent bodies (i.e. School Board and Finance Committee) that there was a financial divide between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students, and this divide advantaged Indigenous students:

> There was a feeling that's come out several times through the school board that the Indigenous students get looked after too well and it's discriminatory against the non-Indigenous students who are for example not wealthy enough to afford a private Catholic education or some aspect of their education. Yes I've certainly heard parents voice that (Interview Participant, Principal 2).

From the data emerged the perception that there is an inequitable educational divide, between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students, in favour of Indigenous students. This divide was articulated by participants in a variety of ways. Some participants questioned the validity of education programs that focused on Indigenous students. One parent stated that the school "turned my children into racists" (Focus Group Participant) because of her children's exposure to groups of Indigenous students where the perceived educational divide was evident to them. Another parent suggested that Indigenous education programs are "failing miserably", intimating these programs set Indigenous students against non-Indigenous students.

Different consequences for Indigenous students' poor showing in the data further highlighted the relationship of the perceived differential treatment of Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. The notion of "two different scales" (Non-Indigenous Parents, Focus Group, l.939) was reiterated with reference to rules: "I feel that there's two lots of rules. There [are] rules for non-Indigenous kids and there [are] rules for Indigenous kids... and it is hugely problematic…" (Focus Group Participant).

Moreover, the data suggest a strong and enduring perception among parents that Indigenous people generally are advantaged and this is most evident to them in the ways in which their children are treated at school. One parent stated: "We have a problem with the perceptions of young Aboriginal people out there that think they are entitled to everything" (Interview Participant, Angela). Moreover, another parent suggested that the issues of (perceived) differential treatment of Indigenous students were the result of particular ideologies at the systemic level: "And I think sometimes it's got a lot to do with the hierarchy of Cath[olic] Ed[ucation Office], their airy fairy ideas" (Interview Participant, Sandy).

The participants highlighted a maleficent relationship between Indigenous enrolment and the quality of the school. For the most part, high numbers of Indigenous students eroded the quality of the school, where 'quality' is understood in a variety of ways. The decline in quality due to Indigenous enrolment was most manifest in students' behaviour and the extent to which the parent participants' children were subject to this.

In addition to parents, ensuring school quality by balancing the racial composition of the school was a priority for the Principals of the research site school. This was an important aspect of school administration which ensured that the research site school remained attractive to non-Indigenous parents. Principal 2 stated that the way he enrolled students had changed over time and he implied he now had to be more discerning when it came to enrolling Indigenous students. He stated that he made errors in selection "probably due to inexperience" (l.158) which prompted changes to the enrolment process. The participant

referred to a particular Indigenous community where he was not selective enough and this led to issues surrounding student behaviour and raised complex challenges with non-Indigenous parents. He then went on to outline how he had changed his approach to the enrolment of Indigenous students: "We try to maintain a racial balance. Certainly, Indigenous to non-Indigenous we try to maintain at least one to one, a maximum of one to one."

The principle of "racial balance" was founded on a notion of integration, which was directly related to maintaining school quality. It was stated that if the research site school was to enrol too many Indigenous students there would be a decline in non-Indigenous enrolment: "... and as soon as that trend starts if you're not very, very careful you can turn it into an Indigenous boarding school and that's certainly not what we want. It has to be a school that works on integration of Indigenous and non-Indigenous ..." (Interview Participant, Principal 2). The point of difficulty here is on the enrolment of Indigenous students in relation to the perceived quality of the research site school. It is conceded that the enrolment of Indigenous students brings challenges that are difficult to justify on the basis of integration and racial balance.

Racial imbalance in enrolment where the imbalance was in favour of Indigenous students was an indicator of poor quality. This was considered a malignancy which threatened the on-going financial well-being and the subsequent viability of the school. Both principal participants either explicitly stated or implied a commitment to the enrolment of Indigenous students on the condition that this enrolment did not exceed the enrolment of non-Indigenous students: "as your Indigenous numbers go up, your non-Indigenous numbers go down" (Interview Participant, Principal 1).

This particular approach to enrolment was a formula for future viability of the school because it was their perception that non-Indigenous parents had an intolerance for too many Indigenous students:

> And people in your enrolment interviews were very blatant in their questions about the number of Indigenous, to the point of saying things like I am happy for Indigenous kids to get an education but not with my kids. Or, I don't want my kids sleeping next to a black kid (Principal 1, ll.68-70).

The data indicated that high numbers of Indigenous enrolments diminish the status of the school as an indicator of school quality. Principal 1 highlighted this issue, stating that this had the potential to shift enrolment demographics: "And if you go to school with black kids you're going to be diminished in the social rungs ... Because you've got increased Indigenous" (Interview Participant, Principal 1). The implication here is that Indigenous enrolment erodes the quality of the school in relation to its capacity to offer social mobility or social class maintenance to non-Indigenous students. For this participant, the role of the Principal was to ensure that the racial composition of the school did not discourage non-Indigenous enrolment: "it's probably the most difficult thing I had to deal with as a Principal...trying to maintain a harmonious living environment in boarding where

the racial mix was not going to impact negatively on either group" (Interview Participant, Principal 1).

Thus, parents were actively avoiding schools with high numbers of Indigenous students because it stymied their child's social progress: "they don't want their kids associating with a lower socio-economic group" (Principal 1, l.326). Principal 1 considered the systemic Catholic vs. Private school image as pivotal in some parents' decision-making, stating that "the elitism thing" (l.378) is an important consideration. The quality of the research site school was reduced because of Indigenous enrolment and this was used by competing schools as a lever with prospective enrolments that had racially motivated reservations about Indigenous people:

> And because [research site school] has Indigenous kids that diminishes you on that social scale. Gossip is part of that. I think there's too many boarding schools in [rural township], I think that also has played a factor. And I think the other boarding schools play that to the hilt in their enrolment interviews. They don't come out and say on their billboards we only have 2% black kids, but they certainly will make sure it's dropped in the conversation at enrolment interviews (Principal 1, ll.379-384).

These data indicate a race-social class element of the parental choice of school process, whereby certain non-Indigenous parents deselect schools on the basis of the racial composition of the school. For some of these parents, the higher the concentration of Indigenous students, the more likely their child was to be socially immobilised, in addition to being exposed to poor behaviour and an unsafe environment.

Implications and conclusions

The school choice process is a complex process, whereby parents engage in psychical processes in order to define notions of a 'good' school which in turn influences their choices. However, school choice in the current Australian educational landscape implies that academic results are the predetermining factor of school choice, evidenced by the Australian Government's continued public accountability measures such as the *My School* website. This is not to discredit the value of a school's academic results in the parental choice of school process, but it fails to recognise the complexity of the process, which is heightened for those living in rural and remote communities.

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Michael McCarthy PhD is a Catholic school principal in Queensland. His PhD research was in the area of parental choice of school by rural and remote Indigenous and non-Indigenous parents.
Email: mccarthys2@aanet.com.au