

# **The impact of school staff perceptions on parental choice of next school**

(A study into the perceptions held by staff in contributing schools about the schools they contribute to and the impact that may have on the marketing decisions of the next school.)

**Richard Chambers**

Research project submitted for EDTL802  
In partial fulfilment for the degree of Master of Teaching and Learning  
University of Canterbury: College of Education

May 2008

## **Contents**

1. Abstract
  2. Introduction
  3. Literature Review
  4. Research questions (Hypotheses)
  5. Methodology
  6. Results (Discussion)
  7. Conclusion
- References
- Appendices
- a. Definition of Terms
  - b. Data Table

## 1. Abstract

Can and do staff at contributing schools have an effect on the decisions parents and students make about their next school? The writer's experience as a past contributing primary school principal and a current intermediate school principal would suggest that the comments a teacher or principal makes about a another school may influence parents and students in their selection of their 'next' school.

The study seeks to explore contributing school staff perceptions about the school/s they contribute to, their knowledge about the school/s, how they gain knowledge about the school/s, and the frequency they provide advice on school selection to parents or students. A key element of the study is the focus on the perceptions held by contributing school staff of the schools to which their school contributes. The New Zealand school system is an increasingly competitive school environment.

New Zealand compulsory education is relatively fragmented with a wide range of schools being present within a self-managing framework overseen by a central Ministry of Education. Each school delivers individually tailored learning programmes based on a nationally mandated curriculum. This has resulted in a system of schooling that is inherently competitive and where parents have considerable choice about which schools their child may attend although enrolment zones or enrolment criteria can at times restrict this choice.

The result of this environment is that many schools have to engage in both direct and indirect marketing to ensure their survival. This marketing may include a range of activities including open nights, community newsletters, a

glossy school prospectus, or newspaper advertising. Contributing schools often act as information gatekeepers to prospective students and families, interpreting, allowing or not allowing information to pass on to students therefore the perceptions that contributing school staff have about a school may influence the advice they give or the access to students that they allow.

A written survey was provided to all staff at three contributing schools. All three schools contributed to the same two intermediate schools. The survey contained multiple-choice questions, with a small number of open-ended questions.

Staff in the case study schools showed little factual knowledge about the schools to which they contributed. The majority of staff felt they had no views for or against particular schools, nor were they asked directly for information about the 'next school' very often.

The writer identifies an area for further study, suggesting a study involving Year 6 students, parents of year 6 students, contributing school staff and staff at the next school. This study would seek to compare the sources and type of information students and parents had about 'next school' selection and the influences contributing school staff may have on the type or content of information available.

## 2. Introduction

Every day we make decisions, from the mundane such as which loaf of bread or television we purchase to the more significant decisions, such as which school my child is going to attend. In order to make decisions we may gather a range of information from a variety of sources, some informal, some formal. These sources include brand awareness/reputation, price, internet searches, advertisements, consumer watchdog groups, the opinions of friends and family and the opinions of 'experts' (often with a vested interest i.e. sales representative). Different types and qualities of information surround us. We select the information we want and make a decision.

The more value we place on the decision or the greater our perception of control over our choice, the more we seek to make 'informed' decisions. We attempt to find information we can trust in order to help us to make this decision. We then prioritise the information we have access to on the basis of our own experiences, knowledge and perceptions. At times this may mean that each of us accept information, which is solely based on emotional response or a perception (ours or someone else's). This emotional response to information can be particularly significant. Peters (2003) discusses a study published in the *Journal of Advertising Research*, which found that emotions are twice important as facts in making decisions.

We seek information about the benefits to us of making a particular decision whether these benefits are emotional, economic or intellectual. The more significant the impact of the decision on our life or those close to us the more likely it is that we will put effort into the decision making process.

While the purchase of a loaf of bread or a television may have momentary significance, the writer believes that we also adopt a similar ‘purchasing’ or decision-making method when making many other more significant decisions that affect our families and ourselves.

As a past contributing primary school principal and a current intermediate school principal the writer has witnessed parents (and students) going through this ‘purchasing’ process as they seek to decide on the next school for their son or daughter. They consider the benefits that will result from a decision to attend a particular school and the ‘costs’ of attending. These costs may include emotional, financial social or opportunity costs.

Many parents and students are actively seeking to make an informed decision about the school that will best suit the student’s needs or that will provide the best future opportunities for the student. For some parents the benefits or costs of attending or not attending a school may be significant, and may not directly relate to the quality of the school, but to community perceptions of the school.

Parents (and increasingly students) have access to a range of information sources about schools. As the age of the students the school caters for increases, the sources of information available and the type of information available also increases. A difficulty parents and students face is deciding what information to use, how to interpret that information and what information or sources of information to trust.

One source of information for parents and students is the staff of the 'feeder' or contributing school the student currently attends. The purpose of this study is to consider if the contributing school staff is a useful or appropriate source of information parents or students to use in deciding their next school.

Stott & Parr (1991) suggest that probing the opinions and perceptions of parents of students who choose to and not to enrol at your school is an effective tool in understanding your school and the marketing challenges that it may face. This study explores the perceptions held by one group of people (contributing school staff) who may have a significant influence on the perceptions of prospective students and parents about a school, due to this group's expert status.

### 3. Literature Review

A review of literature discussing parental and student choice of next school identifies the following themes: the mechanisms of parental choice, relationship management, school marketing and perception management. There appears to be considerable research around the mechanics of how parents 'action' their choice, through vouchers and other 'choice' enabling mechanisms and factors that limit choice, for example, enrolment zones. Research, as distinct from opinion pieces about how parents gain or should gain the information necessary in order to make a choice of schools, appears limited.

Gerwitz, Ball and Bowe (1995), identified 3 types of school choosers:

- Privileged/skilled choosers – these choosers are more likely to ask questions of those in power, but are also more likely to have children who attend a school, which strongly links to a particular high school.
- Semi-skilled choosers – this group is more reliant on the perceptions of others that they see as some kind of expert.

and

- The disconnected – The parent who makes a choice because they have to.

The first two groups of choosers rely to some extent on the perceptions of others when making their choice. Within the school communities that the writer has worked in, the semi skilled choosers and the disconnected or disenfranchised choosers are the most significant groupings.



It is this second group of semi-skilled choosers that is of particular interest to the writer. The impact that contributing school experts might have on the school choices of semi-skilled choosers may be considerable.

Gerwitz et al. (1995, p.41), states that “the primary head teachers often play a key role in influencing or deflecting parental choice and in providing crucial ‘access’ and application information.” The New Zealand Education Review Office (1997, p.1), describes the choice process ‘most’ parents go through in deciding secondary schools for their children as discussion “with other parents and friends and they talk to the children’s primary school teachers and visit schools on open days before they make a decision about enrolment at a secondary school.”

### **Mechanisms of Parental Choice**

Fowler (1993, p8) found that the three most important elements for selecting a secondary school in Christchurch were the “closeness of the school to home, family experiences and impressions of schools, and associations and recommendations of others outside the family and academic and curriculum factors and perceived educational benefits.” This process is unlikely to have changed significantly, other than for the impact of an increasing number of school enrolment zones in limiting parental choice. Vouchers, and eligibility criteria set by private, state, or religious schools can further restrict parental choice. (Wolfe, 2003 & Brighouse, 2003)

The combined effect of New Zealand’s devolution of the education system and central government controlled enrolment zones has resulted in a complicated environment for parents to select schools. Walford (1999) states “New

Zealand's virtual abolition of its educational system, as such, has led to a competitive jungle of autonomous suppliers of schooling". A further result of the current New Zealand schooling system is increasing social polarisation as parents try to ensure their children get into the school they perceive to be the best. Gordon (1999) supports this view of the impact of enrolment schemes in controlling, not only the numbers of students, but also the type of students who will attend a school. The ethnic and socio economic background of current students does, at times have an impact on viability and desirability of schools in New Zealand. The way in which the community perceives a school or its students can determine its future. It is therefore desirable to understand the factors that influence decision-makers.

Considering a school's prospectus, policies, talking with staff at the school, observing in the class and the playground and looking at relationships among children and between teachers and children (ERO, 1995) are suggested as some of the means that parents should use to select a school. This same review suggests asking community members about schools, but does not appear to recognise the importance of word of mouth suggestions in making decisions.

### **Relationship Management**

Relationship management is an increasingly significant factor within and between schools and the wider community, "...competition between schools exists, in fact, it is increasing in ferocity." (Vining, p.9). School survival will often depend on how a school is perceived within its community. A few significant individuals or groups may lead community perceptions about a school; the staff of contributing schools may be one of those groups. Vining believes that 'word of mouth' is extremely powerful and extends beyond

current students and prospective students. It is therefore vital to ensure the accuracy of information to all groups who may talk about your school.

Home-school partnerships are an increasingly important facet of the pre-compulsory and compulsory education sector. These partnerships encourage the flow of information between home and school, two-way support and parental contribution (Biddulph, Biddulph & Biddulph, 2003), (Ramsay, Hawk, Harold, Marriott & Poskitt, 1987). A possible result of this changing relationship between families and schools as home-school partnerships develop, is that increasing numbers of parents might feel more comfortable seeking information from staff at their child's current school. The information that they seek could include information about the next school for their child. Contributing school staff may be more willing to give their opinions simply because they have developed a relationship with the parents.

McGilvary (1999) in an article titled *The Power of Word of Mouth* considered a study about how parents found out about quality early childcare in Christchurch. The study found that a direct endorsement from other parents or an indirect endorsement by someone who knows someone with a link to the centre was more effective than various forms of paid advertising. The power of word of mouth is a highly influential factor in parental and student decision making around school selection. The significance they place on information provided by others is to a large extent defined by the relationship they have with them.

School staff (in particular teachers) are recognised community experts in the field of education. It is reasonable to assume that members of the community

may seek guidance from their local education experts, the staff from within their child's current school (staff who know their child and 'know' education), about how to select the 'best' next school for their child or which is the 'best' next school for their child.

The power of word of mouth is endorsed by Vining (1995). "The instant somebody becomes a customer, they share the right to talk about the school, to judge it and to broadcast their perceptions." Staff of contributing schools could be considered de-facto customers, as they often retain an interest in the performance of their ex-students. If these staff do make judgements on other schools and then "broadcast their perceptions", we are left to wonder what level of significance will the actual 'customer', the parent, place on the perceptions of the 'expert', the teacher.

A study by Smyth, (1998), involving teachers in England (cited in Oplatka, Hemsley & Foskett, 2002. p.3) found that "most teachers are not aware of the parents' views and preferences and even ignore these views in practice". It would appear that a 'reality' has been developed where school staff as 'experts' have considerable power to shape community, while not necessarily responding to information and the views of that community. This creates the potential for contributing school staff to be very influential in parental and student decision-making over their next school and in fact shape community perceptions of the schools in their area. Staff within primary schools and the institution itself are in a position to more strongly influence community perceptions as a result of being able to form stronger home-school partnerships than a school with a two-year programme, such as an intermediate school.

Peters (2003), identifies the power of women in making ‘purchasing’ decisions and their use of word of mouth to do so. Peters cites a study by Barletta, which finds that men want to study facts and women want to talk with lots of people. Women are 80 percent more likely to make recommendations to people and also to consider recommendations from people. Women, are the writer believes, more likely to talk with contributing school staff prior to making a decision about the next school for their child, as they are more likely to have formed a relationship with staff at their child’s current school.

### **School Marketing**

Linda Vining, (1996, p.50) recognises the potential impact of the staff at contributing schools on parental decision making by posing this question to schools developing marketing plans. “What marketing strategies do you pursue with relation to your feeder schools?” It is clear that there is an acceptance from school marketers that contributing school staff have the potential to influence the decision making of parents and students over the selection of their next school. What is unclear is how overt this advice is and how biased the advice might be. While it appears likely that staff influence might become more overt as students get older, attending high school with counsellors and career advisors - giving advice to students about their vocational and study options, we are left to wonder as to how the personal or institutional perceptions of staff may influence the advice they give and at what student age level, staff influence of next school decisions might begin.

Stephen Holmes (2000), in discussing school marketing, views relationship management for schools as having two distinct aspects, the development of relationships with potential and present students and parents, and relationships

with past students and parents. Staff at contributing schools could have a significant impact on the development of the relationship between the potential student and the 'next' school, as they are a conduit of information, accurate or inaccurate, positive or negative or can act as a block to information.

In Oplatka (2002), a study of English secondary teachers, one teacher stated, "existing children are our best ambassadors, because they know how we are, that we are good..." It is reasonable to assume that these children will pass on their perception of their own school to potential students and directly or indirectly to the parents of potential students. Oplatka suggests that teachers within a school are only starting to see themselves as making an indirect contribution to the marketing of their own school. It may therefore be some time before staff of contributing schools recognise that they have an impact on the marketing of other schools, most importantly the schools to which they contribute.

### **Perception Management**

Teacher personal perceptions about a wide range of topics are often treated as 'expert' knowledge by parents. A "perception (is) a belief or opinion, often held by many people and based on appearances", (Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary-online, 2006). An expert's beliefs or opinions are frequently held in higher esteem than an average person's perceptions, yet we often have no knowledge as to how or when those perceptions or beliefs were formed. There is no guarantee that an expert's perceptions are based on fact, even when they are presented as fact. This lack of certainty about the quality of the expert's information often has little impact on whether we accept the expert's views and

allow the expert's perceptions to influence our perceptions, our decision-making. Perceptions are an intuitive judgment based on personal experience, heuristics and information available to the individual (accurate or inaccurate). Our perceptions are influenced by others opinions and perceptions of others.

Parents and students gain information on schools from a wide range of sources, school newsletters, newspapers, ERO reviews, talking with school staff, other students, parents and community members. This information leads to the development of a perception or picture in their minds of the schools under consideration. These perceptions are what will form the basis of the decision, whether they are accurate or inaccurate.

As one of the 'experts' asked for information, the writer has come to wonder how a principal and staff within one school gain their perceptions of another school in order to make or not make a recommendation to a parent or student about their next school. These teacher perceptions or opinions can influence the selection of the next school that a student will attend. This can be done both directly and indirectly; directly by restricting access to information, or by specifically promoting a view; or indirectly by intentionally or unintentionally interpreting information students in their care and their parents will receive.

Parents make choices on the behalf of their children all the time. As their children age parental involvement in the child's choices reduces. A key choice that parents make for their children is the school they will attend. While at times the choice of school is limited by outside factors such as school enrolment zones, family finances or transport, parents on the whole make the choice (Bagley, Woods, & Glatter 2001). Parents may, however, be influenced

by their children in this decision. Parents and students both hold perceptions about the school they attend or could attend.

Bagley, Woods and Clatter (2001, p.32) state that “it is notable that although parents were unable to comment in any depth about a school’s reputation it still featured as a factor in school rejection. In such cases schools might be rejected largely on the basis of vague rumour and hearsay.”

Glen, McLaughlin and Salganik (1993) present the view that there is an informal sharing of information about schools within the community and that at times ‘assistance’ from staff may be necessary. This view supports the validity of asking questions about how staff form their opinions, often presented as fact, and how the perceptions that these opinions are based on were developed.

Schools are used to collecting demographic and learning data about their students. Bernhardt (2003) argues that data about perceptions is equally important. People act on and make decisions based on their perceptions. Finding out about what the perceptions of parents and potential parents are and how they were formed allows the school to discover more about what how school selections are made. This may enable the school to provide information, which will cause a shift in those perceptions and therefore the resultant decision.

Active research into the ability to influence or manage people’s perceptions appears to have developed from an interest by United States military during and post the Vietnam War. Information was freely accessible and available through



modern real-time communications. Perception management is in effect the politically correct version of propaganda. Perception management represents “actions to convey and/or deny selected information and indicators to ... influence their emotions, motives, and objective reasoning; ... ultimately resulting in ... behaviours and official actions favourable to the originator's objectives. In various ways, perception management combines truth projection, operations security, cover, deception, and psychological operations.” (Beavers, 2005, p.80)

The advertising community has clearly recognised the importance of controlling or ‘managing’ information, schools have been slower to accept the reality of perception management. The reality for the modern school is that they also engage in perception management. The school (in this case the school leadership, staff and Board) is making constant attempts to manage what other people think of their school. School leaders do this with a sense of purpose and righteous justification; to ensure that the school is seen to succeed; to ensure that the school’s reputation remains intact or is enhanced, and that the school’s funding remains stable or grow. These goals are not dissimilar to a military perception management campaign or an advertising campaign.

In order to manage perceptions we need to be aware of three things; what the perceptions held by ‘others’ are, what these perceptions are ‘used’ for and what we would like those perceptions to be. Willimon (as cited by Stupak, 2000, p. 253) states that “perceptions are real”. Our perceptions have an impact on how we react to what we see and hear and are often more ingrained in us than fact, to the extent that often “perception is reality”. (Cialdini, cited Stupak p.253)

As educators we need to be aware of the beliefs that are held about our school in order to ensure that our graduates and community have a positive perception of the school and to combat misinformation.

A community's self perception can often be anchored in the reputation of their school. Equally the school's reputation can be anchored in the perception of the community held by outside communities. A school within a struggling community may be perceived as a struggling school by that community and by people outside the community. The reality may be the opposite, with the school performing at a high level, but the perception of the wider community is that it can't be successful because of where the school is situated. The perceptions held of failure within and about that community might be so strong that the community doesn't know or does not believe the reality.

If we accept that the opinions of staff at a student's current school can influence the selection of his/her next school, then we should consider how the opinions of those staff are formed and possibly how accurate information can shape those opinions.

The 'status' or authority of the information may have an impact on the weighting that the receiver of the information will give to it. It is possible that the opinion of educators will have a greater influence on parental or student choice of next school than information received from another source. This information may, however, have no more accuracy or validity than that provided by anyone else. A small amount of information from an expert can have a large impact on the perceptions of an individual, a prospective parent or a student of a school

Downes (in Bridges & McLaughlin, 1994, p.55) states that while technically “it is the parents who choose the secondary school”, surveys have suggested that the student’s preference is highly influential. If this is in fact the case then one of the influencing factors on student preference may be the accidental or overt sharing of their current teachers’ perceptions of their ‘next’ school options. Student preference appears from the writer’s discussions with parents to be a greater influencing factor on the selection of next school than it was several years ago. If student led parental decision-making is a trend, then the direct impact of senior class teacher perceptions (in contributing schools) on student next school selection could become more significant.

The perceptions that parents and students hold of particular schools are very powerful and the accuracy or otherwise of these perceptions appears not to be a significant factor in their decision making, their perception is their reality. It is the writer’s belief that the strength of these perceptions is in part based on the status of the person or organisation (as viewed by the recipient) from whom the initial information was gained.

The perceptions held by school staff about schools that their students could transition to, can clearly have an impact on the choices parents or students will make, as school staff are generally viewed as experts on their field. “To this end, perception management is an essential tool for academic leaders. Influencing the intellectual perceptions of both internal and external audiences significantly impacts your ability to advance the viability, vitality, and visibility of your college.” Stupak (2000, p.256)

It is strongly suggested in several New Zealand reports that teachers and principals in contributing schools do have an influence on parental decision-making about the next school. Government agencies, such as the NZ Ministry of Education in Shaw, H. & Millar, K. (n.d.). and the Education Review Office (1997, 2001, 2005) actively promote that this should be the case. These reports do not reflect on the ability of school staff to carry out this function. It is therefore important to find out if school staff have the willingness and accurate information necessary to support parental/student decision-making about next school; or are they hamstrung by their own perceptions and lack of information there by limiting their usefulness to parents and students when making this decision.

There are appears to have been little research or discussion around the following questions. The impact school staff has on parental and student decision-making about next school (through direct and indirect information or influence)? How school staff, form their opinions about other schools? And do contributing school staff, believe that they influence student and parental choice of next school?

#### 4. Research Question/s

What are the personal perceptions of staff within contributing schools of the intermediate school they contribute to?

How were these perceptions gained?

Do staff perceptions influence the advice given to members of the school community when selecting the next school for their child?

## Definition of Terms

**Composite schools** cover Years 1 to 13, the full range of compulsory schooling and beyond. Most are in rural areas. Many are known as "area schools" although there are also religious or other special character composite schools such as Kura Kaupapa Maori or Rudolf Steiner schools. (ERO, 2001, p.6)

**Contributing primary schools** cover Year 1 to Year 6 (see primary school).

**Contributing schools** are schools that 'contribute' students to another school; e.g. a primary school to an intermediate school, an intermediate school to a high school.

**Decile** is a rating of socio-economic factors, which is applied to schools and is generated by using actual student addresses and national census information. This rating is used by the Ministry of Education to provide additional financial support to low decile schools and by some members of the community as a way of judging a schools capability and student population. Decile 1 is the lowest and decile 10 is the highest.

**Full primary schools** cater for students from Year 1 to Year 8. They are the most common type of school and some are very small and/or isolated. They are distinct from *contributing* primary schools that usually cater for up to Year 6 students only. (ERO, 2001, p.6)

**High schools** cover Year 9 to 15 (see secondary schools).

**Intermediate schools** have students at Year 7 and Year 8 levels only. At present all intermediate schools are located in urban areas. (ERO, 2001, p.6)

**Perceptions** are a belief or opinion, often held by many people and are formed on the basis of the knowledge an individual has available to them.

"They color what we see, how we interpret, what we believe, and how

we behave. They create or diminish value. They generate or solve problems. They are an essential component to academic operations and whether a college is successful. So powerful are our perceptions that many psychologists believe that perception is reality” (Stupak, 2000. p.253)

**Perception management** is a process of ‘directing’ an individual’s or a group’s perceptions by an interested party. Perception management is a process developed in military settings.

**Primary School** is a school covering years 1 to 8. A primary school may be a contributing school, a full primary school or an intermediate school.

**Secondary schools** cover Year 9 to 13 (see high schools).

## 5. Methodology

The method employed in the current study is based on a quantitative research model (Mutch, 2005), which does make some allowance for the participants to write in answers, by providing several open-ended questions. It is assumed that teachers might be exposed to a marketing awareness within their own schools but that they might not be aware of their potential impact on the marketing of another school.

It was important for the study that the views of a wide range of participants be gathered, not only across schools, but also across experience levels and job position. A quantitative approach allowed for the identification of the groups of staff most likely to be asked by parents for information, and the groups of staff most in need of accurate information about the schools they contribute to.

The study looked at the perceptions held by staff at three contributing schools of the school to which they contribute, in Christchurch, New Zealand.

The principal of each school within the study group was approached to explain the purposes, methodology and timing of the study and to gain verbal consent. After verbal consent was gained this was followed up in writing seeking written confirmation of consent for the study to be undertaken. The principals of all three schools approached consented to the study being undertaken. The study group of schools represented the three largest contributing schools to Intermediate A.



It must be noted all participant schools are in a university city in New Zealand. The school principals were concerned about frequent requests for involvement in studies and only consented when they were confident that the workload generated by the survey on staff would not impact on their core work.

Each school was provided with enough survey forms (appendix B) for all staff members to complete if they consented. School office staff distributed and collected the survey forms. The survey was entirely voluntary and differed from many surveys undertaken in schools in that all school staff were given the opportunity to participate.

Each of the three schools selected contribute to, but not exclusively the writer's intermediate school.

School A is a decile 3 contributing primary school with 311 students.

School B is a decile 7 contributing primary school with 396 students.

School C is a decile 5 contributing primary school with 178 students.

To place these contributing schools into a wider context, each school contributes to the same two intermediate schools, Intermediate A (The writer's school) and Intermediate B.

Intermediate A is a school of approximately 250 students. It is a decile 4 school (with a very low socio-economic area within its catchment).

Intermediate B is a school of 490 students. It is a decile 7 school.

## The Survey

A survey was selected as the best way to gain responses from a range of school staff. Given the workloads of school staff and the writer's belief that many school staff have an aversion to large surveys, any survey targeting staff input needed to be able to be completed within a short period of time (Jenkins, 1999).

When establishing the survey, the guidelines contained in Jenkins (1999) were used. A multiple-choice survey with a small number of open-ended questions was selected as the most suitable instrument for this research, as it allows for respondents to provide the researcher with specific information without committing too much time. The inclusion of some optional, open-ended questions allows the subjects to expand on their views or to present an alternate view, a view, which may not have been anticipated by the researcher.

While this short survey format does limit the range and quality of information that can be gained, it was hoped the approach would maximise participation. The survey was suited to the purpose of the study, as it provided information in a manageable way for the writer and was not overly time consuming for the respondents. The principals of the schools involved had all sought assurance that the survey would not be demanding in anyway on their staff.

The study is a requirement of a single paper project towards a Masters degree, and as such needed to fit within those requirements. The writer

had limited time in which to undertake the study due to his workload as a principal of a school. The study represents a scoping project for the consideration of a more in-depth study of the relationship of contributing schools to the schools they contribute to.

Jenkins (1999) recommends that in order to achieve a high return rate, various follow-up actions such as phone calls, letters and resending of the survey be undertaken. A decision was made by the writer not to engage in any follow-ups in the case of a low response rate. This decision was taken for three reasons:

1. The close working links the writer had with the surveyed schools and the negative impact a follow-up might have on relationships;
2. the increased potential for identification of respondents after a follow-up;
- and
3. a commitment to the principals of the schools not to be invasive or demanding of school or staff time.

### Participant Selection

The writer made the decision to approach selected primary schools that contribute to the same intermediate school (the intermediate school of which the writer is currently principal). The parents at the contributing schools do have a choice of intermediate school for their child. The selection of the schools approached was based on the size of the contributing school and the likelihood of a meaningful number of responses.

All staff within the selected contributing schools were invited to participate. It is the writer's belief that all staff, both teaching and non-teaching are given a degree of 'education/schools expert' status by some members of the community.

The survey was undertaken initially in one contributing school. However the response rate was insufficient in number to have provided a clear insight into the research questions. The validity or ability of the research to gauge the perceptions held by contributing school staff would have been compromised without increasing the number of participant schools and therefore the number of respondents (Mutch, 2006). It was decided to approach two further contributing schools to increase the validity of the data.

This caused a time delay and a difference of approximately two months between the data collection at School A and schools B and C. It is not felt that this delay significantly impacted on the reliability of the data. The surveys were provided to all three schools in the same way, with all surveys being completed in a similar fashion by all respondents.

It is unclear why the responses were lower than expected in the original participant school, as no follow-up was made due to concerns about respondent anonymity, respondent coercion (Mutch, 2006) and an agreement with the principal not to have an intrusive process.

## Ethical Considerations

### Consent

The school principal was approached to grant consent for the study to occur using participants within the school. This was gained from all three schools. It was important for each principal that the survey had no follow-ups, due to their staff workloads.

An explanation of the study was part of each survey form (see Appendix 1). The completion of the survey signified informed consent.

It was important not only to the study but also the ongoing relationship of the writer with the contributing school principals, that there was informed consent and that all participants were protected. (Mutch, 2006).

### Voluntary Participation, the Right to Withdraw and Permission

All selected schools were able to opt in or out of the study at any time. Individual respondents could choose to respond or not. No attempt was made to force their participation. Each school principal gave signed consent for the study to be undertaken at his or her school. (Mutch, 2006).

### Deception

The purpose and intent of the study was made clear at all stages of gaining consent from the principals of the schools and the respondents. (Mutch, 2006)

### Confidentiality

Anonymity of participants and schools was protected. Surveys were

unnamed. All collected data was kept in a secure area in the writer's home and destroyed on the completion of the university's requirements. The decision not to have any form of follow-up for unreturned surveys was to ensure that respondents were confident that they would not be identified. (Snook, 2003)

### Participant Safety

The trust of participant schools, their principals and the respondents was vital. (Mutch, 2006)

The writer being the principal of a school that the subject schools contribute to could have been an issue. Ensuring confidentiality and anonymity of material, and ensuring the school principals were clear about the purpose of the study effectively managed this potential conflict of interest. The writer made a verbal offer to each principal to discuss the project at a staff meeting if he/she felt it would be beneficial. This offer was not taken up by any of the principals

The principals were also informed that they would be informed of any proposed material changes to the study and would be able to withdraw at any point. Individuals were able to make a personal decision to complete or not complete the survey. No individual tally of who did or did not complete the survey was taken. There was no follow-up to encourage further responses.

## 6. Results

While information about individual schools is available, the most useful data is that generated by the collation of the data for the three schools. A single school of the size of the subject schools provided little clarity.

### **Key findings**

For many of the contributing school staff their relationship with and knowledge of the school/s they contribute to, was not significant. Seventy seven percent (77%) of all school staff felt that they did not know about the school to which they contributed. For management staff (Principals, Deputy Principals and Syndicate Leaders) the results were very similar with seventy percent (70%) feeling they were not well informed about the schools to which they contributed.

It is clear that staff at contributing schools know little about the schools to which they contribute and the perceptions about schools that they do hold are based on a dearth of information. Staff are most likely to be aware of the physical environment of the school to which they contribute rather than the range or quality programmes available. This creates a challenge for 'next schools' in how to provide contributing school staff with information that is meaningful to them and will allow them to have perceptions about a school that more accurately reflects reality.

Biddulph et al (2003) support the view that one of the most powerful ways to create a link between schools and a shared understanding of other schools is through joint professional development. The advantages

of shared professional development was raised by several teaching staff in written responses within the survey; they felt that they knew more about one school than another as a result of professional development clusters and cultural performance groupings. This would indicate that the relationship between schools could be positively or adversely affected by the decisions of groups beyond the local schools in the clustering of schools, for example for professional development purposes or local politics (community perceptions). The number of schools and the range of types of schools contributing to schools (with overlapping enrolment zones) and the competitiveness that this engenders further influences the ability of schools to openly share information.

The length of time that a staff member has been at a contributing school and their job type appears to have little bearing on their knowledge of the schools to which they contribute. All job types indicated that they had little knowledge of the schools to which they contribute. Seventy percent (70%) to ninety one percent (91%) indicated that they felt they did not know about the school to which they contribute.

Respondents felt unable to comment in detail on any specific area of Intermediate A or B. Respondents felt most confident in providing information about the grounds and buildings to parents and students, nineteen percent (19%) felt they had the level of information required. In all other areas only two percent (2%) (about staff), five percent (5%) (about cultural activities), eight percent (8%) (about Students and



Behaviour), eleven percent (11%) (about Teachers, Learning and Sports) felt they had anything to share with parents or students.

38% of non-management staff viewed other staff at their school as the most available source of information. Teachers (42%) identified other staff as the most available information source. Given that other staff at the same school generally also had a similar lack of information, this is unlikely to be a source of quality information.

Nearly forty percent (40%) of all staff identified ex students and the intermediate school's prospectus as the most useful information they have available to them.

The intermediate school prospectus was considered to be the most important overall source of information, scoring the highest combined score on a 1 -3 scale (with 3 representing the most important). The greatest number of staff also selected the prospectus within their top three choices of information source. This combined result does indicate that the school prospectus has an impact on a wider range of people than the target groups of parents and students. The reality is that the material provided by both schools to assist parents to make a decision in favour of their school is similar in content, with both school prospectuses making similar positive statements about their school.

“Our goal is to challenge and inspire our students, your children. We work with your children for only two years as a result we are very focussed in our approach to meeting their needs. [school name] Intermediate’s role is to provide quality learning opportunities for our students, and to encourage and support them to make the most of those opportunities. We are committed to making time spent at [school name] Intermediate successful and rewarding for all our students.

[School name] Intermediate staff and board believe that emerging adolescents learn best when:

- Achievement and progress are celebrated
- They are encouraged to search for and accept challenges
- They have opportunities to learn and contribute
- They are given clear, consistent, supportive and fair boundaries”

Extract from the prospectus of **Intermediate B** (Principal's Introduction - 2007)

As an intermediate school targeting the needs of Year 7 and 8 students our vision focuses on;

- **“developing a passion for learning”**  
recognising that learning is a lifelong process
- **“building independence”**  
helping our young people to take responsibility for themselves and their actions
- **“Celebrating diversity”**  
enjoying the wide and varied cultural and socio economic backgrounds we come from and the range of abilities we share
- **“embracing challenge”**  
encouraging our students to move out of their comfort zones in order to grow in confidence as they begin to move through the significant and rewarding early adolescent years.

The situation becomes less clear over the next most significant information sources for all staff. Visits to the school and parental feedback are both considered significant. Visits to the school were considered to be very important by the staff (eight (8) staff, twenty three (23) points), but more staff placed parental feedback (ten (10) staff, fourteen (14) points) in their top three information sources. Both sources of information are clearly important to respondents. Parental feedback, with a greater number of staff selections (twenty seven percent (27%) of respondents), is the second most significant information source.

School management teams had a larger range of sources of information that they felt were significant. These information sources were largely community based, ex students 90%, parent feedback 60% and community feedback 80%, and the school prospectus 70%.

Surveyed contributing school staff, are strongly of the view that they do not have a personal preference about schools or allow any perceptions about schools to influence the advice given to members of the school community (94%).

When the survey began to ask challenging questions about perceptions a number of staff were unable or unwilling to respond. When answering the question “do you think one school is better than another?” 25% did not answer the question.

Nearly 20% of contributing school staff felt one school was better than

another, but only 5% indicated this in the previous question. “Do you have a personal preference about the schools your school contributes to?” It is unclear why this variation of response occurred.

When a preference was stated, either by acknowledging a personal preference or a belief that one school was better than another, there was an indication from several respondents that this was on the basis of personal or school interaction with a particular intermediate. It is noted that two of the contributing schools are in the same professional development cluster and the same cultural cluster as one of the Intermediate B. The other contributing school is in the same cultural (music performance etc.) cluster as Intermediate A and is starting a professional development relationship with them.

Management and administration staff are most likely to be asked for advice from the community, but not with a high frequency. Teachers are less likely to be asked for information, with junior class teachers being less likely to be asked of all teachers. It appears that very few school staff are asked directly for advice on next school for their students, and those that are asked for information are asked on an infrequent basis.

The length of time a staff member was at a school or the position they hold within the school appears to have little bearing on their knowledge of the school to which they contribute. It also appears that members of the school management team are more likely to have a greater awareness of the schools to which they contribute. This higher level of knowledge about the intermediate schools may be the result of more

frequent contacts between management due to professional associations, formal and informal peer meetings.

The research undertaken had several inherent factors, which may have had an impact on the type or quality of information collected.

1. The writer's commitment to participant school principals to having a survey that was not time consuming for participants and could be completed in around ten minutes,
2. Data collection being spread over a ten week period, due to the decision to increase the sample to increase the validity of the data i.e. School A being collected immediately prior to one school term break and Schools B and C being collected immediately prior to the next break. While it is not believed that the time lag caused any variation between the results from individual schools. An opportunity for time specific influences to have affected the results, e.g. joint professional development programmes, or music festivals does exist. A tighter time frame for data collection would have avoided even this small possibility.
3. Concerns remain about the accuracy of the feedback received as the status of the writer as the principal of one of the intermediate schools may have influenced some of the responses.
4. Because of the limited nature and constraints of the research project there was no attempt to triangulate staff responses to those of parents or students. This type of triangulation would be useful in order to gauge the accuracy of information provided, as

aligning one's own perceptions with your perception of your own actions is a challenging task. Using multiple sources of information may have also enabled the incidental effects of staff perceptions in general conversations with parents or students to be explored.

If this study was to be repeated it would be important to ensure that the initial sample was very likely (rather than just likely) to be large enough to be able to draw valid conclusions. The return rate for this survey was not as high as initially anticipated, on reflection a return rate prediction of 50% or less would have avoided the delay in accessing the additional schools and additional respondents. While the possibility of a low return rate was considered and planned for, it could have had an adverse impact on the validity of the data and should have been avoided by increasing the initial sample size.

The study has indicated an area for further study exploring the relationship between contributing schools and the school to which they contribute. The writer believes that this relationship is potentially very complex and multi-faceted. These inter-relationships would be worthy of exploring further as contributing schools have the potential to have a significant impact on the school/s they contribute to, in areas as diverse as community perception, roll growth or decline and curriculum development.

It may be that a further study could be more specifically focused on Year 6 students, their parents or caregivers, contributing school

management and administration staff, Year 6 teachers and staff of the next school. This project could further explore the inter-relationships between the groups, how information is gathered, the quality of the information and how that information is used to support next school selection for a student.



## 7. Conclusion

Research (Biddulph et al, 2003., ERO, 1999, 2001, 2005., Gerwitz et al, 1995) has indicated that one of the information sources that should be or is used by parents in making decisions about the next school for their son or daughter is the staff of their current school. It is therefore important to explore contributing school staff experiences of being asked for guidance and how they might form their opinions.

There is research to indicate that contributing school staff could have a significant influence on parental decisions about next schooling, (Glen, 1993 and Education Review Office, 2005).

It is hoped that this study will start a conversation about the impact of school staff on parental decisions about next school and the capacity of school staff to assist in this process. While ‘indirect marketing’ to staff at contributing schools is only one form of school promotion, the writer believes that it may be undervalued. Strategically positioned staff in contributing schools could have a significant impact on community perceptions of schools at the next level of education. While this study does not prove the significance of the word of mouth of contributing school staff, it is clear that there are benefits to be gained for the ‘next’ school in ensuring that contributing staff do hold accurate information and know how to source further information about the ‘next’ school.

It was important to discover if

1. Contributing school staff had the information they required to support parental and student decision making,
2. Contributing school staff are being asked for information and if
3. Next step schools do in fact provide appropriate and accurate information to contributing school staff.

It has become clear that the contributing school staff who participated in this study do not have an in-depth knowledge of the schools they contribute to, nor does it appear from their responses that they are requested by parents to provide this information with any frequency.

When contributing school staff do require knowledge about their local intermediates, it appears they would be most likely to rely on their own perceptions of the school, look at a school prospectus or request information from another member of their own staff, who may not in fact be any better informed.

This is of concern as

1. perceptions held by contributing school staff may not be accurate or well informed. These perceptions evolve from a diverse range of sources and may not have much substance in fact,
2. school prospectus tend to be limited sources of information as they are by their nature a snapshot, a scattergun direct

marketing tool to parents and may not contain all the information necessary to make a decision on the best placement for a particular student,

and

3. relying on staff within the same school as an information source may create a circle of ill-informed perception within a contributing school with possible undue detrimental effects or undue positive effects on another school.

This study has left some unanswered questions as information has only been collected from one perspective: that of the contributing school staff member. There are at least three other perspectives that could add to understanding the impact of contributing school staff perceptions on next school decision-making the student, the parent and staff of the school they contribute to.

The experience of the writer as both a contributing school and intermediate school principal, and anecdotal evidence from parents is that parents and students are often making decisions from a base of very poor or little factual information. Decisions are often based on the perceptions of people who knowingly or unknowingly share their opinions with or without a factual basis.

There is a need for increased clarity around the direct and indirect impact of contributing school staff on parental and student selection of the next school for a student. It is not enough for the Education Review Office (1997) to suggest that parents should ask contributing school

staff to help or guide them in the decision making process in order to select the next school for their child. This advice appears to have been given without asking some important questions. Do parents want or feel they need this help? Are contributing school staff informed enough to give this help? And are contributing school staff willing to help in this process?

There is further work needed around the questions of supporting parents and students in the selection of their next school and the influence that contributing school staff perceptions about other schools may have on the decision-making of parents and students.

Accepting that word of mouth is a powerful marketing tool, and that a greater weight is applied to the opinions of people perceived as experts, then contributing school staff do have the potential to be very influential in supporting parent and student selection of 'next' school. It would be wise for schools to consider the development of stronger relationships with their contributing schools, not only to aid smoother transitions for students, but also to ensure that contributing schools have accurate information to assist in helping parents and students make informed decisions about the 'next' school.

## References

- Bagley, C., Woods, P., & Glatter, R. (2001). Rejecting schools: towards a fuller understanding of the process of parental choice. *School Leadership & Management*, 21(3), 309-325. Retrieved Saturday, , November 04, 2006 from the ERIC database.
- Beavers, G. J. (2005). Defining the information campaign. *Military Review*, November - December 2005. 80-82.
- Bernhardt, V. L. (2003). No schools left behind. *Educational Leadership*, 60(5), 26–30.
- Biddulph, F. Biddulph, J. & Biddulph, C. (2003). *The complexity of community and family influences on children's achievement in New Zealand: Best evidence synthesis*. Wellington: Ministry of Education
- Bridges, D. & McLaughlin, T. edit (1994). *Education and the market place*. London: Falmer Press.
- Brighouse, H. (Ed). (2003). *School choice and social justice*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Cambridge Advanced Learners Dictionary. <http://dictionary.cambridge.org/> Retrieved October 15, 2006.
- Coddington, D. (2003). *Let parents choose*. Auckland: The Valentine Press.
- Education Review Office. (1997). *Choosing a secondary school*. Wellington: New Zealand Education Review Office Report. Number 3, Autumn.
- Education Review Office. (2001). *Students in years 7 and 8*. Wellington: New Zealand Education Review Office Report. Autumn.
- Education Review Office. (2005). *Choosing a school for a five year old*. Wellington: New Zealand Education Review Office Report. June.
- Fowler, M. (1993). *Factors influencing choice of secondary school*. Education Department, Canterbury University.
- Gewirtz, S. Ball, S. & Bowe, R. (1995) *Markets, choice & equity in education*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Glen, C., McLaughlin, K., Salganik, L. (1993). *Parent Information for school choice*. Center on families, communities, schools and children's learning, report 19. Retrieved Saturday, November 04, 2006 from the ERIC database.
- Gordon, L. (1996). School choice in New Zealand. *Oxford Studies in Comparative Education*, Vol.6(1) p.
- Holmes, S. (2000). *The school marketing manual*. Nova Scotia: M B Designs.
- Jenkins, P. (1999). *Surveys & questionnaires*. Wellington: NZCER.
- McGilvary, L. (1999) *The power of word of mouth*.
- Mutch, C. (2005). *Doing educational research: a practitioner' guide to getting started*. Wellington: NZCER.
- Oplatka, I., Hemsley-Brown, J., & Foskett, N. (2002). The voice of teachers in marketing their school: personal perspectives in competitive environments. *School Leadership & Management*, 22(2), 177-196. Retrieved Sunday, October 15, 2006 from the Academic Search Elite database.
- Peters, T. (2003). *Re-imagine!*. London: Dorling Kindersley.
- Ramsay, P. Hawk, K. Harold, B. Marriott, R. & Poskitt, R. (1993). *Developing partnerships: collaboration between teachers and parents*. Wellington: Learning Media.
- Shaw, H. & Millar, K. (n.d.). *Parents and school: how to make choices about your child's education*. Wellington: GP Publications.

- Snook, I. (2003). The ethics and politics of social research. In C Davidson & M Tolich, (Ed.) *Social Science Research in New Zealand*, (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). (pp.69-87). Auckland: Pearson Education New Zealand.
- Stott, K., & Parr, H. (1991) p47. *Marketing your school*. London: Hodder & Stoughton.
- Stupak, R. (2000). Perception management: an active strategy for marketing and delivering academic excellence, business sophistication, and communication successes. *Public Administration & Management: An Interactive Journal* 5, 4, 2000, 250-260.
- Vining, L. (1995). Managing word of mouth. *Education Australia*
- Vining, L. (1996). *Choice, customers & competition in schools*. Carlington: Lenross Publications.
- Walford, G. (1996). School choice and the quasi-market. *Oxford Studies in Comparative Education*, Vol.6(1).
- Wolfe, A. (Ed). (2003). *School choice the moral debate*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.



8. **Do you have a personal preference about the schools your school contributes to:**

YES

NO

8a. If Yes. Does this personal preference affect the advice you give or information that you provide to other people?

YES

NO

Sometimes

9. **Do you feel that one school your school contributes to is better than the others?**

YES

NO

No difference

9a. If yes, how did you come to this conclusion?

10. **Have you been asked for advice about selecting a school for a student by a...**

Parent

Friend

Family member

Student

10a. What advice do you give?

11. **Do you offer advice on schools to parents or students?**

YES

NO

12. **How often would you be asked or give advice on choosing schools each year?**

Never

1-5 times

6-10 times

11 or more

Any comment/s you would like to make

Thank you for your time in filling out this survey.  
Please return it to your school office sealed in the attached envelope by / / .



## Appendix B

### Schools OVERVIEW

	Management	Teacher	Admin	Property	Support	Total
<b>1 Your Role at the school</b>	10	19	4	1	2	36
<b>2 Length of time in Education</b>						
0-2	0	3	0	0	0	3
3-9y	2	9	2	1	0	14
10+	8	7	1	0	1	17
<b>3 Length of time at the school</b>						
0-2	1	6	0	0	0	7
3-9y	4	10	4	1	2	21
10+	5	3	0	0	0	8
<b>4 Do you feel you know about</b>						
Yes	3	2	1	1	0	7
No	7	16	3	0	1	27
<b>5 Provide Information on</b>						
Teachers		2	2			4
School staff		1				1
Learning	1	1	1	1		4
Behaviour	1	2				3
Sports	1	2		1		4
Cultural	2	3		1		2
Grounds	2	3	1	1		7
Students	2	1				3
<b>6 Sources of Information</b>						
Prospectus	7	3	3	1		14
Visits	4	2				6
Open night	1	2				1
Inter staff socializing			1			0

Inter-school PD					0
Ex students	9	4	1		14
Newsletters	2	1	2	1	6
Parent feedback	6	3	1		10
Staff at your school	1	8	2		11
Community feedback	8	4		1	13
Newspapers	1	1		1	3
Personal feeling	3	2	1		6
Worked there	1	1	1		3
Child goes there		1			1
Child went there			1		1
You attended the school					0
Cultural events/PD Cluster		1			1
Nephew/nieces	1				1

**7 3 most important sources**

score 3 high -1  
low  
(number of Returns)

Prospectus	8 (3)	11 (4)	5 (2)	3 (1)	27 (10)
Visits	6 (3)	10 (4)		3 (1)	23 (8)
Open night	5 (2)	2 (1)		2 (1)	9 (4)
Inter staff socializing	1 (1)		2 (1)		3 (2)
Inter-school PD	1 (1)	2 (2)			3 (3)
Ex students	6 (3)		1 (1)		7 (4)
Newsletters	1 (1)	4 (2)	6 (3)	1 (1)	12 (7)
Parent feedback	3 (2)	10 (5)	1 (1)		14 (10)
Staff at your school	3 (2)	7 (4)			10 (6)
Community feedback	6 (2)	5 (2)		2 (1)	13 (5)
Newspapers		1 (1)	2 (1)		3 (2)
Personal feeling		3 (1)		3 (1)	6(2)
Worked there					0
Child goes there					0
Child went there					0
TALKING		1 (1)			1 (1)
No COMMENT		1 (1)			1 (1)
FEEDBACK			1(1)		1 (1)
You attended the school					0

8 **Personal preference**

Yes	1	1				2
No	7	17	5	1	2	32

8a **affects your advice**

Yes		1				1
No	1	2	2		1	6
Sometimes						0

9 **Do you feel one school is better**

Yes	1	2	3	1		7
No	4	10				14
No difference	1	2	3			6

9a **how you come to conclusion**

Parent Information, Feedback from parents/community

Couldn't say I don't know much about Intermediate A. I feel it has a low profile here.

Our school has more experiences with Intermediate B, can't recall many (any) with Intermediate A

People feedback

In cluster with one of the schools, Community/Parent Feedback

10 **Have you been asked for advice by**

Parent	1	4	3			8
Friend	2	1	1			2
Family		1				1
Student	1	1				2

10a **what advice do you give**

Personal and professional, go to visit the schoolx2, contact school office direct,

Contact school, attend open nightsx2 website, visit school & Principals question about your child's needs, look in windows

Ask neighbours, communicate with own child

Look for excellent presentation happy children

Go to each schoolx2, talk to principal, make an informed decision for their child, only they can make decision

Go and have a look

Open night, gauge feel of school, talk to management, visit, talk with staff, talk with current parents

Have a look, not every school suits every student, their decision have to decide what looking for

Go to open night judge for self talk to staff/principal look around

Proximity school uniform ICT cultural aspects, visit, talk to Principal / Parents

**11 Do you offer advice**

Yes	1	2			3
No	9	15	3	1	28

**12 How often asked for or given advice**

Never	2	13	1	1	17
1-5 times	4	2	3		9
6-10 times	3				3
11 or more	1	1			2

Any comments

I teach in Middle School, it doesn't seem to be something parents think about yet.

Most students will go to nearest Intermediate out of convenience

Only when families move into the area

Y2/3 teacher see cultural aspects of some schools mainly Intermediate B

Very clear in not advising as believe children have different fits, advice would be superficial and unprofessional

Very limited and uneducated knowledge of the schools...contributes to.