

DENIS MULLER & ASSOCIATES

Policy and Social Research Consultants

VALUES AND OTHER ISSUES IN THE EDUCATION OF YOUNG AUSTRALIANS

A STUDY AMONG PARENTS WITH CHILDREN AT NON-GOVERNMENT
SCHOOLS

SYNTHESIS OF QUALITATIVE AND QUANTITATIVE
FINDINGS

PREPARED FOR

THE AUSTRALIAN PARENTS COUNCIL
AND
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L2, 234 Queensberry Street Carlton 3053 Ph (613) 9349 3994 Fax (613) 9349 4442 E-mail denismuller@optusnet.com.au

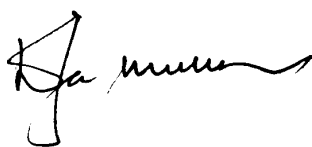
INTRODUCTION

This study was commissioned by the Australian Parents Council in February 2007, with funding by the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations as part of the Australian Government's values education program.

The objective was to explore attitudes to a range of issues among parents with children in non-government schools across Australia. The main focus of the study was to be on their perspectives on values education, the values parents wished to see inculcated in their children, and the role they expected school to play in that process. In addition to this, the study explored parents' attitudes to choice of school, the concept of family-school partnerships, and school funding.

The study had two phases, qualitative and quantitative. This brief report synthesises the findings from both phases. The qualitative phase consisted of 21 focus group discussions conducted among parents with children in Catholic and Independent schools in all States and Territories of Australia. It was carried out in April-May 2007. The quantitative phase, carried out between March and August 2008, consisted of a self-completion survey of parents in Catholic and Independent schools in all States and Territories except the Northern Territory. It attracted 606 responses.

Both phases were carried out by this firm. Full reports on each, with methodological detail, were furnished to the Australian Parents Council.



Dr DENIS MULLER

Principal

September 2008

FINDINGS

Parents with children in non-government schools consciously regard the education of their children as a high priority. Indeed, some see it as the one gift they can make to their children which will outlive themselves. In this sense, some place it almost on the same level as providing life itself and the means to sustain life. Others, who may not accord it quite that status, nonetheless see the education of their children as of great importance for which they are prepared to make material sacrifices. A great many of the respondents in this study would comfortably fit this latter description. Indeed nearly two-thirds of parents surveyed say they do make material sacrifices in order to pay their children school fees.

Parents with children in non-government schools also place a high value on the concepts of choice and personal autonomy. They feel it is right that they should be able to choose their children's school, and they express the wish that every parent had that choice – in government and non-government schooling alike. This is underpinned by a lot more than mere consumer power. Among many of our respondents it is underpinned by a deeply held belief in the primacy of the individual and in the right of every child to a decent education.

Our respondents recognise — and often explicitly state — that they are privileged to have been able to make a choice about their children's schooling. Many think it a serious deficiency in Australia's approach to school education that this choice is not available to everyone. Their position is not that of a neo-conservative or economic-rationalist; quite the reverse. It is expressed in terms of social equity and social justice: every child is an individual with particular needs and, in a just and equitable society every child would have those needs met by a responsive and high-quality education system.

On this as on other issues, we heard the voice of what we will call “moral liberalism”. By this we mean a world view based on commitment to the conventional moral code of a Western society coupled with recognition of the primacy of the individual. This world view is above politics, but of course it has political implications, and our respondents express political judgments based on this “moral liberal” view of the world. These judgments are about many things other than education, and flow naturally from the discussion about values which lay at the heart of this research. We will come to them in detail presently. For now it is enough to say that this world view suffuses the responses we heard from the great majority of parents on matters concerning the four big themes of this study:

- choice of school;
- the values they wished to see inculcated in their children;
- the concept of partnership between home and school, and
- funding of school education.

Theme 1: Choice of school

Parents with children in non-government schools celebrate the opportunity to choose a school for their children and, as noted above, wish every parent had the same opportunity. A few have been in a position at some stage where choice was not available to them because of circumstance: they had been posted to another country or to a remote part of Australia and they had had to make do. For the most part, however, they have been able to exercise choice for both primary and secondary schooling.

Many factors go into parents' choice of school – respondents to this survey list no fewer than 19 – but two stand out as most important in parents' choice of **primary** school:

- the religious or cultural affiliation of the school, and
- its capacity to offer the right balance between academic standards and personal development.

These are followed by three second-order factors: the feel or atmosphere of the school, its suitability to the child's individual needs, and smallness of school or class size.

Secondary school choice is governed by many of the same factors, although the priority order is a little different.

Parents choosing a secondary school are more likely to put the right balance between academic achievement and personal development at the top of the list.

The individual needs of the child and the school's religious or cultural affiliation are second-order factors in secondary school choice, followed by the feel or atmosphere of the school, the smallness of the school or its classes, and commitment to treating the parent as a partner in their children's education.

There is only one difference between Independent-school and Catholic-school parents on this question, and that is the importance Catholic parents place on the religious or cultural affiliation of the school. In other respects, they attach similar importance to the various factors affecting choice of school.

Behind these factors lie some clear preferences:

Balance between academic and other qualities. Most parents want their children to come out of school well-rounded, with a social conscience, the capacity to be decent citizens, and take their place as productive members of society. Academic standards are important but personal development is at least as important, if not more so.

Religious or cultural affiliation. Parents who want their children to attend a school for religious or cultural reasons place this very high – in many cases at the top – of their criteria for choosing a

school. For them it is a very important part of their whole-of-life approach to the upbringing of their child because it represents consistency between what the child experiences at home and at school.

The individual needs of each child. Parents see their children as individuals and want this individuality recognised by the school. Many parents have their various children at different schools because they see them as different from one another and therefore having different needs. In some cases this influences whether the child goes to a single-sex or co-educational school. Where the child has special needs arising from disability, illness or developmental problems, the child's individual needs are a big, often decisive, consideration.

“Feel” of the school. Parents are concerned to see their children are happy, and they think the best chance of achieving this is to send them to a school where the “feeling” is warm, the principal knows each child, the teachers seem motivated, and there is an atmosphere of caring.

School and class size. Many parents want a small school with small class sizes, certainly when their children were in primary school. They fear that otherwise their children would get “lost in the system”, that their individual needs would not be recognised, or that they might not prosper in the hurly-burly of a large school.

A sense of partnership. Virtually all the parents we spoke to want the school to reinforce the values of the home and to be willing to work with them in the development of their children.

Curriculum offerings. In secondary school especially, the needs of the child for particular subjects is commonly a large factor.

Closeness to home. This tends to be of considerable importance to parents when choosing a primary school, but not so important for secondary.

Gender. For the parents of girls in particular, there is a quite widespread view that girls do better in single-sex schools mainly for academic reasons but also because of what the parents see as a healthier social atmosphere. However, this is one area where the individuality of the child plays an important part in parents' decision-making: what might be good for one child might not necessarily be good for another.

While these are the big factors in choosing a school, there are others – not so common but, for the parents involved, influential:

“People like us”. These parents want their children to go to school with other children from similar socio-economic backgrounds with whom they might forge lifelong friendships.

Family history. For some parents, the fact that they had been students at the school – and sometimes so had their own parents and other relatives – means that the choice was almost made for them.

Educational philosophy. Some parents want their children taught according to particular education philosophies such as those of Rudolf Steiner, Montessori or Reggio Emilia.

Exposure to difference. The opposite of those who take the “people like us” approach, these parents want their children to grow up amidst the religious, cultural and social diversity of contemporary Australian society.

Discipline. Some parents place a high value on clear boundaries enforced with strong though humane discipline, and choose schools that promise it.

Fees

Fees are not permitted to be a decisive factor in the choice of school, except in a small minority of cases where the fees at the preferred school are simply out of reach.

Just over one-third of parents (37%) say they are comfortably able to pay their children’s school fees, but this overall figure masks some substantial variations: as many as 50% of parents with children at Catholic primary schools say they can comfortably afford the fees, but only 29% of parents with children at Independent primary schools and 30% of those with children at Independent secondary schools say the same. Among parents with children at Catholic secondary schools, the figure is 38%.

Nearly two-thirds of parents (61%) say they are not in the position of being comfortably able to afford their children’s school fees.

Four out of ten parents say they make sacrifices in other areas, and another 18% say they struggle to pay the fees.

This 58% of respondents who say they make sacrifices or struggle to pay school fees were asked about the extent of the sacrifice.

Just over half (51%) of this group of parents say they make considerable or large sacrifices; 45% say they make some sacrifices but do not have to go without very much.

The perceptions of fathers and mothers are quite different on this question: fathers are inclined to say the sacrifice is greater than are mothers.

Parents with children in Independent secondary schools are much more likely than others to say they have to make large sacrifices in order to afford the fees.

The kind of sacrifices being made commonly include the mother returning to work when she would have preferred to remain at home; forgoing holidays or renovations to the house; living simply; not going out much.

Many of these parents also depend to some extent on scholarships, or on discounts given by the school for younger siblings.

A few are doing it tough financially but are determined to persevere because they consider a good education to be the biggest gift they can give their children. These people often use the phrase, "Whatever it takes".

Theme 2: The important values

Parents were asked to list the values they want to see their children imbued with. This, in approximate rank order of mentions, is what they said in the focus groups:

- Respect for self and others
- Honesty/integrity/decency
- Compassion
- Love for one another
- Sense of justice/equality
- Acceptance of others/Understanding
- Self-reliance/resilience/perseverance
- Responsibility/independence
- Service to others/Sense of duty

They were then shown the *Nine Values for Australian Schooling* drafted as part of the National Goals for Schooling in Australia in the Twenty-first Century.

The nine, as listed on the official document, are:

- Care and Compassion
- Doing Your Best
- Fair Go
- Freedom
- Honesty and Trustworthiness
- Integrity
- Respect
- Responsibility
- Understanding, Tolerance and Inclusion

It is clear that there is considerable overlap:

- Compassion
- Honesty
- Integrity
- Respect
- Responsibility

It is also clear that there are considerable differences.

“Doing your best”, “Fair go” and “Freedom” are three concepts that the parents in this study commonly question because many do not accept that these are values in the same sense as “respect” or honesty”; rather, they are what happen when people adhere to the real values.

The focus-group discussions about these concepts were rich and subtle.

“Doing your best” is seen as a reflection of the effort put in by someone who displays the values of self-respect, responsibility and perseverance.

“Fair go” is seen as Australian idiom. It describes what happens when people display the values of respect for others, compassion, a sense of justice, and acceptance of others. It is also widely seen as having been hijacked for political purposes in recent years, and for that reason alone is dismissed by many parents as having no status as a value.

“Freedom” is seen as a right, not a value, with its existence dependent on people displaying the values of respect for others, a sense of justice, acceptance of others, inclusiveness and tolerance.

The term “tolerance” also raised interesting discussions, with many parents seeing it as negative. Someone tolerated is not necessarily someone accepted, whereas these parents wish their children to learn acceptance rather than mere tolerance – or toleration, which is how many parents interpret the term.

These misgivings show up in the survey too. Comparatively few respondents want to see anything removed from the *Nine Values* list, but those who do nominate “a fair go”, “freedom” and “tolerance” as not belonging there.

More broadly, while parents find the *Nine Values* broadly acceptable, many say there is something lacking, some gel or marrow or animating spirit. In the focus groups they struggled to give it a name. And then someone did: Love for one another. As one group after another launched themselves spontaneously into this self-same debate, it was always resolved by the inclusion of this idea. This was as true of the secular participants as it was of those with a religious affiliation.

It was similar in the quantitative survey. Just over six out of ten parents consider the *Nine Values* list to cover all the important values that young people should learn. However, a significant minority – just over one-third – consider there is something important missing.

As in the focus groups, the ingredient most of this significant minority of parents feel is missing is some expression of spirituality. There is considerable consensus about this. As in the focus groups, it is by no means confined to people with children at religious schools.

Quite how the concept of “spirituality” might be translated into a secular document was not explored in the survey, but from the focus-group discussion it is clear it has little to do with religion or denomination or any particular culture, and everything to do with recognition of the highest aspects of humanity and the obligations imposed by that recognition.

What the parents we spoke to and surveyed struggled to give expression to has been the subject of human reflection at least from the time of Aristotle: the fundamental conviction that God is expressed through love and that both the need and capacity for this love exists within every person. It transcends religion and culture: Buddha’s injunction to love finds echoes in St Paul’s Canticle to Love in his first Letter to the Corinthians (13: 4-13). The same idea is to be found in the teachings of Plato, Augustine and Aquinas.

Allied to this is the further idea of a universal divinity within mankind expressed by philosophers from Ikhnaton of Egypt to George Santayana in our own time, captured in Santayana’s notion that “our reason is our imitation of divinity”.

Hence there is something deeply and humanly intuitive in our respondents' quest for something to unify, explain and provide a well-spring for the values they wish to see instilled in their children. They are saying these values are all very well but without this animating spirit they are empty words. And they seem to be saying something more. They seem to be saying it is a moral imperative to recognise the divine in every person, regardless of race or creed, and to treat one another in ways that are consistent with the presence in each person of that tincture of divinity that is a part of what it means to be human.

In the focus-group discussions there was almost no dogmatism and much conscious allowance for differences. The discussion itself seemed to create its own ethic of tolerance, as if people in the course of these exchanges did glimpse in one another something more than a strange face across the table.

While parents are clear about the ideal values they wish to see their children grow up with, they see many ways in which contemporary Australian society fails to display those values. To some extent they feel they can shield their children from these malign influences – mainly by controlling their viewing of television or their use of the internet – but they realize that beyond these limited controls there is little they can do except give a good example. They expect this too from the school.

Parents see contemporary Australian society as displaying too much selfishness, materialism, injustice and intolerance. They see selfishness expressed in many ways: refusing to accept the so-called boat people; defiling the environment to make money; self-absorbed behaviour summed up in the phrase of several respondents as “I, myself and me”.

They see materialism in terms of “keeping up with the Joneses”, of instant gratification, of having the big car, the big house, the glamorous job.

They see injustice in the treatment of minorities, particularly Middle Eastern minorities and Muslims.

They see intolerance in different ways: prejudice against homosexuality; difficulty in accepting cultures different from one's own; restraints on people's freedom to speak out on issues such as euthanasia or multiculturalism or on other matters that seem to require “political correctness”.

A further recurring theme is that in today's Australia there is too much emphasis on rights and not enough on responsibilities.

The presence among the Nine Values of “Fair Go” generated animated debate. For the parents in this research, whether Australia is a “fair go” society is a moot point. Some parents – especially those who have come here from other countries – think it is.

Most think it is less of a “fair go” society now than in the past because they perceive:

- the gap between the “haves” and the “have-nots” has widened;
- the culture of individualism has grown at the expense of a sense of community, and
- the national morale has been sapped by long exposure to prosperity, resulting in a loss of the big-heartedness that they see as having been forged by those who had lived through the hardships of the Depression and world wars.

As a result, while Australians aspire to a “fair go” society, the treatment of disabled people, the poor, racial and cultural minorities (especially Muslims and people from the Middle East), Aborigines, asylum-seekers, single mothers and other vulnerable groups is seen as evidence that we are falling short of the aspiration.

Because the concept of the “fair go” generated such lively debate in the focus groups, it was decided to ask a question in the survey about parents’ views on this subject. In the survey, only 36% of parents say that in Australia today, pretty much everyone gets a fair go.

The majority (57%) say that while many people do get a fair go, some minority groups tend to miss out. Asked which minority groups they had in mind, by far the largest proportions of these respondents say Indigenous people and the poor. A considerable minority also mention the disabled.

The other minority groups seen to be missing out are immigrants, refugees, recent arrivals (specifically Africans) and Muslims or people of Middle Eastern origin. Altogether 26% of respondents nominate one or other of these minorities as being among those missing out on a fair go.

It can be seen that there is consistency between the focus-group and survey findings on these Values questions.

Theme 3: Partnerships between family and school

The extent to which a partnership is seen by parents to exist between them and the school depends to a large extent on three factors:

1. The culture of the school, as determined by the principal.
2. In the absence of any whole-of-school culture, it depends on individual classroom teachers.
3. How the parents themselves define “partnership”.

Where the principal establishes a culture of partnership, this tends to flourish at all levels. The converse is also true.

Where the principal has not taken a position, it comes down to the classroom teacher's attitude. These attitudes vary from open-arms welcoming to a deep unease at the presence of parents in the classroom.

Some respondents define "partnership" as meaning the parents are encouraged by the school to become involved as members of the school council and the P&F, in fund-raising and working bees. Where the school draws the line at this, parents tend to be philosophical and still feel they are being treated as partners in their children's education. In this sense, parents do not set the "partnerships" bar very high.

For others, partnership means being consulted by the school – and in particular the classroom teacher – on what is right for their child, and to be part of finding the solution to any issues concerning the child.

For others again, it means having reliable communications in the form of newsletters, emails, assemblies, and parent-teacher nights.

For a few it means full engagement in the school's decision-making processes, including curriculum decisions. These respondents tend to come from parent-controlled schools. For the most part parents do not expect to be involved in matters such as curriculum, which they consider the preserve of the professional educators.

There is a fairly clear line, for most parents, between the preserve of the professional educators and the other parts of school life where they feel parents can legitimately be involved.

For many parents, the sense of partnership, or lack of it, really turns on whether the school and the teachers recognise them as the primary educators of their children, and treat them accordingly.

They judge this by:

- the quality of interactions they have with the school;
- the ease with which they can gain access to teachers and principals if they wish;
- the responsiveness of the school to their wishes or concerns, and
- the extent to which they receive early notice of any issues arising about their child.

Parents who feel well treated in these matters say they do feel as if they are partners. Conversely, parents who do not feel well treated in these matters do not feel as if they are partners.

At the other extreme, some parents have had the experience of being told by the school that so long as the child is in the school grounds, he or she is the school's responsibility and that the parents will be notified of any matter should the school regard it as necessary.

Others say they are involved only at the school's request, and on the school's terms. Parents tend to be philosophical about this: it has not caused them to change schools; they involve themselves where they can.

What really upsets them is if the school does not tell them of problems until they have become big, or until some occasion such as a parent-teacher night provides a convenient time to do so.

Overall, most of the parents in this study do feel as if the school treats them as partners, but a substantial number say they do not feel so treated. The picture is very mixed and it is possible that the parents' understanding of what constitutes a partnership influences their perceptions about whether they are treated as partners by their school. As we have seen, some parents do not set the bar very high, but other set it very high.

While these patterns are evident in both the qualitative and quantitative research, and the overall picture from the survey is more positive.

Nearly three-quarters of parents say they feel the school does recognise them as the first educators of their children. This is consistent across the Catholic and Independent sectors.

Parents with children in primary school are more inclined to say the school does not recognise them as the first educators, while there is more uncertainty about this question among parents with children at secondary school.

Looking at the components of family-school partnerships:

- Half the parents say the quality of communication between themselves and the school about their child is very good, and another 35% say it is good.
- An overwhelming majority (94%) say obtaining access to the school to discuss their child is either very easy or quite easy.
- Nearly two-thirds of parents say the school raises issues about their child more or less as soon as they arise, although a considerable minority – 18% -- say the school leaves it until some occasion such as a parent-teacher evening or until it has become a serious problem.
- Just over one-third of parents say the school involves parents a great deal in decisions about the running of the school. Another 41% say the school involves the parents to some extent, while a

considerable minority (18%) say the school does not involve parents much, if at all. Secondary schools are seen as less likely than primary schools to involve parents in decision-making.

- An overwhelming majority of parents (94%) say the school is welcoming to parents.
- Very large majorities (84% and 82%) say the school feels inclusive and listens to parents.
- A large majority (76%) say the school is responsive to the needs of parents, but only a bare majority (55%) say the school finds out what the real needs of parents are.
- An overwhelming majority of parents said that overall they did feel treated as partners by the school in the education of their children.

Theme 4: Funding issues

Hardly any of the parents in the focus groups know anything about how their school is funded. Even among those who are on school councils or P&Fs, knowledge is scant and uncertain.

They know, of course, that fees and fund-raising play a part. Many are fairly sure that some money comes from government, but whether from Commonwealth or State/Territory they mostly do not know. Nor do they know whether the money is for capital expenditure or operational costs, or how it is calculated.

There is a similar lack of knowledge about how money is allocated between government and non-government schools.

All this was evident too from the survey.

While almost two-thirds of parents say the Federal Government does contribute money to the running of their school, almost one-third do not know one way or the other.

While 42% of parents say the State or Territory Government contributes money to the running of their school, nearly half (48%) say they do not know.

In addition to these questions about knowledge of the current funding situation, respondents were asked two questions of principle:

1. Should all non-government schools receive the same amount of government money per pupil, or should some get more than others?
2. Should government money for school education mainly reflect the needs of the school or mainly reflect the individual needs of the particular family or student?

Parents struggle mightily with these questions. The more they discuss them, the more they see the complexities involved.

There was a wide range of responses, but two agreed points of principle can be distilled:

1. Every Australian child has the right to a standard basic grant of government money for his or her education. This applies to children in government and non-government schools alike, and should be the same for both.
2. In addition to the basic grant, extra government funding should be given on the basis of need.

They define need in three ways:

1. The needs of the child, arising from factors such as disability, socio-economic disadvantage, or isolation.
2. The needs of the community served by the school, arising from factors such as socio-economic disadvantage or isolation.
3. The needs of the school, arising from factors such as its asset base, access to private money, whether it is a new or long-established school.

In summary, parents are generally of the view that each child should receive the same basic grant for his or her education, topped up by a needs-based payment.

On the second question of principle, on whether the needs-based government money should reflect mainly the needs of the student or of the school, there is no consensus. There is instinctual support for basing it on the needs of the student, but when it comes to the practicalities respondents cannot see a way to do this.

In the survey too, parents were asked these two questions of principle. The results from the survey mirror the focus-group findings almost exactly.

On the first question, almost unanimously (96%) parents state that every child is entitled to some government money for their education, regardless of whether they go to a government or non-government school.

On the second question there is a division of opinion. More parents (47%) support the position that the government money should be based mainly on the needs of the school. However, there is also widespread support (40%) for basing it on the needs of the child or family.

Attitudes on this question are more or less identical among primary school parents across the two sectors. Among secondary school parents, however, those with children at Catholic schools are somewhat more likely than those with children at Independent schools to say the money should be based mainly on the needs of the school.

Patterns of response to this question are also different at the extremes of the capacity-to-pay spectrum: 53% of parents who say they have to struggle to pay the fees say the government money should be based mainly on the needs of the child or family, whereas 50% of parents who say they can comfortably afford the fees say the government money should be based mainly on the needs of the school.

In the middle of the capacity-to-pay spectrum, however, the picture is contrary.

The responses here suggest that respondents to the survey found this just as difficult an issue as did the focus-group participants.