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Parental Considerations in the Allocation of
Places at Secondary Colleges at Form Three Level -
An ethnographic Study of the Placement of fifty
one children from State and Private Schools and
the thoughts of their families before placement.

Presented as part requirement for the completion
of a Masters Degree at Massey University 1984.

David Scott.

Abstract.

The purpose of this educational research was to discover the relative influences of a child's family and the controlling educational authority upon the college placement of pupils and the degree to which this was related to family status and previous schooling.

During the year preceding their entry to college, I interviewed fifty-one families of children in two Form Two classes. One class was chosen from a State school and the other from an Independent Anglican school.

The ethnographic nature of the research was firmly placed in the Interpretative paradigm of the New sociology of Education. The families were questioned about their motivations for choosing a particular school and this information was related to the structural provision of educational facilities. The stated preferences and reasons were noted and related to an underlying theory of social class and status. The system of zoning within the Education Board area was considered in relation to the experiences of families from a range of social strata and the degree of importance that was placed upon the selection of college and the ultimate choice was seen in a context of a socially reproductive society.

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Abstract.

SECTION ONE.

The Theoretical Underpinings of the Research.	Pages 1-3
My Own Theoretical Stance.	Pages 3-7
Other Research on the Topic of School Placement.	Pages 7-12
Social Class Factors and School Choice.	Pages 12-16
School Choice and Parental Influence in Practice.	Pages 16-19.
Some General Theory and Related Comments upon the Research.	Pages 19-22
Private Schooling in New Zealand and its pertinence to the Study.	Pages 22-32
Class, Power and Ideology.	Pages 32-36

SECTION TWO.

Methodology.	Page 38-43
Preparation for the Study.	Pages 43-44
Some Notes on the Questionnaire.	Page 43
The Questions, their Purpose and Correspondence with the Theoretical Model with Comments upon trends in the Responses.	Pages 43-52
Who Decides?	Page 52-54
Factors that Influence the Decision.	Pages 54-63
The Extent that the Education of the Parent had an Influence Upon the Education of the Child.	Page 63-64

Would Parents Prefer a Different School?	Pages 64-65
How Important do Parents Rate the Choice?	Pages 65-68
What Should College Provide for the Pupil According to the Parent	Pages 68-70
Occupation and Status	Pages 70-71
Overall Considerations of the Effectiveness of the Questions	Pages 71-73
General Comments Upon the Interviews Effectiveness	Pages 73-82
The Practical Implications of these findings	Pages 82-89
Summary	Page 89
Some Findings about the choices made by Private School Families	Page 90
Some Findings Related to the Choice of College and State School Families.	Page 91

<u>BIBLIOGRAPHY</u>	Pages 92-99
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<u>APPENDIX</u>	Page 100.
-----------------	-----------

1. Questionnaire Cue Sheet for the Interviews.
2. Letter to Parents.
3. Prospectuses of the Colleges and Enrolment Form
for State College.
4. Open Evening for Parents of Third Formers.
Newsclippings concerning Intake Procedural Change
during 1983.

The Theoretical Underpinnings of the Research.

The motive for carrying out a piece of grounded research such as this, surely must be the use to which the findings of the research can be put. The explication of the workings of societal processes, must lead to a greater understanding of the reality of the world in which we live and must present the possibility of the creation of alternative universes. At the level of macro-social research, one can only stand in awe of the multiplicity of problems that face the potential researcher. If the findings of the research are to have any validity or predictive power, they have to be structured into an explanatory theory that has withstood the rigorous claims and counter-claims of theoretical analysts and the researcher must be fully cognizant of the potential pitfalls and the research quagmires that path the way forward into useful research.

Once the researcher has come to terms with the theoretical basis of his work, he then has to make sense out of the mass of complexity that evolves from research in the area of human interaction. The problem of truth and validity is not only philosophic it is also intensely practical. When one finds that the answers given to the researcher by respondents in an interview situation are biased or couched in intentionally misleading ways, it becomes difficult to accept the literal responses as realistic when the interpretations that can be placed upon them are multifarious. People give the answers to questions according to what they think you will want to hear. They deliberately avoid areas of their lives that are probably the most telling and explanatory as far as the interviewer is concerned. It is not unsurprising that people wish to appear in the best possible light.

The third area where the greatest misinterpretation could occur is the area of researcher bias. We all have a world view that has been expanded through experience into a composite personal interpretation of how the world functions and the major factors that bring about change. Although there may be a fair degree of

unanimity amongst people as to exactly how this operates, there is certainly no general agreement and the most difficult area to research can be precisely at this point where the question of values and personal and public morals, conflict.

Every piece of research is carried out within the researcher's logical framework of explanatory motives and in the next sub-section, I intend to make ~~clear~~^{my} own theoretical position and my own methodological approach to the study. The enquirer, is not only engulfed within the theoretical debate that forms the basis for his practical work, but is also immersed in the practical problem of making sense of his findings and presenting a valid interpretation of them that forms a composite picture useful for others who are working in the same field.

anyone who tries to conduct research in field settings is continually impressed with the complexity, emotionality and pressure that exists in everyday life .⁽¹⁾

The complexity of field research, is further complicated by the necessity to relate it to the theoretical perspective that best explicates it.

theories must be judged ultimately for the adequacy they display to the understanding of the phenomenon they purport to explain- not to themselves .⁽²⁾

Finally, when one has brought together the most useful theoretical model with the fundamentals of the research, an interpretation is presented that may have some relevance for current sociological theory and may, additionally have some predictive importance for practical application and social intervention.

1. Cris Argyle in "Inner Contradictions of Rigorous Research" Academic Press 1980 New York Page One.

2. Willis - Learning to labour page 194.

My own Theoretical Stance.

My own research was firmly aligned with the ethnomethodologist tradition of looking at a problem at grass roots level and using the respondents contributions as valid interpretations of the world (Garfinkel, Sacks and Leiter). As researcher, I was starting at the social base where the decisions were taking place at a practical level, the hope being that by amassing this type of personal explanation at the family level, I would perceive trends and purpose behind the social frameworks, that would somehow relate to an explanatory social theory.

The sensitivity of British sociologists to the negotiation of everyday life within schools and classrooms has tended to obscure relationships between schooling and local culture, local social structure and so on. (3)

By observational study and by looking at the minutiae of social situations, my research was closely allied to the anthropological tradition of social science research, that has been a determining force behind much of the American research for example in the works of Murray, Wax and Dumont⁽⁴⁾. I have also kept in mind the sociological tradition as epitomised in the ethnology of classroom studies currently in vogue in the work of British sociologists. (Lacey, Stubbs and Willis)⁽⁵⁾ Willis' work especially seemed to hold the most promise of interpretative accuracy, and my research is in the style if not the theoretical completeness of Willis' work. There is a firm grounding of the theory in the practical participant observer tradition with specific examples chosen to emphasise a point and tendencies and trends explained through the research material as they arise.

3. Sara Delamont. British Journal of Sociology of Education 1980, Volume one Number two. page 148.

4. Wax, Murray, L. et al eds "Anthropological Perspectives of Education" New York. Basic Books 1971.

5. See Sara Delamont and Paul Atkinson, British Journal of Sociology of Education. Vol. No. 2 1980 "The two traditions in Educational ethnography - sociology and anthropology compared".

In this way the study is closely allied to the suggested approach advocated by Glaser and Strauss⁽⁶⁾, however, it is not true grounded theory, as my research was not wide scale enough to go beyond the stage of generating theory from the grounded research. A more powerful study may well have generated the theory and then gone back to the research to select more examples to corroborate the generated theory and would have gone back into the field to provide more supportive examples. In my case, I went into the research knowing these limitations and hope that the critics of this research will recognise and understand the small interpretative scale of this investigation.

In particular, the ethnographic account, without always knowing how, can allow a degree of the activity, creativity and human agency within the object of study to come through into the analysis and the reader's experience⁽⁷⁾.

It is this statement by Willis that I find consoling and hope that this 'creativity' and 'human agency' will be apparent in my study.

Although I was concerned with parental decision making, I could not explain this without a systematic interpretation of the societal forces that were acting upon parents to lead them to make certain choices.

Educational sociologists of the neo-Marxist leaning could have a field day in this study by showing the results as

6. esp. as outlined by Barney Glaser in "Theoretical Sensitivity"- advances in the methodology of Grounded theory" University of California 1978.

7. Willis 'Learning to Labour' page 3.

providing evidence that there is a determinism behind educational placement and that this supports the thesis on reproduction theory. Structural functionalists would probably say that we have known all along on a societal level that this is the case i.e. that poor families get the worst deal at school. Others of a more liberal persuasion may ask some deeper questions as to why the status quo is important to all levels of society (a factor that was apparent in my research) and may ask some pertinent questions about the causes and the necessity for change. I don't want this study to be a propounding of Marxist doctrine, although it could be used as such. I intend it mainly as the presentation of the views of fifty one individual families all trying to make the best of their worlds and as an accurate statement of the way that families interpret their choices of school for their children. In a limited resource world of imperfection and competition, it is difficult to see alternative arrangements that would prove to be a benefit to all society. I have tried not to place these value-judgements upon the outcomes of my research. Personal jealousy or sympathy would not enhance an explanatory essay of this sort. As mentioned in the third point made about the difficulties of this type of research, the researcher can be threatened by competing theories, but a far more disastrous fate can lie in the realm of personal judgements and the the transference of ones own system of beliefs and values onto the lives of others.

Although I used participant observation techniques, the central data was obtained through interview and rather than only standing back and observing, I was also required to be involved with the respondents in an interaction situation which had the potential of sullyng the purity of my results.

This interactional analysis makes an interesting corollary or alternative to positivistic and statistical analysis of systems. The approach used by many current theorists is to concentrate

firstly upon the gross impression and the grand theory and then expect the small scale research to correspond with the predictions made. Bourdieu, in 'School as a Conservative Force', is concerned with the larger considerations of inequality and injustice and the generalized reproductive nature of society. Boudon has moved away from this stance into a consideration of behavioural science and a critical analysis of the forces acting upon people within the given structure of society. It is this area of the actions of individuals and groups within the constraining structures of society that has the most relevance for this type of research, especially the way that social policy can be related to educational change.

Well meaning actions either in the form of remedial activities and positive discrimination has sometimes led to adverse reactions within the system and the hoped for results are not always as wished. The proclivity to place trust in large scale educational interventions has not resulted in the improvements projected. This can be witnessed for example by the relative failure of the "Sesame St.," type remedial programmes that even with massive injections of state and private funds, produce results that unfortunately do not measure up to the initial hopes held by their instigators. There is a danger of extrapolating the findings of small scale research into societal analysis and it is simplistic to relate small scale educational interventions to societal change.

Other Research on the Topic of School Placement.

There has been a great deal of research at the level of classroom interaction and at the level of classroom ethnography. Participant observers like Stobbs, have recorded the intricate cadences of classroom language and have made comprehensive transcriptions of the interchanges between pupils and teachers. Bernstein has transposed these findings onto perceived differences between pupils. Other educational sociologists like Willis, have related what goes on in the schools to the wider social melee and have investigated the inextricably intertwined nature of the social processing that goes on inside the school. In recent years, this has evolved through papers like Bowles and Gintis 'Schooling in Capitalist America' and is seen in the work of Passeron and Bourbieu on Class structure and reproduction. I found the social theory of Bourdieu and the social action theory of Boudon as particularly influential upon my own thought development on this topic.

Individual action and the product of individual action constitute the only and ultimate reality with which a sociologist has to deal. (8)

Boudon's book 'The Unintended Consequences of Social Action' was especially influential and I was at all times aware of the implications for my study of his belief in reasoned choices within the interactionalist paradigm and his view that the key to educational opportunity lies out of the school. The perverse effects of social change, made an interesting foil for the, at times, pessimistic neo-Marxist interpretations that I was

8. Raymond Boudon - 'Individual Action and Social Change' page 14.

irresistably drawn towards during my research. It is easy to share his belief that 'meaningful analysis will only come through interaction type paradigms' (9).

Background readings in the Karabel and Halsey volume were influential in the direction of the research in this study as it includes many examples of the current interest shown by sociologists in the reproductive tendency of educative agencies. The concern with how ruling class ideologies are transmitted and perpetrated through the schooling system and through the wider social structure are of crucial importance in this study which concentrates upon the comparison of a prestigious elite Private school and a State school.

The reproduction from one generation to the next of the social relations of production and the cultural symbols ordering those relations are as essential to the maintenance of society as biological reproduction itself (10)

Apart from the work of the American and English sociologists, there is very little that is available in the Pacific region.

Sociological Research into Education in New Zealand is virtually non-existent (11).

Recent work by Connell in Australia has been the most useful and I am certainly in concordance with him when he is discussing the themes of cultural domination and hierarchy in their historical contexts.

9. Raymond Boudon "Individual Action and Social Change" page 202.

10. Roy Nash "Education" - 'A New Zealand Sociological Perspective' p.60.

11. R. Bates - 'Directions for Research in New Zealand' page 17.

Groups within society do act to maintain their relative positions of status and power and his historical account that emphasises this link was worthy of consideration in assessing the current situation.⁽¹²⁾ In this sense, he is close to the true Marxist analysis, when he links the historical evolution of society into conflict situations generated through internal contradictions. There are however many contradictions within historicism and any historical interpretation is inevitably value-laden.

In New Zealand writings we have a few works on social class as shown in David Pitt's edited volume 'Social Class in New Zealand, Richard Bates 'New Sociology of Education - Directions for theory and research and more recently the work of Richard Harker 'On Reproduction, Habitus and Education', where we find a New Zealand sociologist using the work of Bourdieu to propound structural theories in society. Up till now however, there is a pronounced absence of any works in New Zealand that actually tackle the problem of the way that new Zealand schools are inter-connected with the wider social structure. How is the 'habitus' (the culture embodied in the individual) inculcated through the school system? How is this related to the choice of schools? Research on the long term effects of schooling upon the social structure are sparse and it is only in America with large scale research like Coleman's that we are presented with demographic evidence that can be used to support the theoretical social interpretations of society.

12. Connell and Irving - 'Class Structure in Australian History' (especially the introduction).

Recent longitudinal studies in England have been very much in the structural functionist mode and can be faulted on the grounds that they are dated by the time they are presented.⁽¹³⁾ It is not difficult to see why this type of study is sparse, as the results that prove large scale inequity would certainly not advance the cause of the academic who propounded these views.

You may search the textbooks in vain for penetrating empirical studies of the motives, attitudes and personality hang-ups of those who have great power to do damage to our society these are quite exempt from such 'scientific' probing and assessment ⁽¹⁴⁾

It has proved to be safer to operate on the theoretical level using the ideas of major theorists to propound a viewpoint. Richard Harker does precisely this for example in interpreting the work of Bourdieu.

the school he (Bourdieu) argues, takes the cultural capital of the dominant group as the natural and the only proper sort of capital ⁽¹⁵⁾

This sort of appraisal at one remove avoids the dangers that have been well outlined in Alex Carey's work. The research at primary levels is therefore avoided with the end result that there is a paucity of supportive evidence for the Grand theory.

Comparative studies of education provide another source of information for theoretical work. Writings by Holmes⁽¹⁶⁾ in London, and other individuals commentating upon their own countries are

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13. F. Rutter et al (1979) Secondary Schools and their effects on children, (Fifteen thousand hours), London, Open Books.
 14. Alex Carey - 'The Lysenko Syndrome' Had interesting discussion with Alex at McQuarie University in 1982 regarding the difficulty of access to the power elites of society. See also Australian Psychologist. Volume 12 No. 1 March 1977 page 29).
 15. Richard Harker - ' On Reproduction , Habitus and Education' pge 2.
 16. "Politics and Educational Change" ed. Patricia Broadfoot, Colin Brock, Tulasiewicz - pub. Croom Helm London 1981.

another source of insightful analysis that can demonstrate the cross-cultural nature of the hierarchical structures across societies and cultures.

What research there is in New Zealand of the participant observer type, for example Vellecoop, Baldock, Webster (1973), Prenter and Stewart (1972), show a tendency to operate solely within the school setting. There is no New Zealand research that relates the school with the society in a way that moves the participant observer from the classroom out into the family of the pupil.

Apart from two books by Royston Lambert and an article on the Ritual Nature of Caning in Private schools⁽¹⁷⁾, there was no other available research that focussed directly in an ethnomethodological way upon life in Private schools. Even this type of work is severely limited by the containment of the research within the schools and the absence of any relationship of what goes on in the school to what goes on in society or more especially in the families of the children who attend these schools. Royston Lambert, does however provide accurate transcriptions of the discourse and the routines within this type of school in England and it proved interesting reading for this study. There is a distinct lack of participant observation of this type of school in New Zealand.

The ethnographic style that I used, although of a similar type to that used by Stubbs, Delamont and Atkinson⁽¹⁸⁾, is located in a different area of the educational matrix. I made use of the techniques proposed by Hammersly and Wood (1976) and David Hargreaves albeit in a simple and small scale way; I directed my focus on

17. J. Mercurio, Christchurch, New Zealand thesis.

18. See Delamont. Footnote 5 page 3.

the reported thoughts and feelings of the families with pupils in the school system.

Social Class Factors and School Choice.

The 'embourgeoisement' of the mass of society to accept differentiated schools for different class groups is another interesting consideration. Thorsten Veblen (1931), emphasised that in many societies in the past and in the present, the working class and the lower orders have tended to support the upper classes, emulating fashions, activities and lifestyles and even providing political support. The elitism within New Zealand society, although apparent in many of the pressure groups, political organizations, 'boss and worker' mentalities and income statistics, is conspicuously absent in the research literature of New Zealand life. Even though it is known for example that many of our politicians and leading figures in the economic life of the country are ex-pupils of a select group of Private schools (this has been better researched in England and America. - see footnote) There is still a belief commonly accepted by the population of New Zealand that we are an egalitarian state. My interest came with a wish to know how parents at an individual level accomodated their ideas on wanting the best for their children (which over 90 percent of my respondents claimed they wanted), with the fact that many of their children were already failing within the education system.

Elites perpetuating themselves shown in 'The Civil Servants' 1980
-Peter Kellner.

I found out that parents do not realise that their child is failing until it is too late to intervene in the situation.

(All the families thought that their child was performing to the best of their abilities in my sample and therefore judged the school experience as being successful for their child. One child was, "doing well in the special remedial class").

When children are segregated off into elite schools early in their careers, the parents of other children rationalize this by saying that the State schools are equally as good and that the parents paying those high school fees are really wasting their money as they have the belief that the education given in those schools is the same as that given in the Private schools. The children who begin to fail in the course of their education in the state schools are generally those from the lower strata of society. These are the children who leave school at the earliest stage. Their families have little recourse to blame the system, as the schools have continuously emphasised the fact that the child is at fault and the parents are led to believe that their child has not got what it takes for success within the educational system. Later, the children of the more vociferous families are 'cooled out' through the examination system and by this time, the children have been thoroughly inculcated with the idea of 'success' and 'failure' in terms defined by the school. Parents, in general, maintain their belief in their children until the last moment and when the failure eventually comes, the final rationalization is made, which is, that the child has been successful in relation to the family norms and in relation to the education of the parents. The children are weaned away from the school system at the level where they can be successful in their own social group, in the work place and with their friends. Social success and job success at this point take over from the academic criteria of success. Those children who have been filtered out into the private schooling system meanwhile progress

along their separate track having success at school without the hurdles and competition that are a natural part of the State education process. (This is not to say that there are not other obstacles and problems for the private school pupils to face;-but that they are different).

Blau and Duncan claim that:

superior status cannot be anymore be directly inherited but must be legitimated by actual achievements that are socially acknowledged (19)

The achievements they refer to are however made much more accessible through the convolutions of inheritance. When 100% of the families in my sample who had parents who had both attended Private school also had a child at a Private school and when the wealth of many of these families has been traditional in most cases for generations, we cannot ignore the fact that the school must facilitate the transmission of cultural capital, or at the very least not take part in altering the heirarchical nature of our society. In one Private school, Vellecoop in 1968 says only 1% of the boys were from Working Class homes between the years 1918-1968. (20) The position would not have changed today from my small sample. The whole area of Social class research becomes intimately tied up with the findings of my research, in that, although I was looking at the choices that the families were making when selecting secondary education, it was impossible to ignore the obvious relationship that became apparent between the type of school chosen and the class and status of the family.

20. C. Vellecoop "Social Stratification in New Zealand" 1968. Ph.D Canterbury Thesis.

19. Peter Blau and Otis Duncan : 'The American Occupational Structure' Wiley, New York 1967.

The information that I was uncovering was an area difficult to substantiate with other supporting evidence for as David Pitt says:

Poor groups and the very wealthy do not readily appear in the income statistics either for census or income tax returns, which show overall an egalitarian structure. (21)

Pitt goes on to say on page 13 of the same chapter that:

Residential segregation was also reflected in school segregation and Private Education was (in the late seventies) becoming an important part of the upper class lifestyle, even if the rationale for the parents was the better education and academic record that came with smaller classes and better equipment. The elite Private schools were run by the churches, especially the Protestant church (which resisted integration), and there were also a small number of elite state schools or classes. The alumnae of these schools often moved on through the Old Boy network into prestige jobs. (21).

This situation seems to be unchanged in the 1980's. The concept of what I term 'clout' which I use as refering to the influence and power that is available for the potential use of a person, surfaced as an important factor to be considered. The political and social 'clout' of the most powerful families seemed to have a direct influence upon the type of school the child of the family attended and probably more importantly upon the persuasive force

that the family could bring to bear upon the school organization and the school controllers.

Some of the most influential families were able to make the life of a headmaster very difficult, if he did not conduct his school and the education of the parents' children in the manner that the parents wished.

School Choice and Parental Influence in practice.

The effectiveness of the intervention of the parent in the running of the schools came out in two particular instances, one; where the parents said that they were trying to get the headmaster of the local country primary school shifted into one of the town schools and two; the private school parents who said that they were able, with the support of other parents, to have a large say in the length of tenure of the headmasters of one of New Zealand's most prestigious colleges. The threat of withdrawing their children and the withdrawal of the financial support that this represented, would be a big blow to the school board and if a group of parents did not see eye to eye with the headmaster, they could bring very effective force to bear upon the school governors to get things changed. In this respect, the Private schools were in a completely different situation to the State schools, where the unpopularity of a particular school does not bring the same degree of condemnation upon the Headmaster. The State school has an immobile clientele and therefore there is not the same drastic effects upon the school through unpopularity. The head can be paid and his interests protected beyond the wishes of the parents, especially if the school represents the well-disciplined, authoritarian and more conservative aspects of the community. The liberal Headmaster in the State school, who is progressive in his approach to learning and who is also unpopular with the most influential members of the community is in a different

position and Rising Hill school in London and the recent demise of the Christchurch 'Four Avenues' school show that headmasters in the State system can have pressure brought to bear upon them by higher authorities, however, it is not as immediate as the Private school experiences, because the Private school is not buffered to the same degree by the delaying factors of Inspectorates, Education Boards, Unions and the Department of Education.

Apart from the obvious factor that most of the families who sent their children to Private schools were richer and better positioned in life than those families whose children went to State schools, I also wanted to know what constituted the most important differences between the family's philosophy and their differing lifestyle that could relate to the ultimate choice of college. It soon became apparent whilst carrying out the research, that my original title using the word 'choice' was a misnomer as there was no effective choice being shown, so I altered the title to include the word 'allocation' rather than 'choice'.

The recent controversy over the placement of pupils in the Palmerston North area, the ensuing court case and the successful outcome for the plaintiff (five parents who were dissatisfied with the schools allocated to their children), is an interesting corollary to my study, as the Palmerston North Education Board effectively took away all choice from the parents as regards the placement of pupils in different schools. The parents who send their children to fee paying schools are exempt from these procedures. My study would predict that (without knowing these individual parents) they would be the ones who found that their child was not being allowed to attend the school that is most like the one that the parents attended, in terms of being single sex, well disciplined or close to home. Because the area in which I carried out my study did not operate this same type of rigid placement, there were no

really dissatisfied parents. This was allied to the fact that the possible schools available in my sample were valued as being very much like each other by the parents and therefore the level of discontent was reduced. There were no other types of school and no great variation of standards across school to provide a comparison for the parents.

As a general statement, it seemed that the families of all the children in my sample were quite accepting of the way the system was operating in Napier. This corresponds with the comment by Ramsey, Sneddon, Grenfell and Ford⁽²²⁾, that

we did find in our interviews with parents, conducted subsequent to the observational section of the research reported here, that they placed an almost pathetic faith in the ability of the school to promote social mobility.

In my study the parents exhibited a general feeling that the system was organized in the best way possible and the similarity in what the schools had to offer made the move into secondary education a non-controversial issue. Most of the families in the Napier Intermediate sample did not know how the enrolment procedure was organized and had not made any specific enquiries as to other possible schools apart from the one that they had assumed their child would be attending. There was no realization on the part of these families that there was a differentiated private school system of any consequence and no stated awareness of differentiated class-based life chances. There was no voiced resentment about the better chances that were available to some children who were

~~educated outside of the State system and there was an inherent faith~~
 22. Ramsey, Sneddon, Grenfell and Ford - A.N.Z.J.S. Vol. 19 No. 2 1983.

(also see page 9 in same journal 'Talking to Families')

shown in the school system in its present form. I have to emphasise that the sample was not typical or representative of other areas in New Zealand, as there was a strong bias towards the stable family in a fairly prosperous area of the country, with no unemployed breadwinners in the families interviewed. It cannot be said that the research results could be interpreted as being representative of the rest of the country.