School Choice in Bermuda: A Qualitative Study of the Influence of Social Networks on Parental School Choice

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SCHOOL CHOICE IN BERMUDA: A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF THE INFLUENCE OF SOCIAL NETWORKS ON PARENTAL SCHOOL CHOICE.

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DEDICATION

For my son Kai,

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CHAPTER I

Introduction

When one considers the myriad of decisions parents must make for the welfare of their children, choosing the right schooling has to be right up there among the most important of them. Just what parents consider the right schooling to be and how and why they make these decisions about school choice is the focus of this research study. In particular, this study examines the parental decision-making process in the context of social networks as they exist in a very small single school district, the Bermuda Public School System (B.P.S.S.), where school options are limited and geography restrictive. The study sought to understand the role of social networks in parents’ school choice decision-making in the Bermuda context.

Parental choice and its role in Public Education has been a subject of interest for many decades in jurisdictions around the world. Over the past 30 years, educators and policy makers in Europe and North America have examined the issue of parental choice in Public Education and have implemented a variety of education-
choice reform programs designed to achieve various outcomes (Cookson 1994, Wolfe 2002).

West and Pennell (1997) looked at a number of such reforms which occurred in England and Wales in the 1980's and 1990's that involved the creation of a) new types of schools, b) school funding programs, c) financial incentives, d) opportunities for increased parental participation and empowerment, and e) the introduction of a "free market" system for education. The stated purpose of these reforms was to give parents more options for their children's education and to increase the diversity of schools to which students had access. It was anticipated that these measures would not only provide increased parental choice but would also lead to increased competition among schools, and thereby improve school efficacy and student achievement. Research studies conducted by Fitz et al. (1993) and Glatter et al. (1996), suggest that parental decision-making was not significantly affected by the increased diversity of schools available to them. Additionally, these researchers found that, despite the supposed increase in diversity of schools, parents did not always gain their first preference in schools for a variety of reasons, some of which were beyond their control. For example, there were instances of altered
school admissions criteria and practices, a shortage of school spaces, and a belief on the part of parents that their application would just be unsuccessful. West and Pennell cite a study carried out in London in 1998 which explored the types of schools chosen by parents. It was found that socioeconomics factored heavily into parents' choice of school, with parents of higher socioeconomic status more likely to select private schools, whether or not they were grant maintained, and these schools tended to have higher attainment levels on public examinations. The extent to which parents have access to information about schools, and can distinguish between and among schools based on this information, is another aspect of parental choice which has been the subject of study for researchers (Edge et al., 1996).

In the United States, as society's need for a more educated and skilled populace increased, American education saw the creation of private schools for the socially elite and the development of religious schools, as well as schools that were designed to meet the needs of the common folk. While some may have deemed parental choice to be the right of a select group of privileged parents in a certain segment of society to maintain the existing social order, others (Freidman, 1962) saw it as an important mechanism to
empower parents and to give them more of an opportunity to participate in their children's education.

Raywid (1990) argued that there were three basic premises for parental choice: (a) There are many ways to educate children; (b) there is no best program to be found in a diverse, pluralistic and democratic society; and (c) we need diversity in school programs to meet family value patterns and orientations.

In more recent times, globally, parental choice has been seen as having another role, and is viewed by many as a critical component of public education reform efforts. As many developed countries attempt to address heightened public concerns about improving student outcomes, and competing more effectively within the global arena, the concept of increasing parental school-choice programs, and their impact on school efficacy and student outcomes has become an important strategy employed to accomplish these goals. The proposition that increased school-choice in a free-market environment will lead to increased school competition and improved student outcomes has been put forward by several researchers, business people and policy makers (Hoxby, 2000, 2003, 2004). Various laws and policies have been enacted to make these various choice programs possible. For example, in the United States,
chart school legislation enacted into law in 1991 is now in place in as many as 41 states and the District of Columbia, resulting in the existence of over 3,000 charter schools nationwide (Hanushek, 1994). This option can be described as a quasi-private school choice within the public school system. Legislation that gave parents access to private education with financial support is a similar example.

In the main, parental choice programs take on varied characteristics, but in general, they follow a similar format, which involves the provision of increased school options through a variety of government interventions and private corporate sponsorship. Such interventions have taken the form of school vouchers, tax rebates, fee reductions, partial tuition payments, transportation support, public charter schools and magnet schools; thereby providing parents with increased options for choice of the school they deem right for their child. The extent to which increased parental choice has had the impact expected on student achievement has been debated for some time now, with choice proponents (Chubb & Moe, 1990) citing examples of studies to support this proposition, while opponents (Meier, 2004) cite opposing findings that suggest that school competition promotes segregation and elitism and
caters primarily to those who have social capital, mobility and advantage.

On the 22-square-mile island of Bermuda, the concept and practice of parental school choice must be considered in the context of the several unique characteristics which have prompted this particular study of parental choice. The small geographical size of the island, public and private education sector school enrollment which is split about 50-50, the dearth of government funding and interventions for parents in support of school choice, and a thriving economy based on service and information-based industries that generates one of the highest GNPs in the world and over-employment, all make Bermuda’s scenario worthy of study. How do Bermuda’s parents select schools in this kind of environment? How do they arrive at their decisions about where to send their children to school? What influences their decision making? How do they view their school choices - are they real or imagined? Are parents making a choice, and what motivates these choices?

In Bermuda, parents have a total of 36 public schools consisting of 10 preschools, 18 primary schools, 5 middle schools, 2 senior schools, and 1 special school; 7 private schools; and approximately 17 private home schools/tutorial sites, from which to choose. Parental choice takes on new
meaning in the Bermuda context, simply because of (a) the limited number of options available to parents in this jurisdiction, (b) the high cost of private schooling, (c) the absence of government funding alternatives for schooling, and (d) geographical accessibility to schools.

In larger jurisdictions, geographical location of residence has been found to impact school accessibility and school choice. On the surface, this factor may not appear to be an issue for Bermuda because of its uniquely small geography; however, it would be premature to make that assumption for the Bermuda context. If the lack of adherence to the public feeder-school system on the part of Bermuda's parents and the flight to private schools which tend to be located primarily in the central parishes are any indication of the influence of geographical distance on school choice, this may be one reason to remain completely open about the influence of geographical distance from the school on parental decision-making on school choice.

Background: The Bermuda School System

The Bermuda Education Act of 1996 requires that only three types of schools can operate in the Bermuda Education System. These are described as "aided schools",
"maintained schools" (part of the public education system), and "private schools".

School Types:

I. An "aided school" has all or part of its property vested in a body of trustees or board of governors. This governing body owns the property and receives some public funding. This arrangement came into effect after 1965 with the desegregation of schools, (Bermuda Education Act of 2000).

II. A "maintained school" has the whole of its property belonging to the government and is fully maintained by public funds.

III. A "private school" is a school which is in no way maintained by public funds and has not, since the desegregation of schools in 1965, received any capital grant-in-aid from public funds.

N.B. Both "aided" and "maintained" schools are a part of the Bermuda public school system and can be distinguished primarily by their governance. In the case of aided schools, the responsibility for direct governance belongs to the Board of Governors for that school, although they answer ultimately to the Minister of Education. Maintained schools come under the direct governance of the Department
of Education, the Commissioner and the Minister of Education, and currently have no board.

Prior to 1965, the Bermuda School System was racially segregated. With the desegregation of schools beginning in the 1960's, some of the formally maintained "white" schools opted to become private. The remaining private schools became part of the Public School System and became either aided or maintained (Christopher, 2009).

Private Schools:
The private school sector in Bermuda consists of 7 traditional private schools, of which 3 are parochial schools - Seventh Day Adventist, Roman Catholic and Muslim - and the remaining four are secular schools, one of which admits females only. Also, within the private sector there are a dynamic number of home schools (currently 17) which must register with the Ministry of Education and are subject to some government regulation and oversight. In 1991, the only private school for boys became co-ed, and in 1995 one of the maintained public schools reverted to a private school.

Public Schools:
At present, the 36 schools in the Bermuda Public School System are staffed and supported by just over 800
educators. Public school educators in Bermuda are currently unionized in three separate organizations. The teachers, counselors, and para-educators are members of the Bermuda Union of Teachers (B.U.T.); the principals are members of the Association of School Principals (A.S.P.); and Central Office/Ministry of Education staff are members of the Bermuda Public Services Union (B.P.S.U.) and the Bermuda Industrial Union (B.I.U.).

Prior to 1996, the Bermuda Public School System (B.P.S.S.) was a two-tier system with 18 primary and 6 secondary schools. There were four other secondary public schools which sprang up and later closed during this period. In the 1960's, a national secondary school entrance examination (S.S.E.E.), commonly referred to as the 11+ examination and based on a British assessment, was administered to all public school students at the end of seven years of primary school. It was on the basis of these examination results that students were admitted to one of the public secondary schools for the next five years of study. The school system was a selective one at that time, with two of the six public secondary schools admitting students performing in the upper quartile on the Secondary School Entrance Examination (SSEE) or "transfer examination" (Christopher, 2009).
Previous to 1974, the school curricula were designed by individual schools and influenced by the requirements of the external examinations. These examinations were based on the British curriculum, and students sat for the General Certificate of Education (G.C.E.) examinations for overseas students, at the "O" (Ordinary) and "A" (Advanced) levels. Students also sat for British overseas examinations developed by the Royal Society of the Arts (R.S.A.), Pitman, City & Guilds in applied subject areas. The Bermuda Secondary School Certification (B.S.S.C) for high school graduation was introduced in 1997 and included courses in Mathematics and English, offered at three levels of difficulty with mastery at each level deemed adequate to meet graduation requirements. This certification steadily lost favor with the Bermuda public and was viewed as a poor qualification for public school graduates. In 1996, the Government removed the 11+ examination and introduced a three-tier public school system that included five middle schools with two senior schools, and the school system became comprehensive. A new local curriculum was developed for middle and senior schools, and this time it was aligned with North American models with senior schools introducing a credit system. The graduation certification was renamed the Bermuda School Certificate (B.S.C.).
STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Bermuda’s 60,000-plus population, living on a volcanic atoll of 22 square miles, has one of the highest GDP’s in the world (Bermuda Census 2000). Bermuda’s economy is based on two major industries: Hospitality and International Business. Bermuda’s children between the ages of 5 and 15 years of age make up 20% of Bermuda’s population and are required by law to attend school until they are 16 years of age (Education Act, 1996). Bermuda’s Public School System is considered to be failing by many for several reasons, some as yet to be understood. However, the poor graduation rates of the two public senior schools and the increased dissatisfaction of local employers with the quality of the school leavers have contributed greatly to this way of thinking about Bermuda’s public school system. In the past decade, census data show that while public School enrollment figures have steadily decreased, private School enrollment has been increasing (Report on the 2000 Census Bermuda). This steady exodus of students to private schools has resulted in what appears to be one of, if not the largest, percentage of school age children in private education in any jurisdiction in the world, approximately 50% (Report on 2000 Census, Bermuda).
According to the 2000 census report, this shift has resulted in a dual education system in Bermuda of public and private schools, with 79% of the country's black students in public school and 72% of the country's white students attending private schools. The population by race, according to the 2000 Census Report, indicates that 55% of Bermuda residents identify themselves as "black" and 34% as "white", the remaining groups being "mixed", "Asian" or "other". The racial breakdown of the public and private school populations does not reflect the population's racial composition but, rather, indicates a "re-segregation" of Bermuda's schools. This situation is problematic and has serious social, economic and political implications for the continued stability and viability of this island community. A more desirable situation would be to have a more representative cross section of Bermuda's parents and students choosing public education, thereby addressing and possibly reversing this problematic trend.

PURPOSE OF STUDY

The purpose of this research study was to examine how parental choice operates in a small educational environment such as Bermuda's, where parental choices are limited. The researcher examined the impact of social networks on
parents' decision-making when selecting a school for their child.

Research Question

The overarching research question addressed in this study is:

What role do social networks play in parental decisions about school choice?

Subsidiary Questions

1. How do social networks shape a parent's definition of "desirability" in a school?

2. How do social networks influence the intrinsic and extrinsic motivators that parents use when selecting a school for their child?

3. What kinds of social networks do Bermudian parents utilize for decision-making purposes?

4. To what extent are the kinds of social networks used by parents related to their socioeconomic backgrounds?

Significance of the Study

The Bermuda employment sector continues to express serious concern about the quality of public school graduates. There have been a number of independent reviews of the public school system over the past three decades, but reform efforts, thus far, have had little impact on the waning confidence of the Bermuda populace in public education.
Bermuda is described as a community where there are still manifestations of separate school systems within the education system, one predominately white private school system and the other predominately black, - "Two different worlds, two different realities" (The Mid Ocean News, 2007). Can this island community afford to ignore this phenomenon? With almost 50% of Bermuda’s young people of school age currently attending private schools (Bermuda Census 2000), what are the implications for the future viability and stability of this island community? Human capital has been identified as one of the major requirements of any society in this 21st-century global economy that wishes to participate and keep up with the ever-changing demands (Hoxby, 2004).

The findings of this study should be of interest to educators and policy makers alike, as it will shed some light on the factors which influence the decisions that Bermuda’s parents make about school choices and how this decision-making translates ultimately to school selections. In particular, in a uniquely small educational environment such as Bermuda, where school choice is so limited, a greater understanding of how and why parents are making their school choices may help us to find ways to support parents better in this process. Additionally, the findings
may point the way forward for further research as to the relationship, if any, between parental school choices and public school efficacy and improved student outcomes. The study's findings might also provide some insight into how Bermuda's public education reform efforts should proceed and what the reform priorities should be, if public education is to attract and retain a more representative cross section of Bermuda's parents and students.
POSSIBLE INFLUENCES ON PARENTAL SCHOOL CHOICE DECISION-MAKING

Conceptual Framework

![Diagram of conceptual framework]

Figure 1

The conceptual framework for this study is depicted in Figure 1.

Several decision-making models have been formulated by psychologists, sociologists and social scientists to
explain decision-making processes and behaviors for both organizations and individuals. The Elimination of Aspects model of decision-making is based on a process that involves the systematic elimination of choices. Each choice is seen as a collection of measurable aspects, and any aspect selected will help to eliminate all alternatives which do not satisfy that particular aspect (Tversky, 1972).

Rational choice theory suggests that parental decision-making will be a rational process designed to maximize the utility of decisions, based on value preferences and weighing of the costs and benefits associated with the various options (Bosetti, 2004). Other decision-making models that have been described as either a) a descriptive/behavioral model with a focus on making a choice that meets a minimum set of criteria, or b) a prescriptive/normative model which is intended to maximize the outcome by making the best decision possible (Janis & Mann, 1968). Both models are rational approaches to decision-making and, although the latter is highly favored, it has been criticized by others (Simon, 1970), who claim that humans are incapable of truly maximizing their gains when decision-making, since it is impossible to determine all possible outcomes of all possible choices. He
suggests, furthermore, that such an effort would put undue strain on resources and human capacity. Simon may indeed be right but since few would argue with the idea that parents in general want the very best for their children, it follows that a decision-making theory such as Rational Choice Theory, and in particular a prescriptive/normative approach, would be applicable to the decision-making process involved in school choice and can be used to explain the conceptual map presented.

It is important to note, however, that parental decision-making may be even more complex than this and recent research suggests that social networks, class issues, parent demographics and access to choice information also influence a parent's decision-making (Bosetti, 2004). The conceptual map above illustrates the various factors which can influence a parent's decision-making regarding the choice of a school for their child. These factors may relate to what parents believe they know about the schools, what they describe as preferred desirable school attributes, their socioeconomic status, their educational history, the location of the school, their level of involvement in their child's education, their social relationships and networks, and what they may understand their real school options to be (Greene, 2002).
DEFINITION OF TERMS

Dual school system: is a system which is made up of public and private schools only.

Public schools: come under the jurisdiction and administrative control of the Bermuda Government and, its agent, the Ministry of Education. There are 36 such schools in Bermuda - 10 pre-schools (approximately 1 per parish), 18 primary schools, 5 middle schools, 2 senior schools and 1 special school.

Private schools: Under the Education Act of 2000, private schools also come under the supervision of the Ministry of Education but are subject to few direct controls, with the possible exception of those relating to health and safety matters and compulsory education mandates. Decisions relating to staffing, budget, curriculum and assessment are completely within the purview of the private schools and their respective governing bodies. There are 6 private schools in Bermuda. All private schools are fee-paying, with some offering scholarships to deserving (based on financial need) and academically higher-performing
students. Several private schools have identified several preferred-entry points for admitting students which they promote with parents. Some private schools also administer admissions tests at all entry points. Private schools in Bermuda, for the most part, do not provide services for students with severe learning or behavioral challenges.

*Tutorial Sites/Home Schools:* fall under the private sector also, but they are run by parents from their own homes or by certified teachers as small private business entities. In the latter case, some or all of the students may not be related in any way to the school administrator or teachers. These schools, like the other private schools, depend primarily on fee-paying students to meet their expenses. These schools must submit their assessment data to the Ministry of Education on an annual basis, but otherwise are subject to very little administrative supervision from the Bermuda Ministry of Education.

*Feeder-School System:* a system in the public school system intended to guide the movement and transition of students from their neighborhood primary schools to the nearest middle school in their area.
Compulsory Education: Students in Bermuda must attend school from ages 5 to 18 years (Amended Education Act of 2008), and the age of senior school matriculation is around 18 years. Bermuda has 1 tertiary level institution—The Bermuda College—a 2-year community college which confers certificates, diplomas and associate degrees. Students must travel abroad to pursue bachelor’s degrees or graduate study.

School Choice: In Bermuda, parents can choose public or private school at any time during their child’s school career. However, there are neighborhood public schools at the primary and middle levels where a feeder system is expected to operate. To some extent, this is what happens. Primary school age children are meant to feed into the neighborhood middle school after primary 6 (grade 5), and middle school students and their parents can select 1 of the 2 senior public schools they would like to attend after completing Middle 3 (grade 8).

DELIMITATIONS & LIMITATIONS

Delimitations:

I. The size of the purposeful sample studied was restricted to a group of approximately 20 parents who
have children in public or private schools and have transferred their children there for the 2008-9 school year from the other sector.

II. The parents selected had children enrolled in Grade 6 (the beginning of middle school) during the 2008-09 school year.

III. The focus group participants were selected from the volunteer parent sample and limited to 4-8 parents.

IV. There were 75 parents who transferred their children from public to private school in September 2008 and 5 parents who transferred their children from private to public schools in September 2008. Volunteer participants for the study were chosen from this target population of 80.

V. The study was conducted in February 2009 with parents after their children have been in the new school for 6 months. This relatively short period of time that had elapsed since parents made their decision and school selection may have influenced their thinking about their decision and ultimate selection of school.

Delimitations of the Study (Explanation):

Parents in the study have students in their first year of middle school (grade 6) who have transferred to their new school from the private or the public sector.

The size of the study sample was dependent on the number of volunteer parents who agreed to participate and represents a disproportionate number of parents, based on the relative numbers choosing public schools after private versus those choosing a private school after public school.

The sampling includes a diverse group of parents based
on demographics, and its size is limited by the pool of 80 parents who meet the study's criteria. These criteria require that the parents have a student that had transferred from private to public school for Sept 2008 into Middle 1, year 7 or grade 6. The parent sample was solicited from the 80 parents who had moved their children for the 08-09 school year at this grade.

The time frame for this research is restricted to the 2008-9 school year. Parents participating will have made their decision about where to place their child for middle school and transferred them based on decisions made the previous year when they were attending school in the other system.

Limitations:

Size of volunteer parent sample.

The parent sample size is small and is a limitation of the study. The sampling size is 19 parent volunteers whose children attend six of the seven private schools in Bermuda. This number represents approximately .05% of adult population between 15 and 64 years of age (Bermuda Census Report, 2000). The population, from which the sample was drawn, consisted of parents who had made the decision to move their child from public school to private
or private to public for the 2008-9 school year. The child was moved from primary six to middle school year one. There were a total of 80 parents who met these criteria. Making such a move may demonstrate that these parents could be described as choosers, parents who are very involved in making decisions about their children’s schooling. Data collected by

the government of Bermuda does indicate, however, that students move from public to private schools, and vice versa, at various points during their schooling and that one such transfer point occurs prior to the beginning of middle school. The participant sample also depended heavily on the willingness of parents to participate in the study and to share their thinking on a personal decision such as this one with the researcher. This represents another limitation of the study.

The veracity of parental responses.

Some parents may be reluctant to share their honest attitudes and true beliefs on school choice decision-making about private and public education in Bermuda. Parents may hesitate to do so believing that
their views will be frowned upon by others in the community in general; by the researcher who is an educator in particular; or viewed as socially unacceptable to others. Such perceptions may affect how truthful parents are prepared to be with their responses in interviews.

The lack of availability of Bermuda Government data.

The Bermuda Government collects Census data every 10 years. The last Census report was published in May 2000. The more recent data source from the Bermuda Government is the National Budget 2008. Both documents include data about public and private school enrollment and other important statistics used in this study. The Ministry of Education has only recently begun to collect and track student enrollment data. Much of the parent contact data available in the Ministry of Education database is inaccurate, as parents in Bermuda are very mobile and are not required to keep their information current with school officials.

The restricted time factor for the data collection.

The collection of data for the study took place during a very narrow window of time in February 2009.
During this time parent interviews were conducted and a focus group held to collect the data needed for the study.

**The presence of the researcher in group.**

The researcher may have been known to some members of the parent sampling, although every effort was made to minimize this eventuality. The Bermuda community is small and the researcher, as a public middle school principal, may have been recognized. This is clearly a limitation of the study, as this situation might have influenced the responses made by interviewees.

**Group dynamics.**

The focus group discussion was used as another source of data collection during the study. Group dynamics can be a limitation for the study. Participating individuals may not respond well to one another, especially if they hold opposing views. Even if they tend to be in agreement on various issues, this too can affect the quality of data collected, based on how persuasive or compelling any one member's point of view happens to be.
Characteristics of participants: Chooser or non-Choosers.

This descriptor refers to those parent participants who may feel they have had real choices when it comes to selecting schools versus those parents who feel they have had few, if any, options. These two very different perspectives may influence the attitudes of respondents when discussing their decision-making around school choice.

Research Tools.

The effectiveness of the research methods and tools may also be a limitation of the study. The effectiveness of the parent interviews depends heavily upon the quality of the interview questions and the skill of the interviewer. Interviews were recorded and some notes taken—both actions might be a limitation of the study as recordings and note-taking might have inhibited participant responses.

Government of Bermuda research publications and data sources are limited and dated. The Ministry of Education’s home schooling registry, for example, is only as current as the various home school supervisors want it to be. There is minimal supervision of home
schools/tutorial sites by the Ministry, and the onus is on the individual home school, once their numbers exceed a specified number, to register with the Ministry of Education. Home schools in Bermuda spring up and close throughout the school year. Access to such data through other sources is difficult to find. There is no national assessment administered to public and private school students, and therefore nationally published school results are not available. Data published by the private schools is determined solely by the school, whereas the Ministry of Education determines the national assessment for public schools, as well as how assessment results will be published. This makes any analysis and comparison of student achievement in these two sectors impossible and a limitation for the study. The Ministry of Education's Student Management System database provided limited data on student mobility for the past 10 years between the public and private school sectors.

The Size of the Bermuda School System.

Bermuda’s public school sector has:

(a) 10 preschools for four-year-olds (pre-
schooling is not compulsory)

(b) 18 primary schools (ages 5-10 years) P1-P6
(K-5) of varying populations ranging from
80 students up to 250 students

(c) 5 middle schools (ages 11-13 years) M1- M3
(grades 6-8)

(d) 2 senior schools (14- 18 years) S1-S4
(grades 9-12)

(e) 1 Special School (5-18) years

(f) 1 Alternative Program for behaviorally-
challenged students.

Bermuda’s private school sector has:

(a) 3 parochial co-ed private schools K-12

(b) 2 secular coed private schools K-12

(c) 1 single sex(females) secular private
school K-12

(d) 1 special curricular private school K-10

(e) 17 home schools/ tutorial sites (varying
grade ranges and sizes, some with
religious affiliations)

The bias of the researcher.
As a result of the researcher's own personal and professional experiences in the Bermuda community and in Canada, and opinions formed as a result of the literature review, there will be some bias brought to the research study which may affect objectivity. Every effort will be made to minimize this by maintaining a posture of empathic neutrality throughout the process. This researcher has been an educator for 38 years. The researcher has worked as a classroom teacher of mathematics at the senior and intermediate level, a school guidance counselor, a college lecturer for freshmen in Bermuda College orientation courses, an education officer at the Bermuda Ministry of Education, a Deputy Principal of a senior school, and a middle school principal. The researcher has worked in several schools in Toronto, Canada, for 17 years as a teacher and counselor, as a lecturer at the Bermuda College, and in various roles in the Bermuda Public School system for the past 21 years.

The participant response rate.

The extent to which parents volunteered to participate in the study impacted the size of the
purposeful sample to be studied. Invitation letters were sent to all parents who met the criteria for the study and this contact was followed up by a phone call in an effort to encourage participation and improve the response rate.

OUTLINE OF STUDY

This qualitative research study targeted a group of 19 parent volunteers with children currently attending six of seven private schools on the island that provide middle school education to children in M1 or grade 6 or year 7. The private schools represented are located toward the central parishes of the island. The study used an applied research design and was conducted in February of the 2008-2009 school year and involved the use of semi-structured interviews and a focus group of a purposeful sampling of parents in an effort to examine the factors which influence parental decision-making relating to school choice and, in particular, the impact of social networks in this limited-choice environment. The research proceeded as follows:

a) In-depth semi-structured one-hour interviews of selected parents were conducted in February 2009.
b) One Focus group in February 2009 - after the 1-on-1 interviews were completed.

c) A review of Ministry of Education documents and data which reports on student mobility into and from public schools to other schools,


e) Data analysis was based on thematic content analysis of data collected from the interviews, a focus group and document review. Data analysis involved a search for themes and patterns which emerged from the data collected that could shed light on those factors influencing parents' decision making about school choice and which addressed the research questions.

Parents' decision-making and school selections were examined, as were parents' reasons for making the choices they had. The influence of social networks on parents' decision-making was a focus. The findings have been reported as they relate to the research questions posed, highlighting the themes and patterns that emerged in the data.
CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

This review of literature focused on two major categories. The first category is the literature on school choice as an international phenomenon: its characteristics and some of its implications for public education. The second category of literature will look at the literature on parental school choice, decision-making in practice and theory and the influence of social networks on decision making.

School Choice: An International Phenomenon

School Choice and Education Reform.

School choice has been in existence around the world as a concept and an approach to providing access to education for many decades, and studies have been conducted to look at the effects of school choice on students and their families, as well as on schools and the quality of education (Coulson, 1999; Tooley, 2000). Proponents and opponents of school choice in its many forms have espoused numerous reasons why
their points of view are legitimate and in the best interest of a particular group. Findings have varied and often contradicted one another, but the idea and practice of school choice prevails.

School choice, as a more recent approach to public education reform, has been a focus for policymakers, educators, and parents alike for several decades in many parts of the world. Research conducted on the relationship between school choice and student achievement has resulted in mixed findings and have had varied foci. One such focus has been to look at the effect of "access to choice" on student achievement while another focus was to examine the effect of "actual school choice and school types" on student achievement (Hoffer, Greeley, Coleman and Kilgore 1985). There have also been studies to look at how school choice impacts school quality in the context of market competition (Chubb and Moe, 1990; Hoxby, 2004), how school choice impacts school composition, peer effects, cream skimming, re-segregation and societal equity. This part of the literature review will concentrate on these issues, as they relate more directly to the contextual issues of the problem in Bermuda as stated previously.
Studies which examine the relationships between school choice and student achievement have been feasible in many jurisdictions due to the existence of national assessments (like the National Assessment of Educational Progress in the U.S.) which provide student achievement data for researchers to collect and analyze. In Bermuda, no such systemic data on student achievement for public- and private-sector students is available for analysis, as there is no national assessment system to which all schools are subject. It is, however, useful to review the findings of researchers who do have access to such data and can therefore examine relationships between school choice and student achievement.

In the United States, school choice, as an education reform strategy, has its many supporters as well as opponents. Goldhaber (1997), in his research, looks at some of the underlying assumptions made by school choice advocates which are a) that private schools are more efficient than public schools, b) that parents can distinguish good quality schools, and c) that parents will select schools that perform well. He contends that such school choices exist within an environment of fee-paying private schools or school
vouchers for eligible parents, thereby eliminating for some parents any economic impediments to school choice. Goldhaber found mixed evidence to suggest that, although private school students outscored their public school counterparts on the assessments studied, the former students started from a higher baseline. The data also indicated that the parents of private school students tended to be better educated and, having selected and paid for private schools, could be deemed to have already demonstrated an above-average interest in their child's education. Therefore, these findings did not provide clear evidence that the private schools in the study were indeed more efficient than the public schools in and of themselves. As for parents' ability to distinguish a good quality school based on estimated achievement levels, the study concluded that parents were more likely to send their children to a private school, as estimated private sector achievement exceeds that of the public sector and that results in a widening of the achievement gap. The study also found that, all things being equal, parents favored schools that have a higher proportion of white students who tended also to come from upper income families.
Greene (2002), using what he referred to as the Education Freedom Index (EFI), a measure of government-regulated or subsidized school choices, for all of the United States, studied the relationship between the EFI and academic student achievement. His study found a positive correlation between academic freedom and student achievement. Based on this study, Hawaii, having the lowest Education Freedom Index, would be most like Bermuda with only one school district, where school choice is restricted to private schools, public schools and home schools. Hawaii does, however, have charter schools within its public system, unlike Bermuda. The study found that "where families have more options in the education of their children, the average student tends to demonstrate higher levels of academic achievement" (p. 9).

Maddeus (1991), in his paper Should Governments Finance Student Attendance in Private Schools?: A Research Opportunity, discusses the work of Chubb and Moe (1990); and Coleman, Hoffer and Kilmore (1982), who sought to demonstrate through their research that academic achievement was higher in private schools than in public schools and who supported the idea that public funds should be diverted to allow for such
choice and to facilitate education reform. These researchers supported the notion that public education in the U.S., which was "controlled by bureaucrats and political decision-makers" needed to be replaced by a market system which would be responsive to parents and students. These school-choice advocates also believe that a school-choice environment will create competition among schools that will result in forcing underperforming schools to get better, and will empower parents, thereby making them more participatory in their children's education (Goldhaber, 1997; Greene, 2002; Hoxby, 2004; West & Peterson, 2006).

Opponents of school choice, however, postulate that many parents and students will not be able to distinguish schools on the basis of quality, and that they would be subject to doing whatever schools deem necessary in order to recruit them. Bastian (1990) Evans (1990), and Moore and Davenport (1989) believed that such school choice will only make the situation of educational underperformance worse, as the children of better-educated parents would be more equipped to take advantage of choice opportunities than their less-informed counterparts, thereby pulling them away
from certain schools toward others. It would also encourage more formal screening and sorting on the part of the more desired schools to improve their achievement and create dumping grounds of public schools.

Howell (2006) looks at the phenomenon of public-and private-school choice initiatives and the impact on enrollment in private schools. He found the participation rates disappointing, and traced this in his study to parents' knowledge of what they were eligible for under the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act (2002) and what they knew of their own child's school performance. Howell surveyed 1000 public school parents in Massachusetts' ten largest school districts, and his findings revealed that, while parents of children in lower-performing schools knew more about NCLB Act and its various provisions for school choice than did parents of students in higher performing schools, they were not better informed about their child's school performance rating. This disparity extended to other knowledge areas about schools, such as the name of the principal and the school size. Hess & Finn (2004) also found that low participation rates in school-choice initiatives could
be attributed to the efforts of certain education officials and schools themselves who make it difficult for children to leave their district and tend to be less than forthright about their schools' yearly academic progress data.

Gamoran (1996) conducted a study to test his hypothesis that magnet schools show higher student achievement than do comprehensive public schools because they offer a more focused mission and better opportunities to develop "social capital" in students. He found, when comparing magnet school achievement to that of Catholic, secular, private, and comprehensive public schools, that magnet schools and the other private schools did achieve higher scores on the national assessment test, but when he examined the data more closely he found that this had more to do with the types of students and families attending these schools than with any "value added" by the school itself.

School Choice Internationally.
A study of school choice under Yutori Reform (2002) in Japan conducted by Sasaoka (2005) for a dissertation, looked at the attitudes and behaviors of private school parents and school choice. This study came about at a time when there was much concern that the reform efforts of Yutori, which saw reductions in the required public school curriculum and class time, would result in an increase in affluent families' choosing private schools for their children and thereby exacerbate disparities in the school system. The study examined private school parents' spending behaviors and the factors influencing their attitudes and behaviors related to spending on private education. The researcher found that parents who felt they had greater freedom of choice under the education reform spent less on education than did those who felt they had less freedom of choice; whereas parents who believed the reform to be less efficient, equitable and socially cohesive, spent more to supplement their child's public education.

Jefferson (1986) looked at the consequences of public support for private schools and observed that with societal tolerance for inequities in income and social privilege; it is not surprising that society
also tolerates a dual system of private and public schools. The subsequent shift of public funds to the private sector would affect the dollars available per student in the public sector as well as staffing and programming. Canada and Australia were the context for this study. In Canada, where private schools have been the recipients of public funding support alongside public schools, there has been since the mid 1970's a significant decline in overall school enrollment and an enrollment shift has been experienced from public to private schools. Staffing in public schools in Canada has been dropping, while in the private schools it has been on the rise. Australia, on the other hand, has seen a slight increase in overall school enrollment over the same period and public schools have experienced a slight decrease in enrollment of less than 1%. Enrollment in the private sector did increase and represents about 25% of the total number of students in the school system. Staffing complements have risen steadily in Australia, in contrast to Canada, in both the private and public sectors.

Pollard (1989) cautioned that, before lunging into educational choice programs, it was important to
think about the outcomes we desire, as in our effort to improve education we need to think about what that means for improving schools. She posited that choice programs across the U.S. have been found to have had both positive and negative impacts which have not been studied experimentally to determine which models work best in which contexts. She recommended that the local context and organizational traits of schools are critical factors to consider when looking at school choice models for implementation.

Factors Influencing Parental School Choice.

Wilson (1992) investigated the factors that influence parents' choice of schools for their children in a U.S. Midwestern suburban school district, and found that parents responded positively with respect to choice in the school district but showed little propensity for transferring students outside of the district. The data relating to factors influencing choice decisions varied, depending on the parent grouping and their informational needs.

Denessen et al (2001) examined some of the research done by others on the reasons for school choice, and then looked at systemic influences on
parental choice in the Netherlands and in Finland. In the Netherlands school choice is "totally free." In fact, the law there prohibits any school from operating outside of the publicly funded system. Dutch parents are responsible for choosing a school for their child and no school assignments are made. In Finland, however, freedom of choice is limited, with students going, for the most part, to assigned neighborhood schools. The exceptions seem to occur with professional middle-class parents who are more actively involved in choosing their child's school and do not place as much of a priority on proximity as do the majority of Finnish parents. Parents from both countries seemed to place a higher priority on the social education of their child, with least importance on achievement and religious values. It was also found that the higher the social class, the more emphasis was placed on the social education of children, and therefore a reason for school choice. Cultural differences seem to play an important role in determining parents' responses to school choice, and such information as school exam results seems to be of minimal importance in their decision making. Ethnic segregation is of concern in the Netherlands because
of free school choice, and local authorities are seeking ways to counteract ethnic segregation there.

Cream skimming, Social Divisiveness and School Choice

Ladd (2003) takes issue with several of the conclusions which Hoxby (2003) arrived at in her research as it relates to school choice benefits and implications. In particular, in discussing her research findings on school choice in New Zealand and charter schools in the U.S., she offers some skepticism as to the relative benefits of school choice in a competitive market environment for students. Ladd’s skepticism was based on her assertion that there is simply not enough evidence to support that conclusion, and she makes a different interpretation of Hoxby’s data. Ladd posits that parental choices are heavily influenced by a schools’ student composition, thus making money an inappropriate way to grant access to popular schools. She makes the point that in a competitive market, failing or underperforming organizations will go out of business or close unless they improve; this outcome in education presupposes that such an occurrence can happen only if there is somewhere else for those students to go. She questions whether those more successful schools would then be willing to take students
who might well be more costly to educate. In New Zealand, this was not observed to occur with successful urban schools. Socioeconomic characteristics and ethnicity are given as reasons for parental choices in many studies around the world, and Ladd suggests that the positive relationships associated with socioeconomic status and achievement have more to do with what happens at home than what happens at school. But she concedes that there are other spillover factors for such schools that could well impact their outcomes with students, such as peer effect, teacher recruitment and hierarchical structures. These assertions all then beg the question of how such school-choice programs will ultimately benefit the less-advantaged students.

Edwards and Whitty (1994) discuss some of the implications of adopting or rejecting policies and initiatives from other jurisdictions relating to school choice out-of-hand. They raise concerns about the possibilities that choice programs may indeed produce "greater social segregation and more unequal educational opportunity". This is the way in which they see school choice being implemented in the U.K., an approach they believe which has led to a "hierarchy of types of school sharply stratified in status and funding", resulting in a
severe reduction in choice for those very parents such programs are meant to empower.

Yancey et al (1994) researched the racial and socioeconomic segregation of public schools in Philadelphia and Houston. The factors explaining this situation and its impact on student achievement were examined. The study found that the proportion of lower-income and minority (African-American and Latino) students attending these city schools was higher than their representative proportion in the school age general population. This leads to their conclusion that "higher income and white students attend private schools at higher rates." Magnet schools, they claim, have introduced another tier in the public school system which has served to create more racially integrated schools' pulling in white students who might otherwise have attended private school. The researchers also looked at the impact of racial and socioeconomic segregation on school success. They did this within the context of two sets of school characteristics - external parameters (national, state and educational policies) and the internal characteristics of schools. They found that schools with higher proportions of minority students, students receiving free or reduced price lunches with higher student turnover/mobility rates, had lower achievement test scores.
Higher attendance rates correlated positively with test scores in Philadelphia but not in Houston. They concluded that "if the choice must be made between reducing racial segregation or economic segregation, the latter is more important for academic achievement" (p. 27).

Gorard (2001) considered the long-term impact of school choice in the United Kingdom where a national program of parental choice of schools was implemented. The Education Reform Act of 1988 gave families the right to select any school for their child, even one outside of their local education authority. The per capita student funding essentially made this a national "voucher scheme" for all. The three main advantages which were put forward in support of this school-choice model were a) the value of choice for its own sake, b) equity of access to all, and c) that market conditions and competition will improve educational standards. The researcher found, using official statistical databases and school records over a 10 year period from 1989-1999, that as it relates to socioeconomic stratification in the country, this declined between 1989 and 1996 to 30% but has risen again to 32% in 1999. He concludes that the choice reform has had little impact on this domain. As for school outcomes, as measured by the General Certificate of Secondary Education
(G.C.S.E.) on an annual basis, an increase has been observed in the percentage of students obtaining five good passes ("C") at G.C.S.E. year on year since the introduction of school-choice reform. The fact that many other changes were also introduced around the same time makes it impossible to attribute this outcome to the choice reform. The findings linking student background; i.e., poverty levels and achievement; continue to show a negative correlation. Overall, however, this researcher concludes, as have others, that market reforms are working for lower socioeconomic groups and schools outcomes are slowly improving.

Figlio and Stone (2001) investigated how school and community characteristics relate to student and family characteristics to determine enrollment patterns in public and private schools. They looked at how public policy could improve the retention of students in public schools and stem the "hemorrhaging" to private schools. The study looked at three variables which researchers believed could be impacted by public policy: public school concentration, pupil/teacher ratios and crime rates. They found that the concentration of public schools in a given area and the relationship to private school selection were positive ones. Similarly, with pupil/teacher ratios, as these
ratios increase in public schools, so private school choices also increase. The impact of crime rates in communities was also studied to determine if there was any relationship to private school "cream skimming". It was found that communities which control crime better are more likely to retain students in public schools.

Home Schooling as a Choice

Parents who choose home schooling have done so for a myriad of reasons. The movement over the past several decades towards home schooling as a school choice has indeed grown considerably, making it a school choice option which must be included in this review. The 2003 Statistical Analysis Report on Home Schooling in the United States, speaks to this prevalence and describes the characteristics of home-schoolers and their parents as well as their reasons for selecting home education for their children. The data show a 29% increase in the number of children being home-schooled in 2003 since 1999. Additionally, the overall percentage of children being home-schooled in the U.S. rose from 1.7% in 1999 to 2.2% in 2003. When asked about the main reasons for choosing home-schooling, parents pointed to concerns about the existing school environments due to drugs, violence, and negative
peer pressure and their desire to provide religious or moral instruction. In the case of family characteristics and the prevalence of home schooling, the data indicated that white students had higher rates than blacks or Hispanics, larger families over single child families participated, and more two-parent families were represented.

Parents' reasons for choosing home schooling, as determined by the 1999 Parent Survey, fell into 16 categories. The three reasons most cited were: a) to give children a better education, b) religious reasons, and c) removal from poor learning environment at school (Bielick, Chandler, and Broughman 2001). Other reasons given for home schooling in the 2003 survey included the fact that the child might have had special needs, and home schooling would allow them more control over learning.

A more critical view of home schooling by Chris Lubienski (2003) looks at the phenomenon from the perspective of some of the assumptions which lead to this particular choice. In particular, he examines the issue as it relates to the rights and responsibilities of parents to educate their children. He describes what is happening in many parts of the world with more individualized control of such parental decisions and a move away from institutions
like public education. He further suggests that such a choice also marks a rejection of "interference from and accountability to any external authority", a desire for control, and a withdrawal from institutions of mass schooling and collective effort. Lubienski raises questions about the effectiveness of home schooling in the areas of socialization and educational attainment. He suggests that home schooling may fall short in the case of socialization by limiting children's exposure to diverse socializing experiences, and in the case of academic achievement there is no clear evidence that there is a causal relationship between doing well academically and home schooling. In fact, there is some evidence to suggest that home-schoolers have other characteristics which have been found to be associated with academic success, which complicates the matter. There has been little research done on home schooling, but studies to determine how parent education levels correlate to the academic achievement of home-schoolers (Havens, 1991) found only weak to moderate relationships. However, because it is difficult to ascertain just exactly how many parents home school, for what reasons, in what ways, and with what outcomes (Lubienski 2003), it is also difficult to determine how this particular school choice compares in its effectiveness.
to other school choice options. Eric Isenberg (2007) concludes from his study that the likelihood of home schooling options increase as the quality of public school education declines and that this trend will reverse should the quality of public education improve.

**Parent Decision Making & Decision-Making Models**

Teske, Schneider, Buckley and Clark (2000) research findings suggested that parents' stated preferences for school choices are often not congruent with their observed behavioral choices. These researchers have found instead more correlation between parental ethnic background and social class and their actual choice of schools. This is supported, for example, by Carnoy (2002) who said that parents can only choose schools using economic and social definitions of quality, since they know very little about the other components impacting school quality, such as organizational structure and the quality of the staff. Howell (2006) reports from his research that the vast majority of parents studied did not know that their child was attending a low-performing school, but that these same parents in the main wanted educational alternatives for their children, particularly the private school option.
Shaffer and Lichtenberg (1987) in their study which compared two decision-making models in career decision-making with a "model-free" choice situation, to assess the quality of choice, the nature of the choices made, and what they referred to as the "post-decisional satisfaction" on the part of the chooser. These models were the Expected Utility Model and the Elimination by Aspects Model. The former model of Expected Utility proved in their findings to result in the best quality decisions for participants. Proponents of this model look for ways that would appeal to the rational decision-maker and bring about maximum gain. As a decision-making theory, however, this expected utility model has come into question, since efforts to validate this theory through empirical research have been challenged. The feasibility of exploring all possible potential outcomes and options to arrive at the ideal choice is deemed to be beyond the scope of human resources and mental capabilities. On the other hand, proponents of the Elimination by Aspects model believe that decision-makers look for satisfaction, rather than maximization for their decisions, and so tend to successively eliminate choices that do not fit the particular aspect they are concerned about, until they are left with one that is satisfactory. The findings of this study revealed
differences based on the gender of the subjects, with women
farthing better with the quality of their choice after using
the sequential elimination model over the model free
situation, while men showed no difference when using the
two. Although this may have been due to other factors such
as gender-biased career perceptions and perceptions of
access. In essence, the Expected Utility Model is still
considered to be the standard model of decision-making
theory. According to Hoy and Miskel, (1991) the
traditional decision-making process has 5 basic steps.
These steps are outlined in Table 1 below.

Table 1

Traditional Decision Making Model

This model is considered to be a rational one and relies
heavily on what can be described as objective data. This
characteristic, however, can make the use of this model problematic when objective data may not be available to the decision maker or even sought after. It must also be noted that not all decisions can be considered to be purely rational ones and so may not lend themselves to this traditional decision-making model. In summary, although there are favored decision-making theories such as the expected utility theory of decision-making, it is clear from the literature that decision-making takes many forms, depend on such varied characteristics as information in hand about options, predictability of possible outcomes, degree of conflict, time frame, emotional involvement, etc. The decision-making process may be just as varied.

The research of Bruce Arai (2000) in Ontario and British Columbia, Canada, into the reasons for home schooling indicates that Canadian parents have very different reasons for choosing home schooling than do their American counterparts. Aurini and Davis (2005) also refer to the increase in home schooling as a legitimate parental choice and form of private education. As is the case in the U.S., the research in Canada is limited, but the numbers of parents choosing home schooling is growing also.
Arai cites studies of parents who, having rejected the school's curriculum or the institutionalized nature of public schooling, with their "ideologues" and "pedagogues", had diverse reasons for doing so. Some parents sought religious congruence in the curriculum; others sought more rigor, more positive socialization, family unity, alternative lifestyles and values, while still others simply sought to exercise their God-given right to educate their own children as they wished (Ray 2001).

Over the past thirty years, the Bermuda Public School System has come under public scrutiny and criticism and has fallen into disfavor. Educators and other major stakeholders have, for a myriad of reasons, taken to the streets to march on Parliament, at various times, to protest prospective changes and to demonstrate their concerns and perspectives on many of the issues which have plagued the public educational landscape in Bermuda (The Royal Gazette, November 18, 2006). Policy makers of both political parties, the Progressive Labor Party and the United Bermuda Party, have weighed in on the issues over the years and many Government Cabinet Ministers have ended their political careers while holding the Education portfolio. A number of government interventions have been implemented; such as, a restructuring of the school system
from two tiers to three, reducing class sizes in the first
3 years of primary school to 15 students, and 3 separate
curriculum reviews - all in an effort to improve the
outcomes of public schools and to increase public
satisfaction. However, public high school graduation rates
have continued to be unsatisfactory (The Royal Gazette,
January 25, 26, 2007). Results on the norm-referenced
Terra Nova assessment which has been used for the past
several years to evaluate the public school system have
been poor, and an independent education review conducted
last year (Hopkins Report 2007) described the public school
system as on "the verge of meltdown". If public confidence
in public education in Bermuda is to be restored and the
flight from Public Schools arrested, we must gain a better
understanding of what parents are looking for in their
schools, how and upon what basis they are making school
selections so that the public school system can better meet
public needs and expectations.

This research study addresses the questions of how
parents make their decisions when selecting schools for
their children, what influences these decisions, and why
they make the decisions they do. In particular, the
influence of social networking on parent school decision
making has been examined.
Social Networking

Social Network Theory refers to a set of relationships or contacts which can be made between and among a set of objects (people) which are characterized by a description of the relationship. Such relationships can be directional, direct or intermediate, and fall into three categories.

Egocentric networks have the individual at the center and usually refer to good friends or family members. Sociocentric networks refer to networks that fit within a specific context. These networks refer to a group of people who are connected to one another because of where they happen to be together. For example, this might refer to students in a school or classroom, or workers in an organization. Open system networks, on the other hand, are networks without clear boundaries. There are several propositions associated with social network theory put forward by Charles Kadushin, 2004. The following two propositions offer interesting ideas for this research study in the Bermuda context.

Proposition 1:
Refers to Propinquity which says that nodes are more likely to be connected if they are geographically near each other or are in the same place at the same time.

Proposition 2:
Refers to Homophily as having one or more common social attributes and says the greater the common social attributes the greater the likelihood of connections and vice versa.

Research conducted by S.B. Sheldon (2002) found that the social networks of parents predicted their involvement in education and that different types of networks predicted different types of parental involvement. Other research of social networks and the social support they provide is also prevalent and in most cases centers around how social networks support mental and physical health issues. For example, a longitudinal study conducted to examine the determinants of young women's pregnancy resolution choices found that "significant others play an important role in the young women's ...decision making..." (Namerow, Kalmuss & Cushman, 1993). In particular, the study confirms that such primary network members as mothers and boyfriends are the most influential in this decision-making. In the case of mothers, the influence led to choosing adoption, whereas
strong influence from the boyfriend led to not choosing adoption. In two other studies (Vogel, 2007; Wade, 2007) that looked at certain social network factors that might influence one's decision to seek psychological help, researchers found that participants reported that they had been urged to seek help primarily by close family members and friends, with only a small percentage saying it was doctors. The findings suggest that the influence of those who are close to an individual and a part of a primary network was significant in this decision-making situation. How social networks influence decision-making around school selection, in a limited-choice environment like Bermuda, is the focus of this study.
CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Participants

This qualitative research study involved a purposeful sample of 19 parents of students who are currently attending a private school in the Bermuda school system. This sample was derived from the Chancery Student Management System (S.M.S.) database, which is kept by the Bermuda Department of Education to manage and track the movement of students into and out of the public school system. Permission to access this data was sought and approved by the Permanent Secretary of Education and yielded the following population of parents and students who met the researcher's criteria for the study.

There were a total of N=80 Primary 6 (P6) students captured by the S.M.S. database who had moved from public to private school or from private to public schools in September 2008. The ratio was as follows:

75 students moved from primary public schools to private schools; 5 students moved from private to public schools (3 of 5 private schools were tutorial sites or home schools).
The schools represented in this population included:

6/7 - Private or independent schools

17/18 - Public Primary Schools

3/5 - Public Middle Schools

2/17 - tutorial sites or home schools.

**TABLE 2**

Private Schools selected by Parent Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PRIVATE SCHOOL</th>
<th>PRIVATE CODE</th>
<th>TYPE</th>
<th># OF PARENTS IN POPULATION</th>
<th># OF SAMPLE SELECTING SCHOOL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>SECULAR</td>
<td>CO-ED</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>SECULAR</td>
<td>CO-ED</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>PAROCHIAL</td>
<td>CO-ED</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Characteristics of 7 Private Schools:

The 7 private schools in Bermuda can be characterized as follows:

(a) 1 single-gender (female) school with K-12 and IB postsecondary curriculum based on the U.K. National Curriculum.

(b) 3 parochial co-educational school with K-12 curriculum, one based on Canadian curriculum- and two with U.S. curriculum.

(c) 2 secular coeducational schools with K-12 curriculum based on the U.K. National curriculum, one with an A.P. postsecondary program and the other offering IB as a postsecondary program.

(d) 1 coeducational school K-12 with a specific educational philosophy and curriculum (Montessori).

(e) 4 of 7 private schools are located in the central parish of the island within 1 mile of each other. The remaining 3 private schools are approximately 5 miles east or west of the other 4 schools.

Characteristics of 17 Public Schools with which the parents in the sample were associated:
(a) Each of the public schools from which parents were selected for the study is coeducational and offers the Bermuda curriculum from P1-P6 (K-5).

(b) Each of the public schools is located in one of the 9 parishes across the island.

(c) Two of the 17 primary schools are aided schools and the remainder is maintained schools.

(d) All 17 public primary schools, from which the students came, follow Bermuda’s National curriculum (K-5) which has been developed based on international standards.

(e) Students completing primary school programs are expected to move through a feeder system on to one of the 5 neighborhood public middle schools and then on to one of the island’s 2 public senior schools where they are expected to matriculate after four years with a Bermuda Senior School (B.S.C.) Certificate.

The 2 private home schools or tutorial sites in the population can be characterized as follows:

(a) Co-educational with population under 20 students located in the central parish.
(b) The parent simply characterized her child as having been home-schooled.

The Population

The population of 80 parents met the researcher’s criteria, which required that:

(a) Parents had made a decision to move their child from public to private school or from public to private school for the 2008-9 school year.

(b) Parents had children who were moving from P6 (grade 5) to middle school M1 (grade 6) for the 08-09.

Participants for the study were selected from this particular population with the following exceptions:

(a) Parents with students in primary schools within the researcher’s feeder school zone were excluded from the study. Nine parents fell into this category.

(b) Parents who were known to the researcher were excluded. Two parents fell into this category.

(c) Parents who did not respond after three separate contacts by the researcher to participate were not pursued further. Two parents fell into that category.
(d) Parents who were approached and expressed an unwillingness to participate were excluded from the sample. Four parents fell into this category.

(e) Parents with contact information in the database which was no longer viable were also excluded from the sample. Eight parents fell into this category.

(f) Parents who did not respond to the initial phone contact and message left were excluded from the study. Ten parents fell into this category.

**Purposeful Sample**

The researcher conducted 1-on-1 interviews with the purposeful sample of 19 parents during February and March 2009. One parent, who had been approached initially by the interviewer, responded by email in mid-April and was not included in the sample. She did express her thoughts on the subject of her school decision-making and thereby declined an interview. This input was not included in the data analysis. Four of the parent participants also participated in a two-hour focus group conducted by the researcher after their 1-on-1 interviews had been completed.
The researcher made every effort to ensure that the sample used in the study was a diverse and representative one in order to improve the validity of the findings (Patton 2002). Of the 80 parents in the population, 51 were contacted at least once (62%). Of that number, 20 parent contacts (40%) resulted in positive responses and subsequently an interview, with the exception of one parent who responded positively but late and by email only.

Parents were solicited to participate in the study if they met the following additional criteria:

(a) Parents' selection of a school allowed for the greatest possible representation of the island's various private and public schools as possible.

(b) Parents had to agree to participate in the study and sign an informed consent.

(c) Male and female parents were included where possible.

(d) Bermudian and non-Bermudian parents were also included where possible.

(e) Parents with both male and female children were included as well.

Data Collection
The researcher sought and gained permission from the Bermuda Ministry of Education to conduct this study and to have access to the Ministry's Student Management System database. One of the functions of this database is to track the movement of students into and out of the public school system. This data yielded a total 80 of parents who met the researcher's criteria of

a) Having made the choice to move their child from public to private school or vice verse for the 2008-9 school year.

b) Having a child who had completed P6 (grade 5) and was moving on to M1 (grade 6 or year 7).

From this population, 19 parent participants were interviewed and data collected.

Parents were contacted by the researcher initially by telephone and, once introductions were made, the purpose for the call was explained. Parents were asked if they would be willing to receive from the researcher a letter of solicitation for the study, the interview questions and the informed consent form for their perusal. As many as two follow-up contacts by email or telephone were made to some parents and appointments arranged for the interviews. The majority of parents were very receptive to the idea of participating in the study at the outset, and readily
agreed to be interviewed so that they could share their experiences and views on the subject of school decision making.

Parent participants were asked to sign the informed consent forms when they arrived for their interview, as well as to complete the data form developed by the researcher to capture demographic data.

The solicitation letter requesting parent participation specified that participation in the study would involve approximately one hour in a one-on-one interview with the researcher, and possibly another hour if they chose to join the focus group experience with up to 6 other parents. The time frame for the interviews and the focus group was from mid-February and mid-March 2009. This phase involved a little more than a 2-hour commitment for parent participants, if they chose to participate in both the one-on-one interview and the focus group.

In this study, the use of the term parent, as the unit of analysis, refers to the custodial adult of the student. This is the parent or guardian who assumes primary responsibility for the child’s schooling, has completed the child’s school registration form resulting in contact data in the Ministry’s database, and who ultimately responded to the researcher’s invitation to participate.
Instruments:

(a) Semistructured interviews of parents were conducted from mid February to mid-March, using open-ended questions designed by the researcher to collect data to address the research questions posed.

(b) These interviews were conducted by the researcher and recorded using two recording devices. Some notes were also taken during the interviews.

(c) The interview questions were standardized across all interviews and, only when deemed necessary to clarify data response, were probing or follow-up questions added. The one-on-one interview was designed with 6-8 open-ended questions.

(d) The interview questions consisted of behavior/experience questions, opinion/values questions, and feeling/information questions.

1-on-1 Interview questions

IQ1. When you were considering where to send your child to school, what characteristics were you looking for in a school?

IQ2. Before you made the choice of your child's school, what types of information did you seek to help you make your decision?

IQ3. When you were thinking about a school selection for your child, how did go about finding the information you wanted about the school?
IQ4. What experiences, observations or perceptions do you believe have influenced your thinking when selecting a desirable school for your child?

IQ5. When you were choosing your child's school, what kinds of factors about public and private schools did you consider before making your decision?

IQ6. When you reflect on the selection of your child's school, what would you say were some of the greatest influences on your decision making?

**Focus group questions**

FQ1. What do you think most parents are looking for when choosing a school for their child?

FQ2. How would you describe the quality of education provided by Bermuda's school system?

FQ3. In your opinion, where do you think most parents in Bermuda get their information about schools?

FQ4. If you could change anything about Bermuda’s School System, what would it be and why?

FQ5. When it comes to the selection of schools in Bermuda, what would you say influences parents' decision-making

   a) the most?
   b) the least?

Each interview began with a few pleasantries to put the parent at ease, and these were followed by a reiteration of the purpose of the study and a thank you for agreeing to participate. The conditions of the study, such as, its voluntary nature, confidentiality and anonymity as
they relate to the handling of interview data; and the reporting were underscored once again. Informed-consent forms were signed. Participant demographic information was collected at the end of the interview using a brief demographic questionnaire which each participant was asked to complete.

*Demographic Questionnaire:*

**IQ7. Demographic Data:**

a) Age range: _____ under 30 _____ 30-49 _____ 50+

b) Relationship: ___ mother ___ father ___ grandparent ___ other

c) Marital Status: ___ married ___ divorced/separated ___ single

d) Racial origin: _____ white _____ black _____ mixed ___ other

e) Family size: ___ 1 child ___ 2 children ___ 3 or more

f) Education level: ___ < H. S. ___ = H. S. ___ > H. ___ college

g) Education History: ___ public school ___ private school

h) Birth order of child: ___ eldest ___ youngest ___ only ___ other

ADDRESS DATA: PARISH: ______________ POSTAL CODE: ________
DEMOGRAPHICS OF SAMPLE

Figure 2

Number of Parents By Age

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Range</th>
<th>Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>20 - 30</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>30 - 49</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50+</td>
<td>2</td>
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</table>

Figure 3

Number of Participants by Relationship to Child

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Relationship</th>
<th>Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<tr>
<td>Mother</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grandparent</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Number of Parents by Marital Status

- Married
- Divorced/Separated
- Single

Figure 4

Number of Parents by Racial Origin

- White
- Black
- Mixed
- Other

Figure 5
Number of Parents by Family size

![Chart showing the number of parents by family size.]

Figure 6

Number of Parents by Education History

![Chart showing the number of parents by education history.]

Figure 7
Number of Parents by Education Level

![Bar chart showing number of parents by education level.](chart)

Figure 8

Number of Parents by Child's Birth Order

![Bar chart showing number of parents by birth order.](chart)

Figure 9

Number of Parents by Parish

![Bar chart showing number of parents by parish.](chart)

Figure 10
Transcriptions of recorded interviews were made to ensure that all information shared was captured and readied for data analysis later on. All interviews were arranged at times convenient for the parents and held in most cases at the researcher's school in a private office. The interviews took place at varying times of the day and week, as determined in consultation with the parent. In two instances, the researcher travelled to the parent's place of business and in another to the parent's home to conduct the interview.

The focus group, involving four parents, was conducted on a Saturday afternoon and the questions were designed to encourage the parents to discuss their views on issues relating to decision-making about school choice in Bermuda. This focus group was conducted in late March 2009. At the outset, the first nine parents interviewed agreed to participate in the focus group when it could be arranged, however, once the date was set, only 7 of the 10 parents could confirm attendance; and, in the end, only four parents actually attended. The session was recorded and the researcher facilitated the discussion. Notes were also taken during this discussion. The focus group was conducted in a private and neutral location selected by the
researcher and agreed upon by the participants. This session was held in the conference room at the researcher's school. An interview question guide consisting of 5 open-ended questions were developed by the researcher and used for the focus group. Focus group participants were coded for identification purposes and were linked back to their demographic data. Focus group data were transcribed in preparation for data analysis.

Statistical data from the Bermuda Government Census Report 2000 and the 2008 Bermuda Government Budget Report data were reviewed, and include

(a) Data pertaining to public and private school enrollment demographics,

(b) Data linking socio-economic and population residential statistics.

(c) Data was reviewed on the private sector schools relating to enrolment trends from public schools, special programming, fee structures, and population demographics.

(d) Data was examined from the Ministry of Education's Research, Measurement and Evaluation Department, pertaining to public school enrolment trends, middle school
populations and mobility trends to and from private schools.

**Timetable for the study**

(a) Permission to conduct study and access M.O.E.D. Student Management Database received.  
Nov. 2008

(b) IRB Approval received.  
Jan. 2009

(c) Phone and email contact followed by solicitation letters and Informed consent forms to Parents.  
Feb. 2009

(d) Volunteer Parent sample selected.  
Feb-Mar. 2009

(e) 1-on-1 (60 min.) 19 parent interviews were conducted.  
Feb.-Mar. 2009

(f) Focus group with 4 parents was conducted.  
Mar. 2009

(g) Data transcription and analysis.  
Mar. - May. 2009
Table 3

Subsidiary Research Questions, Data Sources and Techniques

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Evaluation Questions</th>
<th>Data Sources</th>
<th>Data Collection Techniques</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. How do social networks shape a parent’s definition of desirability in a school?</td>
<td>Parents</td>
<td>Interviews</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. How do social networks influence the intrinsic and extrinsic motivators that parents use when selecting a school for their child?</td>
<td>Parents</td>
<td>Interviews, Focus Group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. What kinds of social networks do Bermuda parents utilize for decision making purposes?</td>
<td>Parents</td>
<td>Interviews, Focus Group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. To what extent are the kinds of social networks used by parents related to their socio-economic backgrounds?</td>
<td>Parents</td>
<td>Interviews, Focus Group, Document review</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The research methodology employed for this qualitative study is an applied research model. This model allowed the researcher to conduct an inductive analysis and creative synthesis of the data collected for the purpose of better understanding what is happening in this particular educational environment and to address the research questions posed. The design of this case study is descriptive and sought to explain how Bermuda parents' schools choice decisions are influenced by their social networks. The data collection and some analysis occurred somewhat concurrently as the researcher began to hear certain recurring, dominant themes as the interviews progressed. Categories seemed to emerge and could be identified. Once the data was collected, these categories were coded and subsequently interpreted in the context of content thematic analysis, and are outlined in the findings and conclusions of the study (Patton, 2002).

The overarching research question addressed in this study is:

What role do social networks play in parental decisions about school choice?

The subsidiary research questions are as follows:

(a) How do social networks shape parents' definitions of "desirability" in a school?
(b) How do social networks influence the intrinsic and extrinsic motivators that parents use when selecting a school for their child?

(c) What kinds of social networks do Bermuda parents utilize for decision-making purposes?

(c) To what extent are the kinds of social networks used by parents related to their socioeconomic backgrounds.

The interview questions (IQ and FQ) developed for this study are linked to the research questions as outlined below for the purposes of demonstrating validity and reliability.

(a) How do social networks shape parents’ definitions of “desirability” in a school? (IQ 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6) (FQ 1, 3, 5)

(b) How do social networks influence the intrinsic and extrinsic motivators that parents use when selecting a school for their child? (IQ 1, 3, 4, 5, 6) (FQ 1, 3, 5)

(c) What kinds of social networks do Bermuda parents utilize for decision-making purposes? (IQ 1, 2, 4, 6) (FQ 1, 3, 5)

(d) To what extent are the kinds of social networks used by parents related to their socio-economic backgrounds? (IQ 1, 2, 5, 7) (FQ 1, 2, 4)

The focus group participants were coded so that demographic data can be matched with their responses in both the focus group and the one-on-one interview again to establish internal validity. Participants in the one-on-
one sessions and the group session were asked a question which was very similar in both sessions. The questions are IQ5 and FQ 2. This helped to provide some insight into the context of these particular responses as comparisons can be made to determine consistency and validity.

The researcher kept a journal during the research experience, which proved very helpful in documenting and describing the perspectives brought to the study as a result of the researcher’s own personal and professional experiences and biases. These reflections have been included in this report.

Content thematic analysis of the data involved an immersion in the data to discover any important patterns, themes or interrelationships. Coding was done of specific themes so that interview and focus group responses could be carefully analyzed and reported upon with rich description and context. The findings of this study should be of interest to educators and policy makers alike and, once published, will be made available to interested parties.
CHAPTER IV

DATA ANALYSES

This qualitative research study was undertaken for the purpose of examining the influence of social networking on parental school choice in a limited-choice environment, such as that which exists on the island of Bermuda. The researcher conducted this study over a six-week period between mid February and the end of March 2009.

The purposeful sample for the study consisted of 19 parents, drawn from a population of 80 parents, who made the decision to move their children from public to private school, or vice versa, for the 2008-2009 school year. Of this number, 75 parents had chosen to leave public school for a private school and five had chosen to leave a private school for public. Two of the five parents who removed their children from private schools had their children in private home schools and, of the remaining three, two left parochial private schools and one a traditional private school. One limitation of the study is that not one of the parents who made the decision to move from private to public school could be included in the study. Three had to be excluded from the study because of their close
association with the researcher; one became ill, and the fifth declined participation.

The design of this qualitative research involved the collection of data from 19 one-on-one semistructured interviews and a focus group with 4 of the 19 parent volunteers. All 19 parent participants have children who had completed public school up to P6 (grade 5) and had transferred their child to private school for year 7 (grade 6) in September 2008. The 19 parent participants live in 8 of Bermuda's nine parishes, were made up of both males and females, were Bermudian or non-Bermudian, were black, white or mixed race, were married or single. The parents in the sample had a total of 10 girls and 9 boys for whom they had made this school choice. The private schools in Bermuda selected by the parents in the sample represented six of the seven traditional private schools in Bermuda. No home schools were represented in the sample.

The focus of the study was to examine the influence of social networks on parents' school choice decision-making. The overarching research question was:

What role do social networks play in parental decisions about school choice?

The subsidiary research questions served as the framework for data analysis and synthesis.
Social networking as a concept has been described as a set of relationships or interactions between and among individuals which have distinct characteristics, serve various purposes and have interesting consequences, both intended and unintended (Kadushin, 2004). In Bermuda, where the Milgram (1967) concept of "the small world" might be thought to have some relevance, the extent to which parents are influenced by their social networks when making school-choice decisions was of particular interest to this researcher.

The data collected in this qualitative research study were analyzed by a careful examination of the parents' interview responses, focus group responses, and demographic data.

One theoretical orientation which underpins this qualitative research study is that of constructivism. The idea to be pondered in this data analysis is "How have people in this setting constructed reality and meaning? What are their reported perceptions, truths, explanations, beliefs and attitudes?" (Patton, 2002).

Thematic content analysis of the data was carried out for each of the four subsidiary research questions posed.
Subsidiary Research Question 1:

*How do social networks shape parents' definitions of “desirability” in a school?*

**Parents and Social Networks**

It is important to note that all parent participants in the study reported seeking and receiving information, when making their school choice decision, from 3 main sources. They referred to a) talking with other people to get the benefit of their experiences, b) drawing on their own observations and experiences, or c) being influenced by media and school public relations efforts.

Information gleaned from other people emanated from members of parents' various social networks and was reported to be very influential in their decision-making and ultimate school selection. Parent participants reported seeking input from such social networks as family members (including their own child) and close friends; colleagues at work; fellow congregants; public and private school educators and other school personnel; and other parents whom they may not have known beforehand, but whom they believed could share their own school choice experiences and help them to decide. The data indicated that parents were almost unanimous in their use of one or more of the aforementioned social networks to help them
with their school choice decision-making. One parent put it this way:

We found that parents of these schools were a good resource; they could give their honest feedback...we did have conversations with that school, the school where she is currently now; what helped was the fact that the head of the school used to teach my husband so he was able to give us...and the head of the secondary department used to teach me, which was unbeknownst to me at the time but that also was able to calm some of our fears having conversations with them so that helped a lot...that made the decision that much easier for us in determining that she should go there (Parent 01, Feb’09).

Another parent described her process as follows:

We talked to um teachers, students, parents...parents to see what they had to say if they were happy with the school, the curriculum, were they happy with the way teachers dealt with their students and how things were addressed and we talked to students to see if they liked it form their perspective...we talked to varied principals of public primary, teachers of public primary, counselors in the schools because of my profession I see a lot of these people as patients so we have a lot of conversations over the years to say “How do you feel about this school?” (Parent 04, Feb ’09)

There was only one example in the data of a slightly different parent viewpoint regarding the value of social networks when selecting a school and this was expressed by the parent in this way.

This is Bermuda, so it is not very difficult, you have only got so many schools that you are going to choose from...you are going to have to go by the school standards and the reputation of the school and also by the behavioral patterns of the students...also the
academic results are issued every year so you can see how the school has done academically. ...the exam results...basically you read as much information as you can about the school and then you have to make a good judgment...the reputation of the school is easily collected...you know people in the education system, you know through the media and this is Bermuda ...it is not like we're living somewhere where schools are hundreds of miles away...it is quite easy to get information on a school ...you can attend school meetings...pick up booklets on a school...my wife and I are both professionals we like to look at things objectively so we know everyone's personal experience is completely different so that's not going to have any relevance on my son's education ...so you have to go with a more professional view...results and the standards that have been maintained by the schools (Parent 14, Mar '09).

It should be noted, however, that even in this case, the parent referred to knowing educators whom he consulted. This represents a type of social network which he clearly used as a source of information in his decision-making.

Parents' Definition of School Desirability

Parent respondents discussed their definition of school desirability by referring to a variety of school characteristics which were classified and coded through analysis into five categories: (a) environment, (b) student population, (c) programming, (d) structure, and (e) outcomes.
Analyses of responses to interview questions and focus group questions have provided the following summary data.

TABLE 4
School Desirability Characteristics Identified as Influential

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School Desirability Characteristics</th>
<th># of Parents in Sample</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>STUDENT POPULATION</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SCHOOL STRUCTURE</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LOCATION</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Sample size n=19.

18 parents in the sample indicated that they sought out or received information relating to school desirability through interactions with members of their various social networks. 10 of the 19 parents attributed their thinking about school desirability characteristics to their personal history, experiences and direct observations.
School environment.

The desirable school environment was characterized by parent respondents in the study in several ways and was categorized by the researcher based upon whom, within the school environment, is deemed to be responsible for that particular characteristic. The researcher identified and coded three such environmental categories which are attributed to a) student behaviors, b) teacher behaviors, and c) parent behaviors.

a) Student behaviors:

Parents referred to school characteristics as desirable and were related to student behaviors, student interactions, and student academic performance. These opinions or understandings of desirable student behaviors, interactions and academic performance were purported by parents to come from four major sources:

(a) Their direct observations of students in school while visiting or out and about in the neighborhood and the larger community. It is important to note here that in Bermuda all private and public school students can be
identified by their school uniform which is mandatory.

(b) Information gathered from other people in their various social networks.

(c) Personal experiences with other children or close family members.

(d) The media and school information.

In the first instance, some parents reported that in their efforts to decide on a school for their child, they visited the school as a part of an open house event and/or to sit in classes. Such visits afforded them an opportunity to observe the students at the school in classes, at play and moving about the school. One parent said,

Okay, it was a mixture of people with different backgrounds you know coming into that pot and some things that you did not want your kids to be exposed to, they are exposed to in a public school setting...I would definitely say children are more from similar backgrounds in the sense that they come from (pause) it’s (pause) I do not want to use the word well-to-do because that is not it. I do not know how to describe it. I wouldn’t say income because some people struggle to send their children to private school. I want to say come from a more caring, that’s not correct either, they have poor people who care about their children, it is just that they can’t do better (pause) come from a place a more stable home environment so to speak for most people that go to public. Private school you have a two-parent home; you have a father and a mother who are there to discipline to care type of thing because that’s what I have seen. Basically, why I took my child out of that
melting pot ...things he was exposed to ...was things I did not want him exposed to I said not like it is in private school; it might be there but it is not that noticeable[Parent 02, Feb '09].

Another parent commented on the impact that the learning environment she found had on her decision. She described a visit to public senior schools where she observed

Initially when my first daughter went to (public middle school) we had the opportunity to go and spend a day at (public senior schools). Spend your day with the teachers and a lot of the times the teachers would spend most of their time with behavior and there wasn't much learning taking place... Also you get a lot of children constantly talking to each other” (Parent 03, Feb. '09).

Several parents referred to the “social issues” that they believed plagued public schools, as being a major reason for selecting a school in the private sector. These kinds of concerns that relate to student behaviors at school and their impact on the school environment appear as a theme throughout the interview data. Parents consistently expressed dissatisfaction with how certain negative behaviors had disrupted their own child’s learning environment in public school or satisfaction, and that they had not observed this to happen in their child’s private school. Some acknowledged that if it did happen, they felt it was dealt with firmly and immediately.

One parent put it this way,
I have heard so many things in these public schools that go on; it's unbelievable, behavioral things. I know some of it is not all the school, some of it comes from the home, but I think that the fighting, and I'm not saying that doesn't happen, it's just dealt with differently in private schools um the sexual things that go on in schools that drugs that go on in schools the tormenting of some students that go on in schools I mean just stuff...I mean some of the stories I've heard were unbelievable about things that go on in schools...and from reliable sources ...people involved in this. They have been counselors, teachers um who would be involved in situations and in private schools usually when things happen they are addressed immediately and it doesn't get out of hand[Parent 4, Feb. '09].

Negative student behaviors identified by parents were name calling, teasing, bullying, drug involvement, fighting, getting beat up, negative peer pressure, sexual issues and increased violent behaviors. These behaviors were viewed as serious detriments to the desirable learning environment parents were seeking. Several expressed the view that exposure to such negative behaviors was an option they did not want for their children. One parent, in describing the school environment she wanted for her child, said,

Um, I mentioned the first problem with one of the schools having a large affluent number of students, you know I felt these were way above what my child was used to and we are not wealthy so I didn't feel that...he wasn't going to fit in well with that because he doesn't have this and when I have to say...you can't go to school with a laptop, I'm sorry or you can't have this, you know or you get one uniform instead of five...you know ...I mean so I felt that was going to be an issue...Um within the public system the public
schools that we have looked at we felt there were some significant discipline and I felt that that could potentially create a problem with them not being able to learn well or you know the environment is challenged, children who can't even sit still, challenge the teacher so she gets through half the material instead of all the material, you know, um in some of the schools there was a lot of bullying that goes on that I actually witnessed some of it and I did not want my children in that. One more thing that was a huge discussion for us, we do not bully you do not tease...you do not call names ...you don't do anything like that, it is just not appropriate ...so I wanted to make sure that whatever environment they were in, there was a peace element to it. We believe in peace and we believe in treating each other respectfully and we will sit quietly and learn and we are all going to do our work [Parent 08, Feb.'09].

Parents also identified several positive student behaviors which they had observed themselves when visiting schools or which they heard about from others. They described most private school students as being more focused, dedicated, academic, demonstrating school and self-pride in their deportment, attitudes, their speech and behavior. One parent described what she was looking for this way,

I just wanted diversity...even as far as geographically um and racially I just want to be honest, what is in the private school is, I always believed that not everyone in private school is bright...I told my daughter that, "don't think they are better than you", but I wanted her to try it...she would be with more children who may be a little more focused, well that's what I came across. When people realized they have to pay for something they just become a little more focused, they stress it more and focus on it a lot, focus on education ...and even when I went to school and sat in classes, the teachers they might have pulled
somebody and let me ask them how they relate, some of them carry themselves very well, like not all of them, and they speak well and they project themselves properly and that's what I find..." [Parent 10, Feb. '09].

Some parents noted that they could see that students "were happy there"... "...enjoyed being there" and that was important for them to observe. Another parent said, "It's the structure, I can't even explain it...when you walk into the school, it feels like family, everybody's looking out for everyone..." and this was the kind of environment that she deemed desirable for her child's school.

Parents, who learned from their own previous experiences with their child, with older offspring or other family members, were also found to share much of the same impressions about desirable student behaviors in private schools and undesirable behaviors in public school. Some, when making comparisons, having experienced both systems, described private schools as "more disciplined", "a little bit stricter", a quality which they felt their child needed to be successful in school. One parent put it this way,

I looked at um the children also that she would be moving on with, and there were a few of them I was quite happy that she went to (private school) and they went to middle school (public) I tried to emphasize that you are the company that you keep... and she ran around with just about everybody but the majority of her friends (in public school) were not on the honor roll, they didn't have many aspirations, they didn't
even aspire to the Bermuda College...we’ve already got our plans...Bermuda College...Howard University...some of her friends did not even see themselves going to the Bermuda College I tried to surround her with positive people[Parent 07, Feb.’09].

A few parents also cited the importance of making sure their child would "fit in" at the school selected. Here they referred to, not just the characteristics observed in student attitudes and behaviors relating to learning, but also those relating to social interactions such as differences in class, race and socioeconomic group and academic performance levels.

On parent reported,

I was not going to choose public school, concerned about the discipline factor we had a great experience at (public primary school) I would say, discipline was an issue in P6, the children’s behavior was unacceptable, children coming from different backgrounds...if you are prepared to spend all this money then you are prepared to put some discipline behind the money you are spending, prepared to make sure your child will go to school and do what they have to do. Also children are on different levels academically in public school and I think that was a hindrance. Also those who disrupted in my son’s class tended to be lower performing academically. Even if they are not at the same level in every subject at the private school the students are split up into two groups, high flyer and not high flyers. That way my child would be getting what he needed without the teacher having to deal with so many disruptions [Parent 09, Feb. ’09].

There were those also who described themselves as having had casual conversations with people they knew from
having shared common experiences in the past; parents from nursery school or primary school or even Sunday school. Several parents talked about the impact of opinions and experiences of close family members and friends, and on their beliefs about the desirable school environment. These individuals brought a certain increased level of credibility to the discussion because the parents felt they knew them well and could trust them to tell them the truth. As one parent put it,

One parent in particular was a personal friend; I knew her well she wouldn’t sugarcoat. She gave the good and the not so good...people who I knew personally, one personally from work and church, they were not strangers... people with whom I interact daily...[Parent 09, Feb. '09].

While yet another said,

I know them (other parents) my daughter’s Godmother, a close friend of mine from Sunday School, a couple that I used to know from the school my daughter used to go, I spoke with them because they went through the same thing that I would have been going through. I spoke to people at my old nursery school...and the reason I asked them is that everybody’s child has got different personalities and you are trying to see whose child’s personality is similar... all these people have calm and mild mannered children, so that is the type of personality my daughter has and I wanted to see how these children adjusted? My biggest concern was 1) speaking to the people who had been there all that time, did they have any regrets? Have you thought of taking them out of here to go somewhere else? And what is the communication for them? Most of the people I knew and I knew they knew my child and would be able to honestly tell me not just sell me the school...those are the people I would trust the most [Parent 10, Feb. '09].
Another very compelling source of information about school desirability for parents came from public and private school educators. Many parents in the study told of talking with public school teachers, some of whom they described as friends, who provided them with assistance in finding out about private schools requirements and steering them away from the public sector. Teachers were sharing their own frustrations with the public system as well as horror stories of happenings in public schools, all of which, the parents reported, influenced their decision-making and school choice. One parent referred to information gleaned from a public school educator this way,

The only person that asked me about middle school was the teacher ....6th grade [teacher's name] told me at the time ...your child is doing really great...and he told me, "you have to keep encouraging your daughter to give a little bit more because she is a bit shy in school...a little reserved. The teacher said, I know that she can still you know give more" so he wants me to challenge her more. I say, "Okay we can do that and then the latter part of the year in conversation..."Where are you going to send your daughter for middle school?" ...then I said since we are in (name of parish) she is going to (public middle school) and he said, "Are you serious?", I said, "well yeah..." and he said, "you know what I think"...I don't want to say that the teacher is putting the [public] education system down, but he told me, "you are probably reading the newspaper" ....and he said, "you know what is happening in the education system in Bermuda" He told me, "your daughter is one of the brightest child in the class and you are telling me
you are going to send her to (public middle school name)". I said what is wrong with (school name) ... and he told me to "think before you go there, you must consider other schools..." [Parent 19, Mar.'09].

This point of view was particularly the case when the child was viewed as doing really well in primary school, needing a challenge or considered to be a very strong academic student.

Another parent referred to family members and educators in the public school system, which were described as "not very encouraging ... at the time". The data analysis indicated patterns in parents' responses regarding the influences of information they received from educators in both public and private systems. In both cases when this occurred, these educators seemed to share the opinion that the private schools were a better option than public schools for their child. One parent reported as follows:

I talked to a few teachers there, actually I talked to three teachers there and they were long standing teachers and they were frustrated, even though they were trying to put their best foot forward, they were frustrated with all the shuffling that was going on... and I really don't think that it would have been fair to my child going in an environment like that [Parent 06, Feb. '09].

Another parent put it this way,

Spoke to people from all walks of life ... not just one, social settings, just out and about, in town, wherever and teachers, in church, on the street... the schools, we
actually spoke to teachers at the schools in terms of the curriculum, and walked through the school got a feel for the classrooms and talked about how they did each course.... But there are a lot of teachers in the public system that recognizes the pitfalls and they would even encourage us to go private...you know, seeing how things are [Parent 04,Feb. '09].

Some parents in the study did acknowledge that they had picked up some of their attitudes and perspectives about desirable schools in Bermuda from the media. Some felt that the newspaper and the electronic media both had represented schools in certain ways which had grabbed their attention. Stories of fighting or other acts of violence in public schools were not uncommon, whereas, as one parent noted, when it comes to private schools in the media, "you just don't hear about it". Another parent suggested that reading about the various accomplishments of students from a given school in the newspaper “tickled her interest” but more sweeping media reports about the poor state of public education and the fact that “people would say private education is really better in Bermuda and public is the second choice” seemed to be consistent with the sentiments of many of other parents in the study. One parent summed it up this way:

I guess I listen to too much of the media...when they get this problem sorted out of what they are trying to do...and then on paper it’s good but they get everybody to feed into it...information is coming down
the line and my biggest thing is until they get that right, there is going to be a lot of unknown for me and that was the biggest factor... I prefer to go somewhere where I know this is what is going to be, because this year it is going to be one thing and next year it's going to be something else. It can be confusing to me and I know for a child... the unknown [Parent 11, Feb '09].

Teacher behaviors

Another pattern that emerged from the data analysis was the aspect of a desirable school environment which teachers and school staff have created or significantly contributed to. The quality of the teacher and teaching became a recurring theme throughout the data.

Parents indicated a desire for a "caring environment", one where teachers "care for the children...if they care about the well being of the children..." Again, parents reported that they drew on their previous experiences, for the most part, either with older children or close family members, to determine if such was the case in the schools they were considering. Parents reported talking to other parents to find out if "they were happy with the school... the way the teachers dealt with their students and how things were addressed...". One parent shares her perspective:
I find that in the public system you have some dedicated teachers, when we came along almost all your teachers wanted you to succeed, you felt that you know, I don’t get that from every teacher in the public system. And even in the private system, if my children don’t like a teacher I will say to them, “whether you like them or not, it has nothing to do with what you get from their class. You don’t have to like their personality as long as they are giving you what you need to get from them, then you need to get it from them and move on...” whereas in the public system... some teachers really do care. I will give you an example,...when my daughter was in P2 the whole class was a bad class according to the teacher ...I knew that was not true because I knew every one of those students...like I said I am a very involved parent... and in P3 one student that was outside that classroom every single day and had to go to the principal’s office ...because of behavior he was doing what he was not supposed to do, he made the Honor Roll in P3 because of the difference in teachers...there are some teachers that are just not as dedicated [Parent 04, Feb. ’09].

Many parents in the study saw the private schools as holding teachers more accountable. One stated,

I think in the private schools if you are not performing you must go...in government, they keep you around and put you somewhere else thinking you might work out there...and that’s globally not just with teachers, they tend to hang on to people who are not producing and not performing...that is a bad thing, and I understand you want to help people and all that kind of stuff but you know what you have to do, so do it ...teacher accountability[ Parent 04, Feb. ’09]).

Talking to teachers and school leaders was seen by many parents in the study as an important way to determine what the school and classroom environment would be like.
One parent said of her efforts to determine desirability of a school, that it was important for her to know,

Do the philosophies that the teachers have for teaching the kids in the classroom mesh with my philosophies? You know those were really important and you can get a sense of that when you first meet the administrators and the teachers. I always go back 3 or 4 times before you made any decision about any of the schools. I think it is really important that you sit down and have a conversation with someone because you can read what they have on their website but you really never get a sense of what the environment is like there and what the administrator’s like there even though they say something do they practice that? And you get that when you go in and chat with them [Parent 08, Feb. '09].

Another parent, when talking about the teachers and their influence on the school environment, put it this way:

Some of the perception that you heard about some of the middle schools and poor things the teachers are going through on a regular basis...it is like it is so much...things keep chopping and changing and who gets to suffer more? It is the children, that’s how I look at it...I have friends in the public system that teach and you hear about frustrations... [Parent 11, Feb. '09].

In cases where parents reported having established good relationships with teachers, they either felt good about the school as well, or pointed to other factors as being more influential than teacher relationships, in their decision to deselect the school. One parent said of this,

When I go to (private school) I get a strong sense of caring from the teachers. I have never been on that campus and felt that these people are some cold people you know. I never felt that even when I go to the
parent conferences. You know these teachers really extend themselves beyond ways that they really have to. And I always feel comfortable speaking to any of the teachers there and I really feel that they are concerned and they will do what they can to assist, I definitely feel that connection. Not to say that I did not feel that at (public school), but you mix that with the Christ centeredness and that impresses me [Parent 16, Mar. '09].

School disruptions which resulted from teachers' industrial actions were also a concern raised by some parents who saw this disruption to the learning environment as time lost for their children which is time never made up. Classroom disruptions were also of much concern to parents as it relates to the desirability of a school environment. Some parents expressed the concern that too much teacher instructional time was lost or compromised because of social and behavioral issues with students in public schools. This situation was seen as taking the teacher's focus away from students' academic needs, thereby compromising the quality of their child's education. One father stated,

I wanted him to be in a school where there weren't many distractions, leadership issues, union issues, because what happens in my faculty, I am not happy debating salary, quality of teaching suffers. At the time there was a salary issue, there was the Hopkins report, you know, a mixture of issues that were happening at the same time that impacted my decision because what happens when you have these things going on, there is a distraction and the emphasis is not on teaching, the emphasis is on, "Do I get my contract?"
and unfortunately the student suffers in the long run [Parent 17, Mar. '09].

Many parents also raised the issue of lower performance standards and teacher expectations, which they felt were evident in some sectors of the public school system. This conclusion was believed to emanate from such public school practices as social promotion, acceptance of poor quantity and quality of student work, and failure to provide sufficient challenge and rigor for more academically able students. One mother described her experience with this as follows:

...In her second year of schooling at (public school) we had a parent-teacher conference and the teacher said to us ..."She does excellent, but she is a little talkative". And I said, "OK it is something I have to work on, no problem," so I said, "Oh when do you find the talking occurring? Is she being disruptive? Is she helping someone? What is it so I know what I am dealing with?" So she said, "Well you know she is actually going round the classroom , students were asking for help and she being the kind natured person that she is, was going around helping but she didn't explain it like that, she just said she is going around to other students helping them and she should stay in her seat." And I said, "If she is finishing her work early, maybe she can be given some extra duties or given a book to sit in a corner and read...that might keep the students form asking for her assistance." At that point I knew she wasn't being challenged enough and what concerned me even more so was that the teacher didn't recognize that [Parent 16, Mar. '09].

In the main, however, parents reported being happy with the quality of teaching their children had received in
public school at the primary level, as in each case it had resulted in their child's admission to private school and in some cases with scholarship.

Most of the information about teacher quality seemed to come to parents through direct observations, conversations and experiences with teachers and school leaders. Although parents expressed concerns about individual teachers and some of the public system practices mentioned above, they attributed much of the "dysfunction" in public schools to more systemic causes related to reform efforts which have been underway in Bermuda for well over a decade. One parent described what he was looking for this way:

The teaching and learning environment, less confrontational, a curriculum that was extremely rigorous, challenging and diverse...dedicated faculty, most certainly, we almost took him out of public school because of that. I as a faculty, I can tell being a teacher, and I didn't see that you can't really cast too much blame on the teachers because if there were issues at the top, the Department of Education was giving the principals a hard time and they are not happy. Unfortunately some of that's going to filter to the faculty and it is going in the same direction and the level of dedication and commitment is not going to be there... In the private schools there might be leadership issues but you hardly ever hear about them[Parent 17, Mar. '09].

Parent Behaviors.
Another aspect of school desirability that was found to occur as a theme in the data is the level of parent involvement in their child's education and how the parent participants saw this impacting the school environment. One parent put it this way, "...the main fact is that when people are paying a fee, they are committed, they make a real commitment and therefore they are making sure that everything is working the way it is supposed to." All parents interviewed were unanimous about the need for parents to assume their responsibility for ensuring that their children receive and make the most of a quality education. Some expressed the perspective that many of the problems that students exhibit in school are as a result of "serious social issues in this country"; social issues which must be addressed if we are to meet the needs of students and improve educational outcomes. One parent observed that,

We are having a lot of children who are coming from broken backgrounds... I can't say that a child can't go to private school and have divorced parents or whatever...I go to parent-teachers meetings in public and private...I don't know if I can put a % to it but the majority are mother and father, when I go to parent meetings in public there is mainly the mother...fathers are missing in public there is mainly mother...and what I see unfortunately is a lot of boys are being destroyed...because a lot of them do not have a father or father is not playing a role...daddy's making promises that he is not keeping, these boys are angry at 12 years old because a lot of them do not
have a father or father is not playing a role... they are coming from environments where they are just trying to survive and that...makes for a lot of the challenge of teaching in public school" [Parent 18, Mar. '09].

Parents made comparisons between their experiences with school communications in both the public and private systems. A consistent theme was the belief that communications with parents in private school were immediate, open and effective, so that matters of concern were always dealt with to their satisfaction. Examples were shared, however, of instances in public school when this was not the case and issues were not dealt with in what parents would have considered a timely manner, whether it had to do with student behavior or learning needs. Parents reported that they knew what to expect of the private school, and the private school made their expectations of parents very clear also. Private school parents were described this way by one parent participant, "in private school most parents I encounter they know everything that is going on with their child...every project when it is due...". While another parent when speaking of public school parents said,

Most people that go to the public system are ...a lot of them could not afford to go to private anyway, so they have to go to that school...so they have to put up with that stuff...they have to tolerate that stuff and also a
lot of parents are not involved because of the social ills...they work a lot, they rely on the child to be independent and do stuff for itself... [Parent 04, Feb.'09].

**Student Population**

In the study, parents' definition of desirability in a school also centered on the student population of the school. Parents described the characteristics of the students whom they observed in classes or in and around the school; at a distance on the street in school uniform or in the community; or whom they knew personally, possibly through family connections; or because of their relationships with their parents. These characteristics were either ones they wanted for their own children or, at the very least, they wanted their child to be exposed to on a daily basis. As one parent put it, "iron sharpens iron", referring to his desire to have his child in a learning environment where he believed children of similar qualities would be found and where his daughter could therefore thrive. He went on to say,

I believe that she has the ability to be able to produce in such an environment like that, I believe environment is very important...a lot of it was predicated on our existing beliefs about what we thought was there but more than that we had friends who taught there and have also previously taught in public so we had information to compare. We knew there is no perfect environment. We believed that this was a better environment for her... We were looking
for a serious learning environment; we were looking for a curriculum that was rigorous and recognized [Parent 18, Mar. '09].

One mother said,

I was first of all looking for a school that had children that had personalities similar to my child... he's an academic ...so that children who were obviously interested in education and further education ...that was really important for my child...[Parent 08, Feb '09].

For another, the "makeup of the children in private school ...their class and race" was expressed initially as a cause for concern. However, this concern did not turn out in reality to be the problem the parent had anticipated.

A few parents in the study also reported speaking to other parents to determine if they had encountered any issues with prejudice or racism. Many expressed a desire for a diverse student population, and expressed a belief that such a student population came with potential challenges and advantages for their child. There was no example, in the study, of a parent for whom the possibility of the challenges of class, culture or racial differences became a deal breaker to move them away from making a private school choice. Although, in some cases, it did help them to be more discriminating and to select from among different private schools because of what they had
heard or observed of the respective student populations.

One parent put it this way:

I had heard from people in passing, saying stuff that makes it very attractive...even reading in the paper and seeing that she would have a better opportunity upon graduating in regards to getting scholarships, maybe getting into a good college and stuff like that. [private school] graduates getting scholarships and stuff like that or getting ahead by going there, you meet somebody who can help you along, you know that sort of thing... white people, I hear their children moving along because they have gone to this particular school or that particular school and you know your child is as bright, going to another but they are not progressing along as well and you have to wonder why...is it because of the school and who they know? And if I can get my child into this particular school then maybe I can meet these people also [Parent 02, Feb. '09].

Another parent said,

I look at the makeup of the children in private school, their class and race was different, I was very concerned about that, so that was something if I was to be looking at the public school system. I knew that at least there were children there that she could relate to ...much to my surprise it's the same, it is basically the same [Parent 03, Feb. '09].

Other parents reported seeking out parents with children who were already at a school and whose personalities they believed were similar to their own child's to help them determine if that school would be desirable for them also.

One mother said,

Well I was first of all looking for a school that had children that had personalities similar to my child. Well he is an academic so that children who were obviously interested in education and further
education, that was really important for my child [Parent 08, Feb. '09].

Some parents saw a particular school population as desirable simply because their child would be separated from students with whom he or she had had difficulties in public primary school. Several reported cases of teasing or bullying peers in primary school from whom both the parent and the child were very happy to get away. Other parents did say that if their child's friends were going to a particular school they were inclined to want to go there too or be reluctant to go elsewhere; but this did not become the compelling reason for selecting a school. One parent described her feelings about this factor in this way:

...How my daughter would fit into the school...the mixture of children and mainly because of where she was coming from...the children that were coming used to bully her and some of the children she would miss and some of them she would say, "Mommy if this is the last time I see 'em I don't want to see them again...please I don't want to go to a school with those children. So I looked at it and I looked at my finances... [Parent 11, Feb. '09].

A few parents spoke of the undesirability of a school population which included students with behavior challenges and physical challenges, both of which they believed influenced other students ability to learn to their full potential. One expressed the concern that "dumbing down"
might be one consequence of this and another pointed to the need for more alternative forms of education to address the behaviorally challenged student more effectively and to prevent the many disruptions which they felt presently existed in Bermuda's public schools. One parent made the following observation:

I see a lot of kids being advanced and not learning. I see a lot of kids graduating and not knowing how to read. I heard where they dropped the grade point system in order for kids to graduate, I heard that being done. I heard of a lot of kids being distracted where they can't learn, whereas in the private sector it doesn't happen as often. I am not saying it doesn't happen at all but it doesn't happen that often and if it does, they really try to keep it under control whereas if they have a kid that is disturbing the rest if the kids from learning, they are definitely dismissed [Parent 15, Mar. '09].

Parents in the study also talked about the developmental age of their child and the other children. They expressed the need for young people in early adolescence to have a disciplined environment where they could be supported to meet the challenges and changes at this stage in their development. Such related population issues as the social networking potential of a particular school population was identified as desirable, as well as the positive influence of being around other students who "understand the importance of education and what education can do for them." Another very compelling influence
reported by parents was the desires as expressed by their own children to attend a particular school. This input factored heavily in their decision making and ultimate school selection.

Parents in the study shared a common perception regarding school population that was summed up this way by one parent, who said,

'It is the individual child thing, it is not a school or a system thing necessarily, like someone made a comment one time to me, "You tend to get more focused...more studious children going to private school so of course their outcome is going to be better than the outcome of public school...because you do have the ADHD's, the deaf children there with other learning disabilities and disabled children in the system pulling the whole (group) down...[Parent 12, Focus Group, Mar. '09].

We have that in private schools too, we do have children that have issues...but do they pull the average down? [Parent 04, Focus Group, Mar. '09]

School Programs

Parents in the study also identified a school's programs as an important desirability factor for them when selecting a school. This characteristic of desirability in a school was a common theme throughout the data and tended to be described by parents in terms of three specific components: a) academic rigor and high standards, b) comprehensive, diverse nature of the curriculum that was,
and c) internationally recognized. Based on the data, opinions about each of these components were influenced by information from several sources and will be dealt with separately below.

a) Academic rigor and high standards:

All parents in the study reported the desire to find a school which they believed would provide the kind of school program that would best meet the needs of their child. In most cases this translated into a program which offered a good balance between academics and athletic programs while providing challenge and a structured foundation for college preparation. Some parents were very specific about the content of the academic program they had sought, identifying foreign languages, music, science and technology as being key components. One parent indicated that her 5-10 year educational plan for her child required that he have a very specific school program which included,

An extensive music and language program and a strong academic curriculum, instrumental music as well as theory...I was looking for a school that would offer him that program in music as well as do they have an after school activity in that area as well. And that wasn’t available in the (public) school in my area...and also they can offer him 2 other different languages, a strong academic curriculum, and is interested in the British curriculum as opposed to the American curriculum, the reason being I already have in place a 5-10 year academic educational plan. My son was born
in the UK and the system is British and I am looking forward to him going either when he is in high school or after he graduates from high school, him being educated in England[Parent 06, Feb. '09].

One parent in referring to how she went about planning her child’s next stage of education after primary school put it this way:

The first thing that I was considering was the curriculum. What were the subjects that they were offering to the children? How long they would have to take those particular courses? Also once they had finished senior year, did they have a senior program that they transferred to as opposed to moving to a new environment. In regard to the senior program having a preparatory system or program that would allow her to go on to college ...that was also a major criterion [Parent 03, Feb. '09].

Parents reported relying heavily on “word of mouth”, talking to people they encountered in their daily lives either through work contacts or through social contacts.

One parent said,

In Bermuda, I find it easy (to get the information I needed), it is such a small community, from clients and teachers in both schools, from friends, from parents who already had their kids in private school, from experiences of other parents in both systems...who have children there, but also I found that my husband went to [private school] at a time it was a public school[ Parent 13, Feb. '09].

A parent also indicated that the “academic results issued every year, so you can see how the school has done academically ...” was another important influence on his
thinking about the desirability of a school's program. Many of the parents interviewed talked about wanting to find a school that offered their child challenge and a rigorous program, to thereby build on their demonstrated academic successes of primary school, to reach their potential, "give them that extra boost", and to "be more stimulating". Some expressed concern that in public school this had not happened to their satisfaction and in some cases resulted in their child being viewed a troublesome rather than bored or under-challenged.

Another parent described how she and her husband arrived at their decisions in this way:

We looked at various sites for the private schools and the public schools...if we had opportunities to talk to other parents we made sure we did that...as well as with the private schools...we talked with other parents in the private schools too...a lot of them were already friends of ours...a lot of opportunities to talk to parents when we did that tour or whatever...so if they had other parents meeting with you, giving the tour you could chat with those parents... the way that they taught, you know (private school) and (private school) have the IB program and (private school) has the AP program so we looked at these programs in depth on line to see whether they suited our children's academic level [Parent 08, Feb. '09].

b) Comprehensive and diverse nature of the program:

Most parents in the study expressed a desire to have a school program which offered a well balanced education to
their child. One parent referred to her desire to have her child "come out well-rounded ...where you would get a bit of everything...not just academics...sports... extracurricular activities..." Several were looking for specific subjects also like foreign languages and music but also a variety of other experiences that one mother described as allowing her children to "tap into areas that may not normally have been tapped into..." One parent talked about looking at the curriculum "to see exactly what they had to offer ...looking at my daughter's interest... for...just a wide variety of courses...". Another parent said, "Because my children are very athletic as well as academic, we wanted a very good sports program so they can enhance that area...", and still another parent said,

It was also what other activities were offered ...so to give her a whole balance we also looked at what was in our area. Finally we discussed at length where she was and where we wanted her to go and even with her where she wanted to go, not just the school but in her path based upon what she wanted to do...to be honest with you, the school we picked is the school she had wanted to go to since she was seven [Parent 01, Feb '09].

A couple of parents in the study indicated that a school program's religious orientation made it a desirable factor for them, while others said they deselected a school because they wished to de-emphasize the religious orientation. In the case of the former parents, much of
their opinions were reportedly shaped by conversations with fellow congregants and their own religious beliefs. For the latter parents, religious training as offered by the schools in question was not considered a desirable school characteristic.

c) International recognition:

A few parents mentioned their desire to have a school program for their child which had international recognition. This characteristic was deemed important so that their child could make a smooth transition from high school to post secondary education. One parent expressed the view that "low expectations and standards come into question (in public schools) and may not be high enough to stretch children in public school, not so in private school". This view, coupled with the idea suggested by another parent when referring to a private school that "almost all of their students go off to university.....it's the norm...they promote it the whole way through..." made for a perspective among parents that values a school program which has international recognition. Another parent reported,

I believe that we were also interested, I can't remember the actual figure but the % of student body that graduated and went on to college, it was pretty
high and that was a consideration... We recognized at that point in the school we looked and ah we're older but we had some idea about G.C.S.E.'s and IB...we had an idea about G.C.E.'s; at the time I think government was doing BSC [Parent 18, Mar. '09].

Parents who participated in the study shared the view that private schools offered more of an opportunity for their children to be challenged academically and to move on from there to college because of the curricula offered there.

School Structure

The data analysis also identified school structure as a feature of school desirability for the parents interviewed. Parents indicated that, for them, school structure or the way the school operated, as it related to the following three areas: a) home and school communications, b) leadership and clear sense of purpose, and c) accountability for the education of their children were important considerations for them in their school selections. The other aspect of the school structure which parents raised was the importance to many of them of the actual location of the school from their home or workplace. Since this issue had implications for the child's travel time to and from school and since most of the private
schools are located in the central parish of the island, they included this factor as one they considered when choosing the school. One parent said of school location,

I am not one of those paranoid parents, you know, "Oh I need to seek out every private school" I am pretty sure every schools are a good school, but for me I'm a little different and (private school) could be the best school on the island, it could be free, my child is not going all the way to (private school) to school. We live in St Georges, I'm on a more realistic level, if my child is leaving home at 7 'O clock in the morning getting home at 5 'O clock in the evening to me that's not good enough, that's not Ok the location alone was a no... [Parent 12, Mar. '09].

a) Home-School Communications

Parents all reported that home-school communications had a very critical role in their thinking about the desirability of a particular school. Several parents expressed their satisfaction with the way they were kept informed of what was happening with their child in private school and made comparisons with the way things had been handled in public school. One parent put it this way:

Even at the primary school level with the school my children attended, we were very happy with the school when we started out then as time went on some things just weren't dealt with, you know, as a very concerned parent, I would deal with some things myself. Say for instance if I had, if my daughter was being teased, whether she is being teased for because she is a bright student or whatever, I would either get a phone call if it is serious or an immediate email. Usually whatever happened in school I know before my daughter gets home and it is addressed immediately [Parent 04, Feb.'09].
This perspective came as a result of the parent's own experience with the schools, and other parents expressed similar views based on their personal experiences around communication issues with school. In the case of another parent when speaking about a home-school communication said,

There were some minor situations that cropped up when my son was in the school that he's in and they dealt with that forcefully immediately and it has not occurred again...so you know what I am saying ...we were very happy to see that. The communication with the parents about it, you know, there's a lot of stuff that goes on in some schools that don't get communicated to parents. This school immediately communicates when something has occurred whether the parents know about it or not. They immediately send out a communiqué' explaining what happened and how they dealt with it to all parents so there is no, sort of like, sweeping it under the carpet. No rumors going on, they talk about what occurred, how they dealt with it and how they will not tolerate it. So that was huge for me [Parent 08, Feb.'09].

Another parent described how her selected school used technology to facilitate communication with and among parents. She said,

They are making a commitment, it is a lot of money and therefore I want to make the most of every penny. I see like from the class; for example, since he has been there in the private school, there is much more of a commitment from parents to do everything...email when you call someone, the communication works fast...it was like wow immediate response people phoning and calling very much more involved in child's life...(private school) has very good communication on that, parent-to-parent the school has a board top keep communication and then all the children from years 7
are given a laptop on which they have access on their blackboards and anything happen during the day, we are already informed by email...my son is like, oh, immediately... [Parent 13, Mar. '09].

Strong home-school communication was considered by the parents in the study to be a key factor for desirability in a school's structure. One parent described her experience by saying,

I talked to a few of his teachers, you know and ...we became friends because of the communication that I had for him...what is he doing? Is he doing well? Give me his scores today...like you were able to get this information ...and I know that in the public system you can pretty much do the same thing...you can call up a teacher ...email the teacher...and say you know “how is my child doing today?” But that really didn’t matter, but I just felt a close-knit personal connection with some of the teachers at the school [Parent 12, Mar. '09].

b) Leadership and Purpose

Leadership, as it impacts the organizational structure of a school or school system, was also included as an important factor of school desirability that parents raised. The analysis of the data revealed that parents, in many cases, expressed concerns about how the Bermuda public school system was being led versus how they believed individual private schools were operated. The latter was perceived to be going well and running smoothly for the most part, while the former was perceived as being fraught with unwelcomed changes, and far too many examples of
instability and disorganization. One parent described his view of public education by saying,

My son came from public school, my daughter's in public school um obviously with my personal views on public education. I think that it has changed but it doesn't seem to be any real direction in public school, we are going from one system to another and it seems to be in limbo at the moment, even though there is a lot of rhetoric around it, but that's just my personal opinion. 'Cause as I said my son came from a public school and he did very well, the standards were high, he was well taught for most of the time he was there. You know it seems to come down to the individual teachers that you have... [Parent 14, Mar. '09].

All of the parents in the study claimed to be products of public education, however, as one parent put it,

I came through the public school system all the way through and I personally myself do not have anything against the public school system I just don't believe it is all that it can be I just don't believe, and particularly as it has government funding...it should have a prioritization of government funding behind it I think... [Parent 16, Mar. '09]. Still another saw it as problematic:

Primarily the leadership challenges that were taking place in the public school sector and still currently exist with the Department of Education...the uncertainty regarding who is in charge now...I mean I don't know...it is being restructured put it that way and with restructuring you have stagnation...there is no progress... there is no vision... there is no direction... and that filters down to principals and then it filters down to the faculty. In private schools there might be leadership issues but you hardly hear of them [Parent 17, Mar. '09].

Another parent observed,

I think that one of the big problems I see ... in public education is that a lot of it is political, so what happens is that we must have results because that is
what looks good. I think that sometimes we embark on a
good course but you don’t see it through because we
don’t get the results as soon enough as we want to see
them … And I think sometimes change takes time and you
are not going to see results overnight, it’s going to
take time. You have to have at least a 5-year plan
… then you tinker it and say where are we going, I
don’t think you are going to see scores jump up after
1 or 2 years…it’s going to take time, and I don’t
think in the past there has been that patience to see
it through. And that’s one reason why if you look at
the difference between public and private, they
haven’t tinkered too much, they hit on something that
works and they haven’t tinkered with it…we have done a
lot of tinkering in public education [Parent 18, Mar.
’09].

This sentiment was shared by others and was expressed
another way by a parent as,

It is easy for us to just look at what’s on the
surface but as the teacher…I believe that there are
things that they are dealing with from the Ministry
(of Education) also that went down that are affecting
the way things go…it is the Ministry, it’s
principal, it’s teacher, it’s parent, it’s student…all
of them. They all have to come together and do what
they need to do…in private school they do this [Parent
10, Focus group, Mar ’09].

Some parents saw the Ministry of Education leadership as
interfering with the effectiveness of the public school
system. One needed change that a parent suggested was,

The one thing I would change would be to take
education out of government hands and outsource it. I
would honestly change that. You would see more
accountability. I believe you would see that teachers
are more happy and of course that would translate into
the way that they teach and the way they communicate
with parents. Take it out of Government hands [Parent
10, Focus group Mar. ’09].
Another parent added,

There is a lot of resentment and issues toward the Ministry. I’ve got to do it this way. I don’t think the teachers are respected from the Ministry, not only the Ministry but that sit on certain boards, if you can get somebody to say “He is just a gym teacher.” He’s a teacher. What’s that mentality? [Parent 12, Focus group Mar. ’09].

One parent further suggested that,

The same as there is a Ministry (of Health) and a Health Council, the same can be done for education, board with certain stakeholders controlling it because until you have persons that are actually have some stake in what is happening, they are just somebody sitting on top making rules [Parent 04, Focus Group, Mar. ’09].

In the case of individual school leadership, many of the parents indicated that they had some personal knowledge of the various school leaders or they had close family members who did. One said, “The head of the school used to teach my husband...and the head of secondary used to teach me...” These types of historical relationships of parents with school leaders were not unique to these parents and helped to lend credibility and influence both to their leadership and to the information they shared with parents as they navigated the school selection process.

c) Accountability
System and school accountability was perceived by parents to be built into the organizational structure, and proved to be a recurring theme throughout the data. Parents raised concerns about accountability as it related to student performance, teacher performance, system and school leadership, as well as the accountability of parents. The data revealed that parents were making comparisons between accountability, as they believed it to be evident in the private sector, and the limited, or lack, of accountability which they believed existed in the public sector.

Many parents in the study expressed their view on teacher accountability this way: "private schools held teachers more accountable ...more accountable for student achievement." This perspective seemed to have been shaped by parents' own experiences with the schools and by the information they had gleaned primarily from other parents and family members. Several parents concluded that the private sector, unlike the public, did not keep low-performing teachers and as one parent said of the private system and teacher accountability,

My first daughter went to private school; I thought she fitted in at private school better than she did at public school. She is a very focused child and she just gets on with it...it is much more organized and is structured so and I think that the teachers are held
more accountable and that is the biggest thing...I feel in private school they want my child to succeed, they make it. I tell my children all the time, "you know what, if you fail, it is because you wanted to fail because the teachers give you everything you need, in my opinion, to succeed you know and so that any child that fails it is because they just don't have it..."

[Parent 04, Feb '09].

Some parents felt that, although there were excellent teachers in the public system, many of whom had taught their children, there were still others such as one described by a parent as follows,

...I know this was one of the things that the parents brought up at the PTA...things just not being addressed, if everybody is complaining about this one teacher..."why is this one teacher still here and why has the behavior not changed...and why is she continuing to be here the next year doing the same behaviors?"...Parents complained about that a lot." [Parent 04, Feb. '09]

Parents discussed their experiences with private school teachers and their belief that these teachers are, and would be, more responsive to their child's individual needs, more so than teachers in public school who are restricted by the organizational structure in which they work. Most parents in the study put this difference in responsiveness due to the fact that parents are paying for education and so will not accept anything less. A parent put it this way:

If I go to a private school and I say, 'You know what, my daughter has a different learning style and you need to teach her differently, it is addresses that is
the difference, and because I am the type of parent that works wither child...I do feel like whenever I address something in private school, it is heard and it is addressed...I think it is because people are paying for the education and the administration or board or whoever runs it..."you know what, people are paying for this and they are not going to tolerate this and they will pull their child out and put them somewhere else because they have that choice. Public system there is not as much choice [Parent 04, Feb. '09].

When considering student accountability as a part of the organizational structure of a school, parents raised concerns about the social promotion policy in the public system and its impact as they saw it on student performance. One parent admitted doing some comparative research and said,

I did some comparison with the quality of work that I saw coming home from one school as it relates to another, because I have a family member that is in that one particular school that is in my area...the quality of work [Parent 06, Feb. '09].

Another parent, when talking about the children who are on different levels academically in public school said,

We felt that the middle schools that were available here on the island in the public system were challenged, would not meet his needs because he was already above a lot of the kids were already what they were teaching him in school he needed a more challenging environment. There were a lot of things he excelled in that they did not teach in the public system at the level that he needed to be at. He did not get a lot of science at the primary school level and that was a big issue because he loved science and he excelled in it and that was something that he would have enjoyed. So we felt that he'd be behind once he
got into middle school because he’d be behind in science whereas the private school would already be above that level...I wanted to make sure we weren’t disadvantaging him like that because the kids in some of the public schools would be starting at a level behind so that was our primary reason why we felt a primary school would be better for him [Parent 08, Feb. '09].

When speaking of how it works in private school with her child a parent said,

If your child is falling behind 50% you automatically go on report ...automatically...everything freezes...you are on report ...this is what you expected, you can’t get there, you are not passing this level, you will be retained, versus public (school) ...I think now ...you have to get parents’ permission to retain a child... that’s not how it used to be. Now you are retained. I am for it if my son is not doing so well in school he is going to be retained...can’t keep sending him forward...he is just going to be an C average child for the rest of his school life...no, retain him...one year is not going to kill him and let him do better... [Parent 12, Feb.'09].

Parents were concerned about what they saw as a lowering of standards for student performance in the public system and expressed a desire to see the system “assist individuals to rise to the occasion, rather than lowering standards for those others in the classroom who are not doing well.” A father put it this way,

It seems like there is a label of accountability (that) seems to be bandied around more in public school but I think it should be each teacher, each school and each principal ...should be held accountable for what goes on in their school...so the private schools, seeing that parents have to fork out for children’s education and at a high price they have to
fork out, I think that the teachers in private school have to be held accountable ...what I am saying is you have to be held accountable for the standards for everybody ...it all has to be held up to a high standard because it is about the education of a young person and the future of the world... [Parent 14, Mar. '09].

A few parents also expressed concern about the impact on student performance of so many transitions that children must make in the public school system. They hold the idea that students may not be able to make these transitions smoothly, as there may be curricular misalignment between the levels in addition to the obvious social and emotional adjustments that must be made when transitioning from primary to middle and then to senior school.

Parent accountability was another aspect of the school structure that parents raised when speaking about desirability in a school. How a school operated and how well it held parents accountable through its policies and procedures were common themes in the data collected. Parents agreed "that it starts at home with the parents" and that the parents had a critical role to play in their children's education. Schools therefore needed to ensure, through their various policies and procedures, that parents were connected to the learning process and the school. Private schools were described by one parent as places where,
If your grades are not up to par in the private sector then they can really ask you to leave the school because if you are not up to par what's the sense of paying all that money if you are going to have problems passing into the next grade, but in the public system it's like they don't care and um seen that a lot, they don't care, they don't care if you advance or anything and I do believe that it does start at home with the parents [Parent 15, Mar. '09].

Yet another parent, when speaking of a parochial private school, suggested that,

Mind you, no school's perfect, I'm sure [private school] has its challenges but for the most part they try to instill in students Christian education. So imagine being in an environment where there are certain expectations, certain behavioral expectations...you can say certain things, you can do certain things...some things are unacceptable and eventually no matter what environment that child has at home, to go home to, that 9 to 3 Monday to Friday is going to play a part. You know you can't spend that much time in a certain environment and not be changed by it influenced by it [Parent 16, Mar. '09].

Parents seemed to share the belief that private schools, because of their more efficient organizational structure and governance, can be more accountable to parents and allow parents to be more involved than public schools can because of the bureaucracy and sheer size of the public system. One parent summed it up this way:

All organizational structures with the public sector, it's a huge, huge entity and with that you have all sorts of challenges at some time that need to be addressed, but can't be addressed because of how they are prioritized. In the private sector it is like running a small company. And with a small company you can get so much more done, much more focus and there
is a difference in that we are here to make a profit, this is a business, whereas in public school sector it is not a business, there is more wastage ...the level of accountability is not going to be higher [Parent 17, Mar. '09].

And another parent said of system accountability:

That’s where accountability comes in, the accountability in the private schools, they are actually held to it... when you look at each private school, it is that small, when you look at public school, it is a big system ...it cannot be held accountable. I cannot go to my child in Pl’s teacher every day and she is going to address that problem, but I can guarantee that I can go over the street here and call or email and say something’s wrong we need to fix this and you know we need to get on track and we need to sort it out. Whereas in the public system it is like a chain of command ...if I go to his teacher, the teacher doesn’t do anything. If I go to his principal or the vice principal and she don’t do anything, who can I go to? I have to go to the Ministry and that can take forever... whereas in the private sector my child can be dealt with one time [Parent 12, Focus group, Mar. '09]

The geographical location of a particular school was another desirability factor raised by several parents in the study. In these cases, the school’s proximity to the parent’s home or work place was considered to be important. Most agreed, though, that since the island is so small and most private schools are clustered in the central parish, the issue of location of the school was of less importance than many of the other desirability factors they raised in their interviews and in the focus group discussion. One
parent reported that when comparing three schools - 2 private and the public middle school in her neighborhood - she "didn't really want her [child] to go as far as [private school] but I was looking at graduation rate and curriculum." Another parent described her choice of school in this way:

I had two choices I would have to be very shallow, convenience, close to work, because I live in Hamilton Parish and did not want him to go to Paget, this was great, we can all come to Hamilton together and get out and be there in fifteen minutes [Parent 09, Mar. '09].

When parents talked about their public school choice they acknowledged the impact of the public feeder school system on their options. Most simply accepted this as the way it was, and those who considered pursuing other options within the public system were soon discouraged for the same reason. As one parent put it," we were told because we lived in the area this is the school your child would go to..." Another reported, when referring to a public middle school well out of the child’s feeder zone:

I was considering a government middle school so at least she would be with another group of people 'cause like don’t even think about it with the kind of reply I got from her. I talked to some of the teachers and they said, "You must be joking if you think you are going to get her down there... [Parent 11, Feb. '09].
Another theme identified in the data which parents raised is that of the cost of the various private schools they were considering. As a desirability factor, money certainly was an issue that all parents in the study had to look at since all private schools in Bermuda are fee paying institutions. Whether children received partial or full scholarships or no financial assistance at all, parents noted that they were making "a commitment". Said one parent,

I also have to go with my pocket, you know I could have thought of [private school A], I could have thought of (private school B) or (private school C) but that was not what my pocket could afford, maybe one child but definitely couldn't afford two and not even three... but money was a motivating factor um, once I made my decision to say OK she showed a lot of talent, I had to put the money forward no matter what and that's when I decided to put her in [private school] [Parent 16, Mar. '09].

In some cases, the choice was even described as a sacrifice for parents to meet the additional financial requirements of the selected private school. This choice was made in full recognition of the money that would be needed later on to pay for college or university and how much they could reasonably afford to pay out in the present. One parent admitted,

They seemed to want her; they were inviting her to come. I did express that because she set the scholarship exam as well for financial assistance. I did explain to them that (money) was a major
factor...and if she got assistance...because I knew from the start that I couldn't afford the fees from the start...they seemed to be willing to work with me [Parent 07, Feb. '09].

And another said,

You know I did not necessarily want to have to spend this money you know what I could be doing with it...I would love to be able to save that money that I spend in a month and know that my child is getting the same type of attention and treatment and love and caring [Parent 16, Mar. '09].

**School Outcomes**

Parents in the study also identified a school's outcomes as a desirability factor which they considered important. Some parents were looking for consistency of high standards which would be evidenced by high graduation rates and a caliber of graduate deemed to be well prepared for post secondary education or the workplace. Others talked about looking for the same kind of educational experience they had had when they were in school, experiences which they believed had served them well and so would therefore be good for their children. In some cases this meant sending their child to the very same school they attended or a close family member had attended, seeking similar outcomes. In a few cases, parents shared their desire to have the school produce a certain type of
student. For example, one parent referred to the selected school as promoting university attendance after graduation and that it was the norm for students of the school to do this. The parent said,

They speak about that in grade one, it is almost the norm, it is not the exception that you don’t go...almost all of their students go off to university...there is no interruption break for 2 years, you go right on to university and that is good. I mean I don’t know what the statistics are of children or young adults that graduate from public schools going on to university but at [private school] it is the norm. That’s what you do; they promote it the whole way through, that’s positive [Parent 16, Mar. ’09].

Another parent spoke of encountering students in his work, who were graduates of the public and private sectors, and said,

I see firsthand the students who come from the public school and private school in my classroom, ...you know I teach a lot of freshman and I can tell mostly on the first day of school where sector you come from by asking you to introduce yourself and tell me, not even say what school you went to but just the way the students present themselves in class there is a difference [Parent 17, Mar. ’09].

And another parent said,

We have um friends that have taken similar decisions and were happy with their choices...their students...other students of friends of ours are happy and adjusted...were in the environment and were producing. And we liked the product that we saw being produced [Parent 18, Mar. ’09].
Information regarding the outcomes of a school also came from a parent's assessment of some of the school's graduates. She observed, "I went to the 20-year reunion and all the people I had seen there were successful in their lives from back then it is telling me a good answer" [Parent 13, Mar. '09].

One parent, in explaining her decision to select a school with a religious focus, expressed a desire to see her child be exposed to the following interest:

Having some type of spiritual connection and I think that is important for children growing up. It gives you a sense of right and wrong, it gives you a purpose, it gives you or it gives a child some form of direction...it will never leave them and that's important [Parent 16, Mar. '09].

Another parent said,

We did have concerns about the middle school ...we felt the current [practice] of lumping kids to feed into 1 feeder school ...fine on paper but it didn’t appear to be working...when you get to the high school... that was the feedback from parents [Parent 01, Feb.'09].

Still another parent expressed the concern that,

A child can get left behind because of the amount of kids that a teacher has to deal with...in a classroom ..., not so much in a classroom setting because I know you have to have a set amount of children, but if you have say 10 here and 10 there each child becomes a number per se, the size of the high schools, just too big you know, so that each child just becomes a number instead of an individual [Parent 02, Feb. '09].
Several parents raised concern about the constant change that public education was experiencing. They spoke of the need for stability, consistency and less uncertainty. One parent said of this change,

If we look at the private school model in this country it seems to be working quite well. If we use that as an example, I know as we speak, the public system is dysfunctional and is going through a huge transformation right now, we can tell by the positions being created and by the fact that we are spending millions of dollars studying to see what's going wrong. Can we fix it? My concern is the people that you should ask about the school system are parents who have their students ...that's where the valuable feedback should come form because they are the ones that are going through it... [Parent 17, Mar. '09].

Research Question 2:

*How do social networks influence the intrinsic and extrinsic motivators that parents use when selecting a school for their child?*

**Intrinsic Motivators and Social Networks**

The analysis of the data identified the following categories of intrinsic motivators that parents used when selecting a school for their child. They are:

(a) Beliefs about school desirability factors

(b) Values about education and learning

(c) Expectations for school performance and success

(d) Knowledge of child & Parenting Skills
(e) Intuition and Fears

The extent to which these intrinsic motivators were influenced by the parents' social networks will be addressed in turn by pulling from the data the relevant evidence.

a) Beliefs about School Desirability

Parents' beliefs about what makes a particular school desirable for their child has been dealt with extensively in response to the first research question. In summary, it is important to note that these perspectives were indeed influenced by the input, feedback, anecdotal data and experiences of other individuals who were a part of the many social networks which parents participated in. Some of these contacts were made strategically, others through work interactions, some by happenstance, and some due to close proximity and family relationships. Although these networks have varying degrees of influence, most parents reported receiving input from all types and factoring this input into their thinking about school desirability.

(b) Values about Quality Education & Learning:
Analysis of the data revealed that many parents in the study see a quality education as one which they described as "balanced," "academic", "challenging", "enjoyable", "focused", "accountable", offering "diversity", providing a child with "well-roundedness", "meeting their child's needs and interests", "providing the necessary foundation for college and fitting into "the broad picture as she got older". How did the parents arrive at these values about education and learning? What does the data say about these matters to shed some light on the role and influence of social networks in the development of these values?

An analysis of the data does indicate that the parents interviewed do hold very strong values about the kind of education they want for their children. However, the data indicates that, as is the case with human values development, values about education have been formed over time, can be linked to a number of different sources and may have been influenced by a myriad of experiences.

Based on the data the following observations can be made: Most of the parents in the study talked about two major influences on their thinking and values regarding the kind of education they were seeking for their children. The first was their knowledge of and confidence in the
particular school, either based on their own schooling experiences there or those of a close family member, or secondly their knowledge of their own public schooling experiences which they used as a comparison to what they believed was not happening in public education today. All parents in the study admitted being “products of public education” or at least having spent some time in public school.

From when I was going to school, I think most of us 30’s, 40’s 50’s, we went to public school all the way through and it was excellent. We went to school, we went to college and again it is just the dysfunctional one way, this way, I don’t know... [Parent 12, Mar. ’09].

They all claimed to have been well served, for the most part, by the experience. That same parent put it like this,

I went to the original public [school name] and I turned out just fine, been educated very well. The majority of our parents and adults... they still turned out fine and they all did wonderful... doctors, lawyers, nurses, they all came out of the public system [Parent 12 focus group, Mar. ’09].

Add to that the fact that a particular school may also factor heavily in a family’s schooling history almost like a family tradition, and some parents suggested that the school selection was pretty much decided upon. However, many of the parents interviewed, acknowledged that times
have changed and although these experiences of their own schooling history and their family’s tradition with a particular school factored heavily in their thinking, what sealed the deal for them was what they were hearing about and learning about schools more recently, either from other people or in the media. These influences overrode in every case, the parents own public school experiences or family history and resulted in the ultimate selection of a private school. One parent put it this way,

I liked our system before and that was the primary reason ...and that was one of the reasons we chose the school that we have because it was like how we went to school, so that was really a big factor and I had hoped that when a lot of the school changes came out, I was just having my children and I had hoped that by the time they got to the middle schools part, it would have been sorted out and when it wasn’t, it was like...you know what, I am not doing this ... [Parent 04, Feb. ’09].

As several parents pointed out and one actually said, “Bermuda is small... everybody else talks...” Other parents acknowledged the power of word-of-mouth as well as the impact of the media and its portrayal of education in the public and private sectors. A parent put it this way: “The media does a good job in portraying a school in a certain way also...they either hype up one program or they hype up a fight ...the media does a great job of portraying what they want...” Parents in the study, despite the values they
expressed about education, which they seemed to base on their own schooling experiences and those of their families, could not be persuaded that they would find these same or similar experiences for their children in Bermuda's public school system today and so selected in each case a private school.

Parents also expressed the belief that "you get what you pay for", and therefore their willingness to make the decision and in some cases, what was described as, the "sacrifice" to school their child privately, was an indication that they valued a quality education enough to pay for it. Several parents in the study acknowledged that they would have preferred to put their money toward college later on rather than middle and high school now, but were happy they had the option to do so, unlike other parents in Bermuda whom they believed may not be able to pay for private school even if they would have liked to. On the subject of parental choice, a parent said, "Adults, we don't like it when people tell us this is what we have to do...", and parents who cannot afford private school were seen as having limited choices. The parents in the study valued the fact that they, however, had more of a choice and in exercising that choice, were able to select schools which allowed them to get the educational experience they
wanted and valued for their child. The data also indicated that parents demonstrated the extent to which they valued education by their willingness to be involved in their child’s school, to talk to their teachers and administrators; as well as the amount of effort they put into the decision making and the importance they placed on selecting the right school.

One parent summed it up as follows,

Maybe if the [public] system was secure, we parents wouldn’t need a choice; if the system wasn’t secure enough I wouldn’t have a problem with my child going to [public school]. But we don’t have faith in the system...and I don’t think they ended up to private school based on the standards, it is the lack of confidence we have in the system. I have always said I went through the public system and it was fine. I would have kept my child in public if it was like it used to be. Why would I spend all this money when I could save it for college [Parent 12, Focus group, Mar. '09].

(c) Expectations for School Performance and Success

Analysis of the data also reveals that parents were motivated intrinsically by their high expectations for their children’s school performance and success in school. Several parents made it very clear that they expected their children to work hard in school, to make education a priority and to work toward higher education. One put it this way:
Our concern was that if we put her in public she may be relaxed and complacent despite the best ... she might not have (experiences) to keep her challenged. There was also the concern that if she wasn’t challenged, that she would be led astray, thinking about the broad picture as she got older, that was also the key for u... but just to keep her focused and also she was smart enough to know that if mommy and daddy’s paying for it, I had better pay attention, I have got to do what I need to do [Parent 01, Feb. ’09].

Selection of a school was aligned with these expectations and in those few reported cases when parents received feedback that might have caused them to question their selection in any way, they decided to use the information “to teach their child important lessons” or they simply considered the messenger and acknowledged that “everyone’s experience was not the same.” Parents also expressed expectations that the quality of their child’s work should be of a high standard. They reported visiting classrooms in some cases, examining student work, comparing their child’s work to that of other students, and asking questions of educators about standards and accountability of students and teachers. Many felt that in public school, students were allowed to move on to the next grade even though they may not have met the standard set, and some expressed the belief that the standards that were set were too low and did not meet their child’s needs. One parent said of this:
Level of performance...low performance rates in the public system...at [private school] you have a standard. What is the standard in the public system? The standard is not good enough...to get a good performance you assist the individuals to rise to the occasion you don't lower your standards for those others in the classroom who are not doing well. I think that the system does not have a high standard...[Parent 12, Feb. '09].

In every case, the parents in the study expected their child to go on to college or university whether they themselves had done so or not. The data clearly indicated that this was an expectation that was unequivocal for each of them. One parent said of her child, to emphasize the expectations that she had for her child's education,

My child is going to go to higher education...kicking and screaming if that is how it is...you know what I'm saying not that is how it is, but that's important to me...and I want to have parents who have the same expectation I do...[Parent 08, Feb. '09]

(d) Knowledge of Child & Parenting Skills

Analysis of the data indicates that an important intrinsic motivator for parents was their knowledge and understanding of their child's needs and interests and how this influenced their selection of a school. Every parent in the study talked about their child's abilities, interests, personality and/or needs, and indicated that
these were pivotal in guiding their decision-making about
schools. Some admitted to actually involving the child in
the process of decision making by seeking their
input...others sought input from individuals who "knew their
child well", had children with "personalities similar to my
child", or had children from "a variety of academic
backgrounds" who could give input. In this case, it seems
that the parent began with their own knowledge of their
child and looked for input from others within their various
social networks to help them make a good match or find "a
good fit" for their child based on the information shared
about the schools. One father said,

I think the main thing is that I need to know is that
my son is going to feel comfortable in the
surroundings um you know, comfortable with his safety,
comfortable with his academic level, you know, so
these things are things that you have to make sure
that you and the child feel comfortable with [Parent
14, Mar. '09].

Some of the parents even shared their desire to protect
their children from some of the negative experiences they
had observed or heard about in public schools. They
expressed the fact that they did not want their children to
"be treated as an outcast", be bullied or hurt by teasing,
name calling or to be exposed to more socially
inappropriate behaviors. Although most parents
acknowledged that these things could happen in any school, they all believed this to be less of a concern in Bermuda's private schools. In seeking this kind of school climate and culture for their children, the parents drew on their knowledge of their child's needs, interests and personality type in an effort to find a learning environment in which their child might be happy and continue to thrive. Another parent said of his son,

He was adamant that he did not want to go into the system [public] um the middle school he was supposed to go into because of what goes on. He is a very academic student plus he is very into sports, but he did not want to get caught into the fighting, the bullying like that and he was adamant that he just wanted to do his work and go on. You know, just advance, and he felt that this would keep him back, and he was adamant that he did not want to go. I really looked into the private sector and that is what caused me to do that [Parent 15, Mar. '09].

e) Parents' Intuition & Fears

Some of the parents in the study talked about the influence of their "gut feelings" on their decision-making when selecting a school. They referred to how they felt when they visited a school, visited classrooms, talked to some of the people there, and observed the students and staff interactions. They discussed how they were influenced by these intuitive impressions when making their decisions. One parent described this influence as follows:
I am one of those people who are very intuitive, so I get a general feeling for the school if I go in a place and say you know what...no... I don't care how good the curriculum is.... I have lived my whole life like that.... You know what I started to feel when I went into different classrooms ...and I could feel that the children were happy there, I could feel whether they enjoyed being there...and that was important to me [Parent 04, Feb. '09].

Another parent, when speaking about her visit to the school said,

I do go on my feelings, I am like a person, feeling like the vibe I get, if the vibe isn't good, I don't go with it...you go by your gut feeling and my gut feeling has never ever turned me wrong, so I stick to my gut feeling, it is just something that has not steered me wrong yet and 90% of the time I have been right so I stick with it [Parent 11, Feb. '09].

While still another said,

What they did, they allowed us to go in and to also see the work that the children had done during the course of maybe a quarter or a year, depending on when we went. So we get a real feel for the work environment that was there [Parent 03, Feb. '09].

These impressions or intuitive feelings that parents spoke about seemed to come as a result of actual visits to the schools, from observations and interactions with people on the school campus. Although these parents indicated that they relied heavily on their feel for the place, this impression did appear to come as a result of some social networking which took place on the school site.

Parents in the study also alluded to how fear, another intrinsic motivator, influenced their decision making and
school selections. Some spoke of being protective of their child because of some of the environmental issues they had identified in public schools, some expressed concern about the negative peer pressure and antisocial behaviors they had heard about or witnessed, and others were fearful of the unknown and placing their child in a middle and senior public school system which seemed to "lack direction" and was fraught with uncertainty and constant changes. One parent said about selecting a school,

So I think the characteristics of a school was just the knowing...and with most for me, with most parents that are just not in the know, they have a fear of something going wrong...i.e., not being able to have a good relationship or good rapport with the individual teachers because the school is so big... [Parent 12, Mar. '09].

A few parents even spoke about the need for their child as an emerging adolescent to have a more disciplined and structured school environment than they had in primary school, to ensure they stayed focused and on track. They were concerned that such an environment was not there for them in the public system:

Over the years I had received information on various private schools, so I had some information on that already so we could decide...our decisions were based on ...for our children and whether we thought they would fit within those environments. The school had to meet a certain academic standard for us and if they met that standard, then the next important thing would be whether they actually suited our child. There were several schools that got ruled out, you know, because
of that they just did not suit our children's personality. Mostly all of them met the academic standard, except for the public schools, but a lot of even the private schools did not make the environment we were looking for which is why we ended up choosing the way we did [Parent 08, Feb. '09].

**Extrinsic Motivators**

The data analysis in this study identified a number of extrinsic motivators which parents used when selecting their child's school. These motivators tend to fall into the 2 basic categories of:

(a) Objective sources

(b) Subjective Sources

**Objective sources**

The data analysis revealed that parents identified several types of objective data as influencing their school choice decision making. They referred to: (a) graduation rates and exam results, (b) dropout rates, (c) school curricula and extracurricular programs, (d) number of days in school year, (e) the actual structure of the schools, (f) school location, (g) school choices available, and (h) school costs and scholarships.
Most of these types of data were collected from school websites, school information packages, orientation meetings, open houses or through the print and electronic media. In almost all cases, the school itself would have provided the data to parents or intermediaries like the media, and would have determined what data was to be shared and when. Parents, who reported having developed positive relationships with school personnel or having a personal history with a particular school, would have additional reasons to trust the school information shared and to see it as a reliable gauge of the school's effectiveness and success. As one parent stated,

Out of the public school system [school] would have been a choice again ... past experience with family going there. My niece just came from there and a few of the teachers that are there now I know. Um and I felt that the structure of the school, what they bring to the table, what I've seen they have been able to achieve ... what I've seen just in the few years she has been there and just being able to have a good relationship being in the ... zone... to me, if she didn't get to [private school] she probably would have gone to [public school] ... I went to [public school] and the principal ... was my best teacher ... but I just thought [public school] would be a better fit for her [Parent 12, Mar. '09].

This is particularly true for data reported on graduation rates, test results and dropout rates which parents receive either from the Ministry of Education in the case of public schools or directly from the private schools themselves.
One parent in the study claimed that she "heard that teachers [in public school] were lowering the GPA required for graduation in order to increase the graduation rate." Parents in the study believed that graduation rates in private schools were very high by comparison and none challenged this information even though some acknowledged that, unlike the public schools, "the private schools can ask students who are not performing to simply leave''. In these cases, social networking and positive or negative relationships with schools appear to enhance the influence of such information on the parent's decisions about school selection.

Of course, the media in Bermuda elicits various reactions from the public, depending on one's personal experiences with it, and in a few cases parents reported ignoring the media's information about schools completely or responding to such information in a very cursory way because of this very issue.

One parent said,

I get all kinds of opinions and then again like you said visiting the school, getting the curriculum down, how is the general feel of the school? Does it feel comfortable? Does it feel like it is peaceful? Does it feel like a war zone going on? Um those are the kinds of things certainly the media can make or break a school... [Parent 04, Focus group Mar. '09].
Parents all indicated that a school’s curriculum was of interest to them and influenced their decision-making. However, the extent to which parents actually researched a school curriculum ranged from “looking specifically at IB and AP programs... in depth on line and making comparisons”, to ensuring the curriculum “included at least 2 foreign languages and music”, to hardly looking at the curriculum at all. One parent said,

No, we never actually looked at the curriculum, we recognized at that point in the school we looked at...ah we’re older but we had some idea about the GCSE’s and IB, we had ideas about GCE’s at the time I don’t think Government was doing B.S.C...no, I think a lot of it was predicated upon ah maybe our existing beliefs about what we thought was there, but more than that we had friends who taught there and have also previously taught in public...we had information to compare and you know we knew there is no perfect environment, we believed that this was a better environment for her...we believed this was a better environment for her [Parent 18, Mar.'09].

In this case, the subjective information from educators had far more of an influence on the parents’ decision making than did familiarity with the actual curriculum.

Subjective sources

Parents identified a number of external motivators, which can be classified as subjective sources of information, that influenced their thinking when selecting
a school. Analysis of the data shows these subjective sources to be: (a) the wishes of child or other family members,
(b) school experiences of other parents and children (c) desirability factors of schools, (d) commitment and involvement of other parents, (e) international influences, (f) misalignment between tiers in public education, (g) instability and uncertainty associated with public education’s restructuring, (h) teacher, school, system accountability, (i) societal ills, and (j) negative peer pressure and violence in schools.

All of these extrinsic motivators were included in the data by parents and can all be categorized for the most part as subjective sources of information. Parents reported gleaning a great deal of their information about what happens in schools from other people in many of their social networks. In some cases they sought out other parents who had children in the school to get their feedback on the school experience; in others, they spoke directly to the children themselves or observed them in the school environment. Parents reported talking with people they trusted like family members and close friends; people who were colleagues at work or fellow congregants at
church; people who were merely acquaintances educators in
government and private schools; and in a few cases, with
complete strangers. In the main, parents indicated that
these sources of information involving individuals from so
many of their social networks were very influential in
their decision making and school selections. One parent
described this influence from her social networks this way:

If we had opportunities to talk to other parents we
made sure that we did that, as well as with the
private schools. We talked to other parents in the
private schools too; a lot of them were already
friends of ours...a lot of opportunities to talk to
other parents when they did that tour or whatever, so
if they had other parents meeting with you, giving the
tour, you could chat with those parents. And with the
public schools it was mostly just parents that we know
with children at the schools [Parent 08, Feb. '09].

While still another parent said about getting information
on schools,

In Bermuda I find it easy since it is such a small
community...so it came from family in France, from
clients and teachers in both schools, from friends,
from parents who had already had their kids in private
school, from experiences of other parents in both
systems but also I found that my husband went to
[private school] at the time it was a public school, but operated as a private school at the time when he
was there [Parent 13, Feb.'09].

In most cases this information appeared to have been
confirmed by parents' direct observations at various
schools or their own experiences with schools and teachers.

In many cases, parents also relied on their own memories of
"the way it was" for them in school, to line up with what they were hearing about certain schools today. However, where there were discrepancies between past experiences and the present information, they tended to go with the present day information even if it was not gathered from first-hand experiences but from the experiences of others in their social networks.

Analysis of the data further reveals that many of the extrinsic motivators which parents reported were influenced by their own experiences in public school, their observations and assessments of the current status of public and private schools. One parent said, when speaking about what influenced her choice,

Stability was one of the main things - stability meaning that with the public school you had such a change from primary to middle and then there was just so much unsettlement in the air and no clear indication about [public school]. That was the main reason when we were going through the process of choosing a private school they were going to close (public school), do you really want to put your child in... [Parent 03, Feb. '09]?

In particular, some of the parents in the study observed the behaviors of other parents and decided that, in the case of some public school parents, these behaviors were found to be wanting and would not help to create the
learning environment they wanted for their child. One parent said of this:

I am looking at some of the parents that came and it’s, like, do I really need to be there? I am looking at the parents and that’s it to me... shows you how some of the children act, you know, and I was appalled at how some of them acted ...I saw some of the other parents and they were on cell phones being so disrespectful, um like well if the parents are like this, what the devil are the children like? And I looked at that and I said OK if she has to come here, fine, but I would have to let her know that you don’t follow your friends, but some of the parents are awful...you know, all ghetto. Do I want my child mixing with these children? Not at all [Parent 11, Feb. ‘09]!

Other parents raised the issue of parent involvement in education and how they observed it to be poor in public schools, compared to what they were experiencing in private school.

Several parents expressed concerns about the inhospitable nature of public school climates and how they reflect the many societal ills Bermuda is experiencing at present. They saw these factors as being important reasons why they did not want their children in public school any longer, as most of the disruptive and antisocial behaviors were seen to be prevalent in the middle and senior schools. Parents reported coming to these conclusions mostly from firsthand experience with their own children in primary school, older siblings or close family members who had gone
further in public school. One father expressed it this way:

Being that my son went to public school ...one of his biggest challenges was dealing with bullying and because he was sort of a gifted student, always getting high marks and honor roll, students would single him out as being a nerd...and it was rather confrontational form time to time and that is why he embarked on taking jujitsu lessons and after he had to, ah, express himself using his learned skills he wasn't harassed as often as he was before, but ah I didn't think that ah I wanted to find an environment that was non confrontational or has as little confrontation as possible because I know that [in] the public system he was seen as an outcast. I didn't want him to have that challenge in the private sector. I figured it would exist mind you but not at a certain level... [Parent 17, Mar.'09].

Some parents also reported that media reports on the subject had influenced them, as had direct observations when they had visited some of the public schools.

Another extrinsic motivator for parents found to be prevalent in the data was their view of the current status of the public education system reform efforts. Most parents saw the public system as being inconsistent, unstable, and failing to hold itself, its principals, teachers and students accountable. This lack of accountability was reported by the parents in the study to be a major reason not to choose the public system beyond primary school. They expressed concerns regarding the public school system about low standards, poor student
performance and work quality, a lack of challenge and rigor in the curriculum, underperforming teachers who are kept on, too many unaligned transitions from one level to the next, social promotion policy, disrupted learning environments, lack of geographical and racial diversity through the feeder system, restricted school choice, and a lack of Ministry leadership and planning. One parent even noted Bermuda’s recent efforts to follow the lead of certain international jurisdictions whose model for reform has failed to bring about success for students. She said, when referring to how the system had changed and is operating,

I think that that whole mega system has created some of those issues...it is creating some of those issues that she spoke about with children being at so many different levels...and I just look at it this way, if it weren’t broke don’t fix it. I was told by a senator that the reason they did this was because boys weren’t passing the 11 exams so they weren’t getting into certain schools, so again it goes back to standards. If boys were not passing, bring up their standards or work with them to change that, not necessarily change the whole system, and the system doesn’t work in other countries...so why do we do it here [Parent 04, Focus group, Mar. '09]?

Research Question #3:

What kinds of social networks do Bermuda parents utilize for decision making purposes?

Types of Social Networks
Parent responses in the data indicate that a number of different sources of information served to provide or affect extrinsic and intrinsic motivators in school selection process. The summary information follows in Table 5.

The analysis of the data from parents' one-on-one interviews, and from the focus group discussion, indicates that parents use a variety of social networks to aid in decision making, particularly decisions relating to school selection. Social Network theory refers to 3 basic forms of social networks: egocentric, sociocentric and open-system networks (Kadushin, 2004). In this study, parents reported using social networks from all three of these categories.

| TABLE 5 |

Information Sources Reported by Parent Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PARENT REPORTED INFORMATION</th>
<th># of Parents in Sample (19)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>OTHER PARENTS &amp; STUDENTS</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FAMILY</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Identifying Information Source as Influential in Decisions
Parents reported using information gathered from children, close friends and relatives, many of whom also had close relationships with one another. These relationships represent egocentric social networks. Sociocentric networks describe those relationships which are defined by a particular grouping of people within a particular context such as former teachers, co-workers, clients, church congregants or children in a particular class or engaged in a particular activity. This form of social networking was also utilized by parents in the study and was deemed to be very influential. Open-system networking, where the boundaries are unclear, would seem to describe the kind of networking that occurs through happenstance or because of geographical proximity like
living close together on a very small island and only sharing, when necessary, a common experience as parents might do when faced with the similar decision of school selection for their child.

Many of the parents in the study relied heavily on their various social networks to help them with their decision in selecting a school for their child. In some cases, they relied on these sources of information almost exclusively, especially those networks involving the child himself or those children of family members and close friends. Most parents reported that the influence of information from social network sources was greater than that of school information packages, website information and other more objective data sources.

In response to the interview question about the greatest influences on their school selection decision parents reported these to be the following:

- child's best interest and needs
- rigorous school curriculum
- poor standards and current state of public education
- harmonious school climate

Research Question #4:
To what extent are the kinds of social networks used by parents related to their socio-economic backgrounds?

Social networks and Socioeconomic backgrounds

An analysis of the research data to determine how the social networks used by parents relate to their socioeconomic backgrounds was limited to an analysis of socioeconomic status of the parent participants derived from their reported demographic data relative to the number of parents in household, Bermuda status and race. These factors are linked to the group household income data compiled by the Bermuda Department of Statistics during the 2000 Census, and do provide some indication as to the estimated socioeconomic status of the study’s participants.

Since socioeconomic information relating to income was not solicited during the data collection process, and is not available for individual residents through tax returns and the like, it was necessary to examine some of the other indicators of household income for the parent participants.

Three indicators that were identified are:
(a) Bermudian or Non Bermudian, (b) Racial origin (Black, White or Mixed/Other), and (c) Household type (2-parent or 1-parent household). These three categories were chosen
because they are used by the Bermuda Department of Statistics to compare household income data for Bermuda residents on what is referred to in the Census Report 2000 as Households' Relative Economic Position.

The data relating to the Relative Economic Position for Bermudian and non-Bermudian residents (Bermuda Census Report, 2000) for the three racial categories included are as follows:

**TABLE 6**

Relative Economic Position of Bermudians and Non-Bermudians

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CHARACTERISTIC OF HOUSEHOLD</th>
<th>POOR (LESS THAN )</th>
<th>NEAR POOR ($35,831 TO $44,789)</th>
<th>MIDDLE CLASS ($44,790 TO $107,493)</th>
<th>WELL TO OVER ($107,4 93 &amp; % OVER %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>REFERNCE PERSON White Bermudian</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Non- Bermudian</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Bermuda Census Report, 2000 indicates that the largest percentages of people in Bermuda who fall into the Middle Class and "Well-to-Do" categories for Relative Economic Position are white non-Bermudians followed closely by white Bermudians.

Data which looks at Household Types and Relative Economic Position in 2000 is displayed in Table 7.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic of Household</th>
<th>POOR (LESS THAN $35,831)</th>
<th>NEAR POOR ($35,831 TO $44,789)</th>
<th>MIDDLE CLASS ($44,790 TO $107,493)</th>
<th>WELL TO DO ($107,493 &amp; OVER)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mixed/Other Non-Bermudian</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
A further examination of parents' socioeconomic backgrounds involved an analysis of statistical data obtained from the Bermuda Department of Statistics using income data which had been linked to census districts. These data are as follows:

The 19 parents in the study sample reported the following demographic data, as presented in Figures 4, 5 and 11 and relate to the indicators used above.
Bermudian & Non-Bermudian

Number of Parents by Bermuda Status

Figure 11
The majority of parents who participated in the study can be classified as Bermudian adults living in 2-parent households who identified themselves as Black. The economic data included in the Census Report 2000 indicate that individuals in these groupings tend to fall in the Relative Economic Position (Census Report, 2000) classified as middle class and well-to-do with household incomes ranging from $44,790 to $107,000 and over. Parents in the study, when reporting on the social networking they used to help them with their school selection decisions, referred to using the 3 types of social networks - egocentric, sociocentric and open-system networks.

All parents discussed the use of egocentric networks which seemed to have no relationship at all to their socioeconomic background. Parents spoke of seeking input, counsel and feedback from close family members, good friends, and acquaintances. The extent to which these contacts were impacted by socioeconomic differences among parents cannot be determined from the data. Parents, in every case, reported making these type of contacts, although in the case of the four parents who were non-Bermudian, their access to their immediate family members for input about the local education system would
have been limited, since most of these family contacts would be some distance away in another country. One parent admitted that she and her husband, who had come from another country to Bermuda a few years earlier, relied on input from other parents and their children that she may or may not have known before. As her nuclear family was relatively new to the country and unfamiliar with the education system, she said,

Well, children of my friends, not really friends but acquaintances, um yeah I asked them, "What is it like? Do they like the school? How do they do at the school? Do the parents like the school?" I think I was just kind of hesitant. I wanted to somehow get to the schools, I just don't know how...I just don't know how...and (with) only one child but I have all the time, but I was just kind of hesitant. I was really shy to go to the school and ask them. I approached mommies and daddies. I kind of backed off that plan and asked the parents [Parent 19, Mar. '09].

She and her husband, with her daughter's input and that of her primary 6 teacher, finally made their choice.

Bermudian parents in the study would likely have had a larger network of contacts from which to gather information than did the non-Bermudian parents, as their lives in Bermuda were more established and included much history with the local school system. Many parents referred to their own schooling history in public education and the people they knew in education currently who were connected
to this history. One parent talked with people at her old 
nursery school, another met with her former teacher and her 
husband's former teacher, both of whom were now private 
school administrators. In these cases the common 
educational history made the contact easier to make and the 
input derived more valuable and credible to the parent.

All but one parent interviewed was currently in the 
Bermuda workforce, and so the majority of participants can 
be described as representing two-parent families and 
working adults. As such, the parents in the study also had 
social networks which they formed in the workplace. Many 
parents in the data did refer to seeking input during their 
decision making, from clients, co-workers, colleagues, "my 
boss", and other folks who may have been a part of the 
sociocentric networks they had. Some parents also talked 
about the contacts they had with members of their church 
and Sunday school, as well as those who had faced the same 
decisions as they had faced a few years earlier and were 
seen as good sources of information about a school.

Um well the experience of others ... my boss was an 
alumnus of [private school] and another friend of 
mine, two of her kids go to [private school] and I 
love those kids, they are really...and another cousin of 
mine, she is back in the Philippines, already, her son 
got to [private school] and it is a Catholic 
school...[Parent 19, Mar.'09].
There were some data to indicate that for some parents, the kinds of social networking that they found themselves in served only to convince them that they did not want to "put their child in that melting pot" or have them associate further with those types of children. For example, some parents talked about what they learned and observed when visiting certain schools. The parent described it this way:

We thought that there was a lot of affluent children there that may, the children were affluent enough beyond our means that that could present a problem for our child feeling like he fit in, but when I say that it would not have been the deciding [factor], because if I felt that all other things were beneficial enough, I would have chosen the school. It was one limiting factor that I thought could be an issue [Parent 08, Feb. '09].

Another parent acknowledged that she saw the possibilities for her child to get scholarships and into a good college increase based on the private school she attended.

A few parents reported in the data that they had served as PTSA presidents and had attend and held meetings with many other parents at their respective schools. In this capacity, they also reported hearing many of the concerns of other parents about the schooling experience they were having and all of this information may have factored into their decision making when it was time for them to make a school selection for their child.
One such parent said,

Parents complained about that a lot, that and the whole learning support thing...their children, I was appalled in my last year at public, I was really like couldn't believe it, the student wasn't getting what he needed from the classroom so the teacher was being paid to tutor him at lunch time and I'm like no, if they are not doing their job in the classroom, they need to do it for free or some other time... I was in disbelief when a parent told me this. She was also a PTA member [Parent 04, Feb.'09].

Some parents in the study discussed how their particular occupation or volunteer role in their child's school afforded them an opportunity to speak with a number of different people, many of whom were teachers and other educators who had valuable information to share about public and private education. One parent said,

In the salon I do have people that I don't know, so they might be willing to share when we come across the subject. So we can call these people strangers since sometimes I came across people once that I don't know from anywhere else [Parent 13, Mar.'09].

And another parent said of her sources:

My husband's boss, a few who we knew as friends, and I have a colleague here [at work] whose niece goes to that same school. Word-of-mouth does get around I will say that, asking general questions and I asked the general public there was a reputation they seemed to have maintained for some of them not all of them, some of the private schools had maintained their reputation [Parent 01, Feb. '09].

The parents in the sample who identified themselves as professionals were very clear that they had made many of
these kinds of network contacts during the decision-making process, and found the information they gleaned from educators about public and private schools in particular to be very compelling. One parent summed it up this way:

There are a lot of behavioral issues I understand from teachers and counselors that are there. So those are things that I think and I can't even say that maybe the students that go to private schools have parents that are more involved, but I wouldn't say that that is necessarily so across the board...but you tend to get more focused students in private school [Parent 04, Feb. '09].

The research in the study was conducted over a six-week period extending from mid February to the early April 2009. One-on-one, 1-hour, semi-structured interviews and a 2-hour focus group were used to collect most of the data. The semi-structured interviews were all recorded and subsequently transcribed by the researcher for analysis. The study's volunteer participants were all provided with the open-ended interview questions prior to the interview and were asked to sign an informed consent form (Appendix A) when they arrived for the interview. At the end of the interview, participants completed a demographic checklist.

The purposeful sample ultimately used in this research was drawn from the population of parents derived from the Ministry of Education’s Student Management System database.
These parents met the researcher's criteria for the study. That is to say, parents deemed eligible for the study had to have moved their child from public to private school or private to public for the school year 2008-9. The child also had to be moving from primary 6 to middle 1 or year 7. There were a total of 80 parents in the population who met these criteria and, of that number, 75 had moved a child from public to private school and 5 had moved a child from private (this number included 2 home schools or tuition sites) to public schools. Database reports were requested from the public system database manager with the permission of the Ministry of Education and represented these 2 categories of students and parents. The students' names were listed on each report alphabetically by sending or receiving public primary school name. Each report also included information relating to student gender, Bermudian status, Lear level Destination School, and parent name and contact telephone information.

The researcher selected a purposeful sample from these reports making every effort to ensure that a diverse and representative sample of parents was solicited for participation. The researcher, in seeking diversity and good representation for the sample, considered the following categories in the population data: (a)
Destination school, (b) Gender of student, (c) Gender of parent, and (d) Bermuda Status of parent/child.

The researcher, in an effort to get at least 20 parent participants for the study, wanted to ensure that a full range of Bermuda’s private and public schools were represented, along with male and female students who were both Bermudian and non-Bermudian. Fifty-one of the seventy-five parents (66%) on the public to private school report were contacted initially by the researcher by telephone. Of that number, only four parents refused to participate any further, with the majority of them agreeing to share their email information and to have a letter of solicitation, interview questions and informed consent form sent to them. Six parents could not be reached at all because of incorrect phone numbers or phones of out of service. Some parents, for whom messages were left, did not return the researcher’s call. Follow-up contacts were made to some parents as many as three times, to encourage participation. These solicitation efforts resulted in a sample of 19 parent participants. Four of the nineteen participants also participated in the focus group discussion.
The five parents in the second database report who had transferred their child from private to public schools could not be interviewed for the following reasons: (a) 2 parents moved their child to the school where the researcher was the principal, (b) one parent was known personally to the researcher, (c) one parent was unavailable due to illness, and (d) one parent declined participation.

This situation presented a limitation for the study as it clearly excluded any data from parents who had chosen to move their children from private to public school.

Parents in the sample break down as follows:

- 15 Bermudians
- 4 Non Bermudians
- 16 Mothers
- 3 Fathers
- With 10 female children
- and 9 male children
Parent Profiles based on Demographic Data

**PARENT PROFILES**

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Figure 12

Number of students transferring to Individual Private schools

**Student Private School Transfers**

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Figure 13
The interviews were conducted as soon as they had been arranged with each of the volunteer participants. Interviews took place at various times during the day and were arranged at the parent’s convenience. They were held, in most cases, in a private office at the researcher’s school. A few interviews were conducted on the weekends, two were conducted at the parent’s workplace, and one in a parent’s home as she had a very young child. All participants were asked the open-ended interview questions which were shared beforehand with parents and some probing follow-up questions were used to clarify information or to encourage parents to expand on their response. All interviews were recorded with the parents’ permission and informed consent forms were signed. Parents also completed a demographic questionnaire at the conclusion of each interview which lasted on average about one hour. The focus group was conducted in a private conference room at the researcher’s school on a Saturday and, although nine parents had agreed to participate initially, seven confirmed once the date was set and four turned up on the day to participate.
Although parents were not specifically asked about their occupation during the research, the data and observations by the researcher indicate that most participants were white color workers, professionals or middle class individuals. Most participants were also found to be in two-parent households, Bermudian and Black.

Summary of findings:

The analysis of the data in this qualitative study involved a thematic content analysis approach. Each of the four research questions became the focus for the analysis and synthesis of the data and the findings were organized in response to each question.

The overarching research question:

What role do social networks play in parental decisions about school choice?

The four subsidiary research questions (RQ):

1. How do social networks shape parents’ definitions of "desirability" in a school?

2. How do social networks influence the intrinsic and extrinsic motivators that parents use when selecting a school for their child?
3. What kinds of social networks do Bermuda parents utilize for decision-making purposes?

4. To what extent are the kinds of social networks used by parents related to their socioeconomic backgrounds?

RQ1: How do social networks shape parents' definitions of desirability in a school?

The data relating to this question indicated five themes emerging from parents' responses. Parents, when discussing the issue of desirability in a school, focused on various aspects of the following school characteristics as ones they were looking for in a school: 1) environment, 2) population, 3) programs, 4) structure, and 5) outcomes. In each case, when parents identified these particular characteristics, they were very clear about the kind of environment or programming, etc. they sought for their child and why they did so.

Parents in the main expressed a desire to have a school environment, population, programs, structure and outcomes that they believed would best meet their child's needs and which were all available to them in the selected private school. Parents described the need for an academically rigorous learning environment where children's individual performances are recognized and catered to. Parents were looking for a school with a diverse population as far as culture and race were concerned, but a more
homogeneous one when it came to student attitudes to learning and willingness to focus and work hard at school. Parents also discussed their desire to have school environments which were peaceful, with minimal disruptions from both students and teachers alike, both issues which they reported finding very much present in private schools. Parents expressed concerns about the quality of teaching in public school, not so much as it relates to teacher qualifications, but more so as it relates to their ability to maximize the use of instructional time, either because of the numerous social issues that they believe exist or because of the range of abilities in their classes and the demands which this situation placed on them. All parents said they were seeking caring and nurturing environments for their children and most felt that, as children progressed through school to the middle and senior levels, it became more and more difficult to see such environments in the public school system. The parents in the study also looked at other parents and indicated their desire to see their child in a school where other parents were more involved and supportive of their child's education than they believed was the case in many public schools.

Parents in the study also indicated a desire to have their children with other children who had certain
characteristics which they admired and wanted for their own children. They were seeking peers to whom their child would be exposed who would both model and affirm many characteristics and behaviors which they deemed to be indicative of well-rounded and well-educated young people who were headed for a bright and successful future. Some spoke of the networking potential of the private schools, as well as the positive aspects of their diversity. Some expressed concerns about the existence of racism and classism in certain private schools, but believed that these negatives were secondary to the positives that such schools might offer their child. Parents were convinced, however, that their child would be among more focused and disciplined peers in private school, and this was by far the more desirable characteristic to be considered.

Parents talked about the desirability of a certain kind of school programming. They wanted their children to experience a well-balanced program with extensive curricular and extracurricular activities. All of the parents in the study did not take issue with the quality of education their child had received in public primary school and were very pleased with the preparation they had received, as evidenced by their admission to private schools in some cases with scholarship. However, parents
did express concerns about what they believed to be the declining standards in the public middle and senior schools and expressed a desire to see improvements at these levels in particular. Concerns about the comprehensive approach to education, which attempts to serve all comers, were also raised by many parents and were described as being very influential in their decision to move to private education.

The overall structure of the public education was problematic for many parents who were concerned about the three tiers and the resulting transitions from one level to the next; the perceived lack of accountability that exists; poor communication between home and school; and the ineffectual leadership which they believed had plagued public education over the past decade or so with restructuring, review, reform and more restructuring. Most parents talked about the need for stability, consistency and accountability in the public school system so that it could again establish itself as a viable first choice schooling option for parents.

Parents also identified as desirable, outcomes for schools and students that included increased graduation rates, alternate programs for some learners, higher standards and improved quality of work from students. Many pointed to teacher commitment, social promotion policies,
and systemic bureaucracy and lackluster leadership as being the reasons the public schools struggled with these issues and recommended change in these areas.

All parents in the study were very clear about seeking input about school desirability factors from several different sources before coming to any conclusions and making a school selection. They identified other people as the major sources of information and described several kinds of social networks through which they gleaned information. The parents, without exception, admitted to seeking out and talking with close family members, friends, work colleagues, clients, fellow congregants, educators, other parents and, even in some cases, acquaintance or strangers in order to gather the information they needed to help with their decision making. These sources were reported by most parents to be the most influential, although many also talked about making their own observations while visiting a school or moving about in the community. Some parents also visited websites, but in the main reported that their contacts within their various social networks proved to be the most helpful. One group which parents all mentioned as playing an important role in their decision-making was public school educators. Parents encountered this particular group of individuals spread
among all of their aforementioned social networks, and their information appeared to carry much more weight since they were practitioners in the public system. In general, parents also admitted to being influenced by public opinion, the media to some extent, and a school's history and reputation.

*RQ 2: How do social networks influence the intrinsic and extrinsic motivators that parents use when selecting a school for their child?*

The analysis of the data in response to research question 2 looked at intrinsic motivators of parents such as 1) beliefs and values, 2) expectations, 3) knowledge, and 4) intuition and fears.

Parents in the study discussed their beliefs about the value of education to them and their children's future, their beliefs about what a quality education should look like, and what they believed schools and school systems should offer them to deliver on these things. These values and beliefs may have come as a result of exposure to the beliefs and values of their own parents, but the data did not provide evidence of this. Many parents, however, did talk about their own educational experiences, all of which were in public schools, and expressed the belief that they had been well served for the most part and wanted something similar, if not better, for their children. Certainly,
parents' beliefs about which schools possessed the desirable characteristics they were seeking were greatly influenced by their social networks, but the data does not shed any light on how they arrived at these beliefs and values in the first place.

Parent expectations were another intrinsic motivator which became a recurring theme in the data, particularly as it related to student performance and success. All of the parents interviewed were very clear about their expectation that their child would go on to tertiary education. They also expressed the expectation that the private school to which they were paying so much money would deliver the quality of education they expected and be accountable for meeting their child's needs. The parents in the study had all completed high school and most were college graduates. The data, although it did not include occupational information, did indicate, based on demographics, that most of the parents would be classified by the Census statistics as "middle class" or "well-to-do" (Census Report, 2000). These experiences, both as college graduates and in their workplaces, would have provided social networking opportunities which affirm these expectations for their children. In some instances, parents spoke of what they did not want for their children after sharing scenarios
where they had had networking experiences with other parents that convinced them that these were not the kind of contacts they wanted for their children. Parents also reported that it was very important to them to find a good fit for their child so that the selected school would meet their academic and social needs, and interests, and they would be happy there. This intrinsic motivator of knowing their child and his or her needs could only have come from their contact and parenting experiences with that child over the years.

Many parents in the study also discussed their fears and concerns for their child when it came to antisocial and violent behaviors that their child might be exposed to in public schools. Much of this information was reported to have come either from sources they considered reliable like their own eyes, hearsay from family members, friends, educators, or from the media. No matter the source, these concerns and fears were reported to be very influential intrinsic motivators for parents when making school selections.

The extrinsic motivators which emerged from the data analysis fell into two categories. They were 1) objective sources, and 2) subjective sources. Parents reported seeking out information about graduation rates, school
curricula and scholarship information, indicating that such information was very important to them. There was no independent source in Bermuda where this information can be obtained, so parents relied on the individual schools to provide them with the answers. Other objective issues, like school location and private and public school options, were also raised as extrinsic motivators in the decision making, with parents taking issue with the forced choices in the public system and limited choices in the private system. The cost of private school was also an important extrinsic motivator which most parents in the study described as a commitment and sacrifice they were prepared to make in order to get the outcomes they wanted for their child. Although a few of the parents mentioned having scholarship assistance, most did not and indicated that it would have been their preference to spend the money later on for higher education had they had their druthers.

Many parents in the study reported that there were certain subjective extrinsic motivators that influenced their decision making. These motivators can be associated more directly with social networks. Examples such as their child's wishes factored very heavily in most parents' decisions as did the experiences of other parents and their children at the selected school. Parents who networked
with PTA contacts or attended parent meetings and school tours reported being influenced for good and, in some cases for bad, by what they experienced. Parents also shared their views of the current reform efforts of the public system and reflected on the general lack of confidence in the direction things were moving and the ultimate outcomes. Many blamed this situation on a lack of accountability from top to bottom, societal ills which are reflected in schools and the lack of autonomy that they believed public schools currently experience in contrast to private schools.

RQ 3: What kinds of social networks do Bermuda parents utilize for decision making purposes?

Analysis of the data reveals that Bermuda parents use all three forms of social networks in their decision making. They relied heavily on social networks which are described as egocentric, such as good friends and family relationships. They also called on those sociocentric networks which involve contacts made in the workplace, at church, or at the previous or selected school to provide important input into their decision making. Some parents admitted to seeking out total strangers whose children may have worn the uniform of the school of interest to
determine what their experiences were with the school. Some even cited happenstance as the way in which they connected with others on the subject of school selection and education. Parents seemed to believe overwhelmingly that word of mouth was indeed the most influential means of getting the information you needed about schools in Bermuda.

**RQ 4: To what extent are the kinds of social networks used by parents related to their socio-economic backgrounds?**

The analysis of the data did show a relationship between the social networks used by parents and their socioeconomic backgrounds. In this study, all the parents had moved their child from public school to private school. While in the decision-making process, many parents reported making contact with individuals in both private and public school to gather information to assist them in their decision making. Most parents admitted to having considered the financial consequences of their decision to move to the private sector and entered into these discussions within these networks recognizing they would have to find the money. Additionally, they utilized networks in their respective workplaces to do the same, and in every case, whether it was the boss, a coworker or a
client, they were able to get the information they were seeking. There was only one parent interviewed who was not working at the time of the study and was at home caring for a baby. Everyone else had access through their work to these networks. The non-working parent reported making several visits to schools to talk with school personnel because she and the time to do so. No parent reported being unable to find someone to talk with in any of the networks he or she used, thus indicating that these networks included people who had some knowledge or experience with private education. Those members of a network who were deemed not to be knowledgeable or uninterested in the subject were excluded from the process by the parent, or if their information was negative, tended to be discounted in the decision making.

One could induce from this data that an individual who did not work in semiprofessional or professional occupations, or who did not have a college education, might not use the same kinds of social networks as these parents. However, in this study even the few parents who might be described as blue collar workers had been able to find similar social networks that provided them with the information they sought to help them make a school selection with which they were pleased. The one difference
seems to be that workplace networks were less influential in these cases, but parental networks appear to have made up for that.

CHAPTER V
CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

The purpose of this research study was to examine how parental choice operates in a small educational environment such as Bermuda's, where parental choices are limited, by examining the impact of social networks on parents' decision-making when selecting a school. Over the past two years, a great deal of energy and resources have been expended by Bermuda's educators and policy makers alike in an effort to reform public education to improve students' outcomes. The mission of the Bermuda Public Education system, which has been crafted and re-crafted several times in the past decade, has always included the phrase "1st choice" when referring to the choice Bermuda's parents will make when selecting public education. Unfortunately, this is not Bermuda's current reality when it comes to public school enrollment, which continues to decline in comparison to that of private schools (Bermuda Census Report, 2000). Policy makers and senior education officials continue to seek answers to this plight and look for ways to improve
the quality of public education. Over the past several decades, the Bermuda government has conducted strategic planning exercises, commissioned independent reviews, mandated curricula audits, hired numerous consultants, and legislated school based accountability and given more authority and oversight to the Government-appointed Board of Education. Bermuda's public education system has been in a state of continual change for many years now. What has been the role of parents in this change process? What do parent want for their children? How do they make their decisions about school selection?

It is important to note that what stands out particularly for this researcher is how receptive parents were when contacted; how readily they agreed to participate in the study; and how eager they seemed to have a forum for expressing their opinions, attitudes and sharing their decision-making experiences, on school selection in Bermuda. Participants appeared to be very eager to give their honest thinking in answer to the interview questions posed and, although sometimes qualifying their answers in an effort not to offend anyone, parents who participated seemed anxious to finally have their say and voice their feelings and opinions about what they believe is happening
in education in Bermuda today, and why and how they made the decisions they have for their child.

The overarching research question for this study was:

What role do social networks play in parental decisions about school choice?

The four subsidiary research questions are:

1. How do social networks shape parents' definitions of "desirability" in a school?

2. How do social networks influence the intrinsic and extrinsic motivators that parents use when selecting a school for their child?

3. What kinds of social networks do Bermuda parents utilize for decision making purposes?

4. To what extent are the kinds of social networks used by parents related to their socio-economic backgrounds?

In Chapter IV, the findings that resulted from an analysis of the data collected from parents' responses to the interview and focus group questions reveal several patterns and themes which must be highlighted.

Parents reported relying heavily on information gleaned from a variety of their social networks in making their school selections. Parents shared with the researcher clearly defined characteristics that they
desired in a school and how their discussions and interactions with many different people had been very influential in helping them to come to the final decisions they made. Parents also indicated that certain of their social networks were more influential in their decision making than others. For example, all study participants reported seeking input from close friends and family members, particularly if they had children already in a school in which they were interested. Parents also admitted to deliberately seeking out other parents with whom they may have had no more than an acquaintance at best, but who were already a part of the school and had valuable inside information and experience with the school. Parents seemed to credit "word-of-mouth" as being a more influential means of getting information about schools than information received through information packages or school websites. Parents drew conclusions about what they wanted, or did not want, in a school from positive and negative information shared by others. They appeared to value hearsay, public opinion, personal experiences and the experiences of those close to them to varying degrees; all resulting from any number of their social networks.

The fact that all parents in the study were themselves the product of public education, and seemed happy about
that, only served to underscore their desire to provide for their child something more than they believed the public education system currently offered. The analysis of the parents' data revealed that there were several desirability characteristics that emerged as themes and must be highlighted.

Parents expressed a desire to have schools with the following: (a) rigorous, academic and well balanced curriculum; (b) focused, minimally-disrupted harmonious learning environment; (c) strong school-home communications; (d) accountability at all levels; (e) Higher performance standards for all; (f) performance grouping for students; and (g) stability and consistency. In each case, these school desirability characteristics were raised during interviews and reflected parents' reactions to what they had seen, heard or believed to be true about public or private schools. Many parents expressed concern that societal ills might be to blame in many cases and even "the dysfunction of the Ministry of Education", leaving public schools and public school educators with little choice as to how effectively they could respond and ultimately be able to deliver a better product.

Analysis of the data also identified several intrinsic and extrinsic motivators which parents used when selecting
their child's school. Many of the intrinsic factors, such as, beliefs and values parents held about what constitutes a quality education and the importance of a good education to one's future, were clearly evident in the data collected. What is not clear from the data, however, is the extent to which these beliefs and values had been influenced by the parents' social networks. It is true that parents sought out input from many of their network contacts when making their decision, but the data does not tell us if their beliefs and values about education were influenced by the information they gleaned there, to any significant extent. It would appear that, for the most part, parents found that the feedback they received from individuals in their social networks affirmed their existing beliefs and values, and when they did not, parents appeared to set them aside as a minority report to be treated as such and a few parents chose to use this input as an opportunity to teach their child an important life lesson. In no instance did parents report changing their minds as a result of any negative information which they received about private schools. There is, however, some evidence that social networks did have some influence on those intrinsic motivators that parents had which were classified in the data as concerns or fears. Parents gave
accounts of hearing "horrendous stories", as one described it, from educators and others about some of the anti-social behaviors occurring in public schools. They described unpleasant, hurtful and sometimes frightening experiences that they knew about either from direct experiences with their own children or as reported by others in their various networks, and were very clear about wanting to ensure that their child was not exposed to any of these in the future if they could help it.

Additionally, parents reported having concerns about the restructuring of the public school system some ten years earlier, which had resulted in the introduction of middle schools. Several expressed the sentiment that the old system had worked for them and others, and saw no reason for the change and believed the change may have contributed to many of the problems they were now seeing in public education.

Several of the extrinsic motivators which emerged from the data for parents were more clearly influenced by the social networks of which they were a part. Parents sought out information from others about such issues as school climate and culture, school programs, standards and outcomes, teacher and school accountability and communication. Some parents reported making school visits
and doing some of their own independent research, but in the main, the greatest impact on parents’ decisions in these matters seemed to come from talking with folks in their various social networks, with public school educators and family members and friends being the most influential sources.

The parents in the study were very open about using a variety of social networks, some of which they were members of already, and some which were purposeful and formed out of a need to get information from a particular group of people to help them with their decision making. In this case, parents reported talking to work colleagues and clients as well as other parents who had made similar choices recently, to help them decide, and it is fair to say that some of these contacts may not have been made had not parents been faced with this particular decision at this time. Networks became more diverse as parents were willing to expand their circles in search of relevant information.

The data provide little direct information about the relationship between the kinds of social networks used and the socioeconomic backgrounds of the parent participants. However, we can make some inductions from what we did learn from the data. For example, 63% of parents in the study
can likely be classified as "middle class" or "well to do", based on the "two parent" descriptor used in the Bermuda Census Report 2000 which identifies Relative Economic Position. Eighty-four percent of parents identified themselves as black Bermudians, 94% were currently working and 84% had a college-level education. We can induce that the nonworking parent of a two-parent household did not have access to workplace networks but did report talking to family members, friends and school personnel in her research efforts. Those parents who identified themselves as non-Bermudian did not appear to have easy access to family members on their side of the family, but did report speaking with them about their decision making, as well as with those family members who were on the island with them. Also, parents in the study sought out other parents whom they believed had experienced school selection decision making already, and would be in a position to help them learn from their experience.

In Chapters I and II, the literature review looked at three theories which seem germane to the thesis of this study. The first is the theory of Constructivism (Dewey 1902, 1956). This refers to idea that individuals construct meaning from their experiences and use that meaning to apply to new situations. There has been much
said and written about constructivism in education literature, and many have used this theory in various forms to try to explain much of human learning and understanding. In particular, the ideas related to psychological constructivism seem to be consistent with the findings of this study relating to parent decision making around school selection. Parents in the study reported relying heavily on their own experiences with schooling, their children’s experiences, and the feedback they received from others in their social networks to guide their decision making. More objective sources of information like information packages, media reports and websites were utilized but de-emphasized by parents in terms of their influence on school selections.

The second theory which was discussed earlier which has bearing on this research is Rational Choice Theory. The idea that individuals, in an effort to arrive at the optimum outcome, will consider their options rationally, look at the implications of each, narrow down their choices through an elimination process, and then make a choice which they deem best meets their needs (Bosetti, 2004). Most parents described their decision making as involving various steps which they took to gather information that they believed would help them to make the best choice for
their children. They eliminated certain options based on the information they had, then having narrowed down their choices, made a final choice with which they all reported being satisfied six months later at the time the research was conducted.

The third theory which is consistent with this study and was described in Chapter II is Social Network Theory. This theory refers to the ways in which individuals connect with each other in networks of various types and how these networks can influence social attitudes and are themselves often influenced by geography and proximity.

Researchers in the area of school choice have explored a number of relationships between school choice and such issues as student achievement, school quality and composition, peer effects, cream skimming and equity. Goldhaber's study (1997) examined some of the assumptions that school choice advocates made about parents decision making. He found insufficient evidence to say that private schools were indeed more efficient than public schools, since he found that parents who selected and paid for private schools had already demonstrated an above-average interest in their child's education by doing so, and therefore suggested that other factors had to be considered.
when assessing school efficiency such as parent support and involvement. Some school-choice opponents challenged the notion that parents could distinguish a good quality public school and would select it for performing well. Goldhaber's findings indicated that parents were more likely to choose a private school over a public school anyway, since private school estimated achievement levels tended to outstrip those in the public sector. Additionally, this only served to widen the achievement gap between public and private schools. He also found that the parents of private school students tended to have higher levels of education and, in taking advantage of choice options, leave other parents with what soon would become educational dumping grounds (Bastian, 1990; Evans, 1990).

School choice proponents also suggest that choice will empower parents to select quality, while opponents believe that parents will not be able to make such assessments about school quality and will only fall prey to school marketing. The Japanese researcher Sasaoka found in 2005 that parents who believed they had less freedom of choice under the reform efforts at the time spent more to supplement their child’s education as a result.

Studies that investigated what influences parents choice of schools looked at how parents respond on the
basis of school location, cost of schooling, social education, achievement, and cultural considerations. Denessen's research (2001) in Scandinavia revealed that parental school choices, when money was not a factor or where choice was limited, were influenced more by social and cultural considerations than by test results, religious values and school proximity. This was found to be particularly true the higher the social class. Ladd suggests that the actual composition of a school is very influential in parents' school selection, and cannot be minimized when considering the consequences of underperformance and subsequent school closures on successful schools. These studies all refer to many factors which are believed to influence the decisions parents make about school selection.

Study Conclusions

Research Question 1:

*How do social networks shape parents' definitions of "desirability" in a school?*

This study finds that, in Bermuda where school choice options are limited to either "free" public education or fee paying private education, parents who chose private
education did so for many of the same reasons, with few exceptions. The majority of parents in the study also tended to have a college education, and would be classified as middle class or above in economic status.

The study's findings indicate that parents' decisions about school selection were very much influenced by the social networks of which they were apart. They reported seeking information from primary network members like close family members, friends, as well as other parents. They also sought information from educators from both public and private schools and found this information to be very compelling. Parents reported asking individuals in their networks about such school desirability characteristics as quality of teaching, student population, school-home communications, curricula and environmental issues. All parents expressed a desire to have a rigorous academic program for their child, but most were also concerned about finding a good social climate and appropriate learning environment. Many found the current reform efforts in public education to be destabilizing and fraught with low standards, poor accountability and too many unknowns, making it impossible for them to keep their children there for middle and senior school.
Research Question 2:

How do social networks influence the intrinsic and extrinsic motivators that parents use when selecting a school for their child?

Parents in the study also indicated that there were several intrinsic and extrinsic motivators that influenced their decision-making about school choice, many of whom were influenced by their various social networks. Parents reported being influenced by such intrinsic motivators as their belief in the importance of education, their knowledge of their child's individual needs and interests, and their real concern that public education could not provide the kind of learning environment that would maximize their child's chances of success. They also reported that such extrinsic motivators as school graduation rates, exam results, school population, school culture and climate were very important in their decision making. They indicated that much of the information they gleaned about these things they learned from talking with other people in their various social networks, and in most cases confirmed through direct observation. Figlio and Stone (2001), in their research, examined how school and community characteristics relate to the characteristics of students and families to determine enrollment patterns in
public and private schools. They found that such extrinsic factors as public school concentration, pupil/teacher ratios and crime rates had a positive relationship with private school selection, with increases in the former seeing an increase in the latter. Similarly, research data contained in the 2003 Statistical Analysis Report on Home Schooling in the U.S., pertaining to the selection of home schools, indicate that extrinsic factors influencing parents in these cases had to do with environmental factors in schools, such as drugs, violence, negative peer pressure and poor learning environment. The same study revealed that parents were also influenced by such intrinsic factors as their desire to provide religious or moral instruction to their children or a desire for a better quality education. Also, the family characteristics of those choosing home schooling in this research tended to be of white families with two parent households. Research (Knowles, 1991) conducted with Canadian parents who selected home schooling indicates that their motivators were somewhat different from their American counterparts had to do more with seeking a rigorous curriculum, positive socialization and alternative values and lifestyles.

It is important to note that in this study parents relied heavily on social networks to help them in their
decision making about school choice in the absence of objective data on schools. National data on public and private school programs and outcomes are not available to parents in Bermuda in any systemic form which would allow parents to make realistic comparisons between schools and more informed choices.

Research Question 3:

*What kinds of social networks do Bermuda parents utilize for decision making purposes?*

Parents in the study reported using a variety of social networks when making school selection decisions. They reported talking with family members and close friends to help them decide. They also reported deliberately seeking out other parents whom they felt had faced and made a similar decision to what they were considering and could share their experiences with them. They reported gathering information from colleagues in the workplace, people they knew from church, educators, and others whom they believed could shed some light on the particular schools they were considering. Educators from both public and private schools factored heavily in the findings of this study as individuals who were very influential in helping parents
choose private schools over public particularly at the middle and senior school levels.

Research Question 4:

To what extent are the kinds of social networks used by parents related to their socioeconomic backgrounds?

Parents in the study were, for the most part, selecting the similar types of social networks, and the demographic data indicate that most parents in the study could be described as middle class to well-to-do by the economic relative position classification in the Census Report 2000 based on their household type, race and Bermuda status. Most parents reported that, although they believed that paying for private education was something they were prepared to do to get the kind of educational experience they wanted for their child, they found this expenditure to be in some cases "a sacrifice", "a real commitment", and even "a stretch" if they did not get some form of financial assistance. The parents did not see fee-paying as a factor of little consequence, but were prepared to do what they had to for the benefit of their child. Clearly socioeconomic background of parents was a real factor in whether private education was an option for them, but as to how this impacted the types of social networks they used
the data does not provide evidence of any substantive relationship. With the exception of the one parent who was not in the workplace and therefore did not have access to this particular kind of network, all of the other parents mentioned some form of networking that involved their workplace, friends, educators, family members, other parents and students. Research by Ladd (2003) about the impact of school choice on social divisiveness indicated that there is insufficient evidence to support the conclusion that a school's student composition heavily influences parental choice, and so to have money being the key to accessing popular schools does not bode well for other schools and the resulting impact on their continued viability and existence.

Interpretation of Findings

The findings indicate that the various social networks of the parents in the study do indeed shape their notions of desirability in a school. All of the parents reported seeking information on various aspects of a particular school from individuals in their lives whom they believed would have useful and provide reliable information and could therefore help them in their decision-making. We can speculate as to the reasons for this situation and, in
doing so, must consider the obvious issue of propinquity. Since Bermuda is such a small island community of only 22 square miles, residents have increased opportunities to access and interact with others in the community. Another reason to consider is the limited number of choices of schools in Bermuda, both in the public and private sectors. This limited choice increases the chances that parents will encounter other parents in their close social circles or in the larger community, who have had firsthand experience with a particular school and are willing to share that experience with them. Another reason which can be considered is that Bermuda parents, like parents anywhere, have formed their ideas about what schooling should be or could be from their own experiences with it. As a result, parents bring this prior knowledge to their decision-making and school selection for their children. Couple this with input they may receive from others whom they may consider to share some of their same attitudes and values about education, and these factors become very influential in their decision-making.

Parents, like all other members of the public, must rely on the media, anecdotal reports from those individuals who have direct knowledge of what is happening in schools or school-produced materials, to find out what they want to
know about a selected school. The extrinsic motivators which influence their decision-making have been reported to be primarily the social climate of the schools, the school’s academic program and the organizational structure. In each case, parents have looked to others for information, made their own observations, researched some materials and came to their conclusions. We can speculate about why it is that the majority parents seem to find information from other parents more compelling than information gathered from websites or written materials. It would appear that accessibility to these sources did not pose a problem, so maybe the reason had more to do with the desire for the human connection which parents seemed to find more reliable and relevant for their decision making. It is also interesting to speculate about the extent to which “word-of-mouth” and anecdotal reports through networking influenced some of the intrinsic motivators which parents reported. For example, parents expressed concerns about the violence and antisocial environments of public schools and their fears for their children and others who found themselves there. These fears no doubt were based on actual experiences in some instances and other incidents which may well have been exaggerated and altered in the telling and retelling, but would be none the
less influential with parents and serve to heighten or confirm their fears.

Parents in the study reported using many of the very same types of social networking to help them in their school-choice decision-making. Most parents reported talking to close family and friends, work colleagues and contacts, and educators. Few parents reported receiving negative feedback about their school selection, and it is important to consider why that is the case. This may have a great deal to do with the individuals they chose to consult with on the matter. For example, if parents spoke with other parents whose children were already at the school, they may have been less likely to say they had made a poor choice for whatever reason, while continuing to send their child to that school. In the case of educators who, by virtue of their professional responsibilities and intimate knowledge of the goings-on in schools, we can reasonably speculate that parents would find their input about private and public schools to be very credible.

In the case of the relationship between parents' social networks and socioeconomic backgrounds, there was found to be no substantive differences based on this factor. We may speculate that this is the case because parents in the study all understood that a private school
selection necessitated the payment of fees and would require a financial commitment from them. A few parents indicated that financial assistance or scholarship from the school made all the difference in the end to their final decision, but most others fell into a socioeconomic group where they felt they could manage the additional financial expense at this stage in their child's education. These same parents all spoke of working through their decision-making with spouses and other close family members, friends and co-workers. The latter group suggests that these parents were representing two-parent households, where both parents were working. The demographic data also indicated that most parents in the study had a college-level education and this too suggests that their socio economic backgrounds may have been very similar.

Strengths of the Study

The study was conducted at a time when education reform issues and efforts in Bermuda were very much at the forefront of public debate. An independent review of the public education system had been conducted in January 2007, and the subsequent report and recommendations had led to several reform efforts over the past two years which have heightened the public's awareness and focus on education.
As a result, parents were eager to participate and share their experiences and views on the subject under study. The study's target group was made up of parents who had made the decision to select a new school and move their child in the past school year and could therefore make comparisons with their previous school when discussing their selection and decision-making.

Limitations of the Study

One clear limitation of the study was the absence of data from parents in the sample who had moved their child from private to public school. Their perspective on the issues, their networking practices and influences would have provided a more balanced body of information. Although we can speculate as to why parents might make the decision to move their children in this direction and suggest financial reasons, or as in the case of home schooling, for more opportunities for peer socialization, it must be acknowledged that this is an area for further study.

Another limitation of the study may be the target group chosen. Parents in Bermuda, and elsewhere, make school-selection decisions at various points in their child's life. Although this study chose to focus on
children moving from public to private or vice versa at the end of primary school, research of parental decision-making at other points in children's lives could be done to determine how the age of the child influences the decision-making and the social networks utilized.

A limitation of the study may be the fact that parents who participated in the study were all just six months into their first year of living with their school selection. This short time frame might be characterized as the honeymoon period of living with the decision made, and therefore be too soon to expect a fair assessment of their school selection.

Recommendations

FOR PRACTICE:

The findings of this study indicate that parents in Bermuda rely heavily on three social networking sources to help them make school choice decisions for their children. These sources are: 1) the school experiences of other parents, 2) their own experience with schools and education, and 3) the information and experiences gleaned from educators. Therefore, the following recommendations are offered when considering how public education can
impact these experiences and offer a better educational option to parents.

I. The Bermuda Public School System/schools (BPSS) must provide a more socially harmonious climate in all schools where antisocial and disruptive behaviors are addressed as a priority through a variety of interventions including, when necessary, removal to an alternative learning environment.

II. The BPSS must provide opportunities for rigorous academic achievement, where students are challenged and enriched at all year-levels. Differentiated instruction, performance groupings and cooperative learning must be studied and implemented so that children can receive the quality learning experience they deserve and parents want for them.

III. The BPSS must ensure smooth transitions for students moving from each level of the system to the next. This should involve addressing and ensuring full alignment, both vertical and horizontal of curricular standards, school equity and collaborative communication.

IV. The BPSS must develop and implement a 5-10-year plan for school reform which provides for stability and consistency of systemic practices and procedures.
V. The BPSS must develop a clear marketing plan to promote what schools have to offer students and their parents, while reflecting a culture of continual improvement.

FOR FURTHER STUDY:

I. A quantitative study of student outcomes in public and private education as measured by a national criterion-based assessment.

II. A study of the influence of student gender differences on parental school choice decision making.

III. A study of the impact of developmental age of the child on parental decisions about school selections.

IV. A study of national student outcomes for private and public schools as they relate to college and university admissions and selected programs of study.

V. A study of the influences on Bermuda parents' school selection decisions when moving from private to public schools or to overseas schools.

FOR POLICY CONSIDERATIONS:

I. The BPSS must provide parents and the public at large with extensive objective data on the Bermuda school system which is derived from empirical and qualitative research
studies. Such data must be made available, if parents are to make more informed school choice decisions and do not have to rely so heavily on social networks and perceptions as information sources.

II. The BPSS must ensure stability of the system by developing and implementing a 5-10-year strategic educational reform plan which establishes clear priorities and goals with stakeholder input, transparency that addresses the following issues, and remains free of political interference.

   a. School governance that promotes equity, parental participation and ownership in the educational process.

   b. Full vertical and horizontal curricular alignment

   c. International recognition of curriculum

   d. Rigor and enrichment in the curriculum at all levels.

   e. Alternative education and matriculation options for students.

   f. Ongoing professional development for educators with improved teacher recruitment and removal procedures.

   g. Stronger home-school communication and partnerships.
h. Reculturation of the Department of Education to provide services/support to schools with systemic, participatory and visionary leadership to promote stability, collaboration and inspire public confidence.

Public education in Bermuda is the life-blood of the country. Failure to provide a quality education to all young people regardless of race, socioeconomic status or class will spell disaster for the continued stability of the country. Parents have every right to expect that they can provide their children with a quality education that will prepare them well for their futures. The Bermuda Public School system must be able to offer such an education to every child regardless of their station in life and the ability of their parent to pay for it. Necessary effective educational reform and stability in the BPSS (Christopher, 2009) must be accomplished in very short order. Every day that these efforts falter puts Bermuda’s students one step further away from having the quality education that they rightly deserve, the quality of education their parents want for them, and the quality of education their country needs. Parents are the ones who will continue to decide whether the education offered by the BPPS is desirable and they have very clear ideas about
what that should be. Parents will continue to rely heavily on other parents, on educators and on their own experiences with schools for information to inform their decision making. However, they must also have access to reliable objective data about schools. The BPSS must ensure that it does all in its power to make the schooling experiences of Bermuda children as exemplary as it can. If the BPSS can educate every child as if that child is their very own, then we will not need to be concerned about the information which parents will share within social networks, since their school selections will reflect their satisfaction with public education.

Governments are responsible for providing a quality public education that meets the needs of all of its citizens. The current trends in Bermuda's education system, which has more than 50% of school age children enrolled in private education, raises a very serious question: Is the Bermuda Government fulfilling its mandate, or is the responsibility for providing a quality education for our children now being passed to the individual citizen?
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