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# The Silent Stakeholders: A Reflexive Thematic Analysis of Student Perspectives of School Choice & Satisfaction in Australia, New Zealand and the South Pacific

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## ABSTRACT


This study examines student perspectives on school choice and satisfaction in private Christian schools across Australia, New Zealand, and the South Pacific. Using reflexive thematic analysis of focus group data from 192 students, the research explores student influence in school selection and its relationship to educational satisfaction. Findings reveal that students had minimal input in choosing their schools, with parental decisions primarily driven by faith alignment. Factors contributing to satisfaction included cultural alignment with personal faith, positive peer relationships, and constructive interactions with teachers. The study highlights the complex interplay between student agency, parental influence, and satisfaction in school choice.

## KEYWORDS

Reflexive thematic analysis; school choice; school satisfaction; student perspectives

## Introduction

While the debate regarding school choice has been ongoing for some time, the voice of the most impacted party, the children, has been neglected in recent years. Through capturing student perspectives on school choice, the potential exists for more comprehensive and nuanced discussion on the issue of school choice. This issue has become politically charged in Australia and New Zealand, with persistent debates ongoing regarding the ethics of government subsidies for families who choose to have their children educated by non-government bodies (Kidson, 2023; M. Sciffer, 2023; M. G. Sciffer et al., 2022). By the same token, discussions regarding the entrenchment of socio-economic class and social mobility have also become paramount within the debate, not just in Australia, but also on a global scale (Brown & Bøje, 2024; MacDonald et al., 2020, 2023; Windle & Fensham, 2024). While these discussions are important, they tend to put child experiences as an insignificant element in the equation.

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Potentially, the reason for children's views not being captured in the research is due to the fact that children are often viewed as being unable to engage in complex decision-making processes (Carnevale, 2021), and that parents are wanting to improve or maintain their existing social class and educational status (Beech et al., 2021; Brown & Bøje, 2024). However, these approaches reinforce Foucault's position that schooling is a central mechanism for developing the power imbalance between adults and children (Foucault, 1991). Subsequently, based on the recent research on the topic, children do not have a position in the decision-making process of which school to attend. However, this does not reflect the actuality of the situation. Mandic et al. (2018) note that children from higher income families often have more a say in which school they attend compared to their peers from lower income households. However, more recent findings in the field of school choice have not examined child voices or opinions on the matter of school choice. This demonstrates a significant gap in the existing research literature which this paper aims to address.

This study examines the experiences of students in Australia, New Zealand and the South Pacific who attend private Christian schools. The paper starts by providing an overview of existing literature in the field of school choice, and the need for greater inclusion of student perspectives in research on school choice. It then outlines the Reflexive Thematic Analysis methodology undertaken in the research, highlighting the themes present in the qualitative study. The overarching themes are discussed in depth, highlighting the commonalities found between students in different countries and discussing differences. It concludes by analyzing potential implications for policy and ways in which the debate surrounding school choice can be framed in a way that incorporates the themes arising from the student voice.

## Literature review

### *The concept of school choice: a review*

Within Australia and New Zealand, the debate about school choice has been consistent since prior to federation, with "settler schools" and "mission schools" being used to educate both the children of migrants to the new lands and the children of the Indigenous and Maori populations (Taylor & Guyver, 2012). In the South Pacific context, similar approaches were undertaken by colonizers as they sought to "civilise" the original inhabitants of the islands that they encountered (Taira, 2020). These early schools were typically funded through religious organizations who included an element of religious education into their curriculum (Ryan, 2006). Since the turn of the 20th century, debate regarding private schools has centered on the role of government funding, but has evolved to encompass broader societal implications, particularly regarding social mobility

and class structures (Brown & Bøje, 2024; Windle & Fensham, 2024). Parents often view private schooling as a mechanism to either maintain or improve their family's social standing, with education seen as a critical pathway to success through enhanced networking opportunities and potential access to prestigious universities and careers (Amatullah & Dixit, 2023). Subsequently, the concept of school choice can result in perpetuating social inequalities through economic empowerment and access to social capital and personal wellbeing (Levinson, 1999). This tension is particularly evident in families who have achieved upward social mobility and view private schooling as a means to solidify their newfound position, while those from established backgrounds may see it as a way to preserve their legacy and social capital (Al-Deen, 2018; Thrupp, 2007). While it is not within the scope of this paper to argue the appropriateness of government funding for private schools, it seeks to provide a contribution to the discussion about student perspectives on school choice.

Recent research examining parental perceptions of schooling sectors has highlighted key differences in focus and satisfaction. Cheng and Iselin (2020) found that non-government school parents reported a stronger emphasis on academic excellence compared to government school parents. They also noted that religious and social values received greater attention in non-government settings. While Catholic and Independent school parents expressed higher satisfaction with their children's school experiences overall, government and Christian school parents reported equal levels of satisfaction (Cheng & Iselin, 2020). These findings reinforce Levinson's (1999) assertion of how different schooling models balance private values with public obligations. Just as Levinson (1999) observed that schools must navigate between respecting private commitments and fostering civic virtues, the Australian non-Government schools appear to be differentiated by how they prioritize academic achievement, values education, and parent satisfaction (Cheng & Iselin, 2020). This suggests that the theoretical tensions Levinson (1999) identified between cultural coherence and civic education continue to manifest in how different schooling sectors position themselves and are perceived by parents.

However, these approaches to understanding school choice often overlook the role of students themselves in the process. To address this gap, we turn to Giddens' Structuration Theory, which provides a valuable framework for examining school choice from the perspective of student agency and experience.

### ***Structuration theory and school choice***

Anthony Giddens' Structuration Theory offers a nuanced perspective on the interplay between individual agency and social structures in the context of school choice. Giddens argues that while social structures constrain individual actions, they also enable them, and individuals have the power to reproduce or transform these structures (Giddens, 1984). Structuration

Theory posits that all individuals, including children, are knowledgeable agents capable of understanding and engaging with their environment, albeit within certain bounds. This knowledgeability is limited by unconscious conditions or consequences of actions, which in the context of school choice, might include family traditions or societal expectations that students may not fully comprehend. The theory emphasizes the importance of studying day-to-day life to understand how structures are reproduced, making the examination of students' daily school experiences crucial. Moreover, the routine of attending school serves to minimize anxiety within these structures, potentially explaining why students might express satisfaction with their school regardless of their level of input in the choice.

The theory also recognizes the significance of social identities, such as age and gender, in shaping experiences within societal structures. Importantly, Structuration Theory acknowledges that while there may be commonalities in school choice processes across different cultures and nation-states, significant variations exist that must be considered. Power dynamics play a crucial role, both in terms of the initial decision-making process between parents and children, and in the students' ability to shape their educational experience post-enrollment. Even within the constraints of their educational environment, students possess some degree of power to influence their experience and potentially reshape the structures they inhabit.

By applying this theoretical framework to the study of school choice, we can move beyond viewing students as passive recipients of educational decisions made on their behalf. Instead, we can examine how students, as knowledgeable agents, engage with and potentially transform their educational environments, even in situations where their initial choice was limited. This approach allows us to explore the apparent paradox of high student satisfaction in situations of limited choice. It suggests that students' agency is not solely expressed in the moment of school selection, but in their ongoing engagement with their educational environment. Their satisfaction may reflect not just contentment with a decision made for them, but their active participation in shaping their school experience within the given structures.

Furthermore, this framework provides a basis for examining how students' experiences and perspectives might contribute to the broader reproduction or transformation of educational structures over time. By giving voice to students' experiences, we can gain insight into how educational policies and practices are lived and potentially reshaped by those most directly affected by them.

### ***Student perspective on school choice: previous studies***

The literature on school choice has predominantly focused on parental decision-making processes and systemic factors, often overlooking the role of students as active agents in this process. This oversight aligns with traditional views of children as passive recipients of adult decisions, rather than as knowledgeable agents capable of engaging with and potentially transforming their educational environments, as proposed by Giddens' Structuration Theory (1984).

Recent trends in research have begun to challenge this perception, advocating for greater inclusion of children's voices in various domains, including education (Carnevale, 2021). However, the application of these ideas to school choice research remains limited. This gap may be partly explained by the bounded knowledgeability of students in the context of school choice decisions, where family traditions, societal expectations, and other unconscious factors play significant roles (Reay, 1995).

One notable exception is the work of Mandic et al. (2018), who conducted a quantitative study of student participation in school choice in New Zealand, examining the perspectives of 1,465 adolescents. Their findings revealed that most students reported social connections and recommendations from friends as primary motivating factors in choosing their school. This aligns with Structuration Theory's emphasis on the importance of social identities and peer networks in shaping individual choices within broader societal structures. However, Mandic et al. (2018) study, while valuable, was limited by its quantitative nature, which did not allow for in-depth exploration of the nuances in students' decision-making processes or their subsequent experiences in chosen schools. This highlights the need for qualitative research that can capture the complexity of student agency in school choice, as well as how students navigate and potentially reshape their educational environments post-enrollment.

The concept of student agency in school choice is further complicated by cross-cultural variations in educational systems and family dynamics. While some studies have touched on these differences (Al-Deen, 2018; Iner, 2021) there remains a dearth of research examining how cultural contexts influence student involvement in school choice across different countries and educational systems. Moreover, the power dynamics within families and educational institutions, a key aspect of Structuration Theory, have been under-explored in the context of student perspectives on school choice. While some research has examined how socioeconomic factors influence parental choices (M. G. Sciffer et al., 2022), less attention has been paid to how students navigate and potentially challenge these power structures in their educational journeys.

The limited research on student perspectives in school choice also leaves unexplored the question of how students' satisfaction with their schools relates

to their level of involvement in the choice process. Structuration Theory suggests that individuals have the capacity to reproduce or transform social structures through their actions and experiences. In the context of school choice, this raises questions about how students' ongoing engagement with their educational environment might shape their satisfaction, regardless of their initial level of input in the school selection process.

### Research question

The data examined here looks to address the following two questions:

**RQ1:** How much influence did students have on their choice of school?

**RQ2:** Are students who had more influence in their choice of school more satisfied with their educational experience?

The research questions above have been designed to enable an analysis through structuration theory (Table 1):

Mandic et al. (2018) quantitative study in New Zealand touches on student influence but lacks the depth qualitative inquiry could provide. By examining these aspects through Structuration Theory, we can develop a nuanced understanding of student perspectives on school choice. This approach contributes to both theoretical discussions and practical considerations in educational policy and practice, potentially informing more student-centered approaches to education.

### Utilizing reflexive thematic analysis

Reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) offers a robust method for analyzing qualitative data, particularly suited to this project's focus on student perspectives regarding school choice. RTA emphasizes the active role of the researcher in constructing themes, rather than viewing them as passively emerging from the data (Braun & Clarke, 2022). This approach

**Table 1.** Research Questions and Alignment with Structuration Theory.

Research Question	Emergent Themes from Structuration Theory
RQ1: How is student voice manifested in school choice processes?	The bounded nature of student knowledge in school choice contexts Cross-cultural variations in student involvement in school choice Power dynamics in school choice from a student perspective
RQ2: In what ways do students' experiences of involvement in school selection shape how they engage with their schooling structures post-enrolment?	Students' navigation and potential transformation of educational structures post-enrollment The relationship between student involvement in choice and subsequent satisfaction

aligns well with the project's aim to center student voices within the broader debate on school choice, which has often overlooked their experiences and opinions.

The iterative process of RTA, involving six recursive phases from familiarization to writing up, allows for a deep engagement with the qualitative survey data collected from students. This methodological approach enables the researcher to identify and interpret meaningful patterns across the dataset, developing themes that capture the nuanced experiences and views of students regarding school choice (Braun & Clarke, 2021a). The flexibility of RTA in terms of theoretical orientation is particularly valuable, as it allows the analysis to be tailored to the specific research questions and context of school choice.

Crucially, RTA's emphasis on researcher reflexivity encourages a critical examination of how the researcher's own positioning and assumptions may influence the analysis of student perspectives. This reflexive stance is essential when exploring a topic as politically charged as school choice, ensuring that the analysis remains grounded in the data while acknowledging the interpretative nature of qualitative research. By employing RTA, this project can produce rich, detailed findings that illuminate student voices and experiences related to school choice in a way that informs policy discussions and adds depth to existing debates (Terry & Hayfield, 2020). The method's capacity to develop conceptual themes that go beyond mere summarization allows for deeper interpretive insights about school choice from the student perspective, potentially reshaping how the issue is framed and discussed in both academic and policy contexts.

## Methodology

The research examined here forms part of a broader study into the lived school experiences of students in Seventh-Day Adventist schools. Data was collected from students participating in focus groups with analytical in-depth approach to group development (Acocella & Cataldi, 2021). Groups were assigned to ensure internal homogeneity with age, and a diverse range of groups within each school.

A total of 192 students were interviewed across 44 focus groups across Australia (8), New Zealand (21), Papua New Guinea (8), Samoa (4), Solomon Islands (2) and Tonga (1). Of the 44 focus groups, 37 were conducted with secondary school students (grades 7–13) and 7 were conducted in primary schools (grades 3–6). Focus groups consisted of between 3–6 participants and went for 30 minutes (primary school students) and 55 minutes (secondary school students). Participants were chosen using a convenience sampling method in conjunction with the schools. The students were chosen based on minimal inconvenience to their learning. Provided that student classes were not interrupted by the focus group; they were invited to participate. Ethics



approval was provided by the university and the South Pacific Division of Adventist Schools.

The focus groups commenced by asking participants about the process that lead them to enroll in the school. Utilizing a conversational technique, the participants were asked about their experience at the school, and to discuss some of the positive elements of the school and then discuss some of the negative elements of the school. Students were then asked to share their stories about how they came to enroll at the school and, give what had been discussed, would they make the same decision again if they had their time over. Responses were audio recorded and transcribed using Microsoft Word's automatic transcription function, and then edited for clarity.

## Data analysis

The initial stage of utilizing Braun & Clarke's RTA for qualitative research is data preparation and familiarization with the data (Braun & Clarke, 2021b). To assist in developing familiarization with the data, the researcher who coded the transcripts was also responsible for checking the transcripts for errors. Through this process, the researcher was able to develop a good understanding of the flow of the conversations and begin to generate initial codes for further analysis.

Initially, the codes were broken into two categories – positive experiences and negative experiences. However, as Braun & Clarke rightly note, RTA is a messy process and codes develop, grow and change over time as the researcher becomes more and more familiar with the data (2021b). Subsequently, the initial codes grew out from positive and negative, and broader themes emerged. As the focus groups were centered on student experiences, the themes that emerged began to be associated with different elements of school life and then tied back to the decision-making process that lead the student to enroll in the school.

It is important to note that RTA does not seek thematic saturation, but rather fosters the development of numerous themes that amplify and centralize the voices of participants (Braun & Clarke, 2021c). This approach acknowledges that the complexity of experiences in relation to school choice cannot be confined to a limited set of themes (Braun & Clarke, 2021c). Instead, it allows for a nuanced exploration of their perspectives, elevating their often-overlooked voices in the debate surrounding school choice. The iterative nature of RTA enables continuous engagement with the data, potentially uncovering new insights that further highlight student satisfaction or dissatisfaction with their schooling experiences. Consequently, the themes discussed below are not exhaustive but represent those most pertinent to addressing the research question. They have been selected for their capacity to illuminate key aspects of student perspectives on school choice, ensuring

that participant voices remain central to the analysis. This approach allows for a direct connection between student voice and their satisfaction with their chosen educational pathway, providing valuable insights into the efficacy of school choice policies from the perspective of those most affected by the decision.

## Findings

The findings reveal a complex interplay between agency and structure in school choice, aligning with Giddens' Structuration Theory. Students generally had limited agency in school selection, with only eight out of 192 reporting significant input. This reflects the constraining aspect of social structures, primarily manifested through parental decision-making.

Paradoxically, limited student agency did not correlate with dissatisfaction. Most students expressed contentment with their current school, citing cultural alignment, positive peer relationships, and constructive teacher interactions as key factors. This suggests that parental decisions often align with student preferences, even when those preferences weren't explicitly considered during the selection process.

Interestingly, two students who exercised significant choice expressed dissatisfaction, highlighting that increased agency doesn't necessarily lead to better outcomes. This nuanced relationship between choice and satisfaction exemplifies the duality of structure in Structuration Theory, where social structures both constrain and enable individual actions. These findings underscore the complex dynamics between student agency, parental influence, and educational satisfaction within the structures of private schooling.

### *Student influence in current enrolment decisions*

When asked about whether they had a choice in the school they attended, most participants said their influence was minimal to non-existent. This was especially noticeable in participant responses from schools that were comprehensive (i.e. taught Kindergarten through to Senior Secondary) and within participants from the Pacific Islands. These participants noted that the predominant reason their parents chose to send them to their current school was based on the faith profession of school:

... my parents chose this school for me to attend. ... I grew up in a Christian home and my parents always wanted me to grow and develop in Christian principles. So, I am so glad that I am here in this school and it's a great opportunity for me. (Female Year 12 Student, Samoa)

... I grew up in a Seventh-day Adventist family, so I didn't really have a choice, but I would still choose to come here ... I'd still choose to because of the community, and especially knowing most of the people in school, outside of school, so church and stuff, it really grows a nice, encouraging bond within the whole school. (Female Year 11 Student, New Zealand)

My parents chose here and growing up to year 12 ... I can see the influence and the impact that having these Christian values can mould you to be. And I mean, if you were to have kids, I would send them here. (Male Year 12 Student, New Zealand)

The prominence of faith alignment in school choice decisions, particularly in comprehensive schools and Pacific Island contexts, underscores the significant role of cultural and religious factors in educational decision-making. It challenges assumptions that school choice is primarily driven by academic or economic considerations, instead highlighting the nuanced understanding of educational value held by many families.

This trend reflects the deep embeddedness of religious values in certain settings and raises important questions about the intersection of religious freedom, educational policy, and social cohesion. As societies become increasingly diverse, the role of faith-based schools in education systems may become a more prominent topic of debate, particularly where such schools receive public funding.

Understanding the importance of faith alignment in school choice provides valuable insights into the complex interplay of cultural, religious, and educational factors influencing parental decision-making. This understanding is crucial for policymakers, educators, and researchers seeking to comprehend and address diverse needs and preferences within educational systems.

Younger students clearly understood that the predominant reason their parents chose to send them to a private school was due to the faith position of the school. Participants who attended a private school in the Pacific Islands remarked that attending a school within a similar faith position as their family was important. To help elicit responses from primary participants, the interviewer offered them an alternative of attending a school that had all the same features as their current school but did not have any faith position. Participants would report that the faith element was still the most important influence on their decision to remain:

I would actually want to come to a school that talks about God so I can build my spiritual self. I want to know more about God and be closer to my Father. (Male Year 5 Student, Samoa)

... because I'm a Christian, and so if everyone else is not a Christian, I'd feel uncomfortable, and then they might talk about other not Christian stuff. (Female Year 5 Student, Australia)

The responses from younger students, particularly those in primary school, provide a compelling insight into the importance of faith alignment in school

choice. It demonstrates that even at a young age, students are aware of and can articulate the religious motivations behind their school attendance. This suggests that the faith element of their education is not merely a background factor, but an actively recognized and valued aspect of their schooling experience.

The responses from Pacific Island students highlight the cultural embeddedness of faith in these communities. The emphasis on attending a school with a similar faith position as their family underscores the interconnectedness of education, religion, and cultural identity in these contexts.

The quotes provided offer particularly revealing insights. The Samoan student's desire to "build my spiritual self" and "be closer to my Father" indicates that these young students view their education not just in terms of academic learning, but as a holistic process that includes spiritual growth. This perspective aligns with many faith-based educational philosophies that emphasize the development of the whole person.

Similarly, the Australian student's comment about feeling "uncomfortable" in a non-Christian environment reveals the importance of a shared faith community in creating a sense of belonging and comfort for these students. This response also hints at the potential challenges these students might face in navigating more secular educational environments.

An interesting sub-theme emerged amongst students whose faith background was different from the faith position of the school. While these students also acknowledged they had minimal influence in the decision to attend their specific school, they also noted that the faith element was important. One primary school student who identified her family as being of the Hindu faith reported that attending a faith-based school was an important factor in her parents decision-making:

... my parents said the behaviour of the other students the reason I came here. ... they said going to a Christian school means their behaviour was probably better. I went to a public school before coming here and I was bullied a lot because my family is Hindu. Here, even though it's a Christian school nobody has ever bullied me for believing different. (Female Year 6 Student, Australia)

Participant: (Female Year 7 Student, Australia)

I would stay, because I've been to many non-religious schools and they're very not kind like religious schools. Plus, it does talk about God in religious schools, where in non-religion schools it just goes into their subject.

Facilitator: Yeah. So when you say, they're not kind, what do you mean by they're not kind?

Participant: Well, they're not as polite as they would be here

Facilitator: Okay, so it's about how they speak to each other?

Participant: Yeah.

Another student who did not identify as religious noted that peer interactions also had a significant influence on their parents decision to enroll them in a private religious school:

For my parents it definitely impacts them because they feel like if it's a Christian school it's . . . like, people are nicer here, I guess. (Female Year 11 Student, Australia)

The experiences shared by students from non-Christian backgrounds reveal a nuanced aspect of school choice that extends beyond simple faith alignment. These accounts demonstrate that even for families who do not share the religious background of a faith-based school, the perceived benefits of a religious educational environment can significantly influence their decision-making process.

Parents appear to associate faith-based schools with higher standards of student behavior, likely rooted in the belief that religious education emphasizes moral and ethical conduct. Paradoxically, some students from minority faith backgrounds report feeling more accepted in faith-based schools than in secular public schools, suggesting these institutions may foster a more inclusive atmosphere, possibly due to their emphasis on values such as respect and tolerance.

Students consistently mention the quality of peer interactions as a distinguishing feature of faith-based schools. Terms like “polite” and “nicer” are used to describe the social environment, indicating that parents and students perceive these schools as fostering more positive interpersonal relationships. The comment about religious schools discussing God alongside other subjects suggests that parents value an education that includes spiritual or ethical dimensions, even if it differs from their own faith tradition.

The development of this theme indicates that parents are prioritizing school culture and social environment over strict faith alignment. For these families, the perceived benefits of a faith-based education system – such as improved behavior, politeness, and inclusivity – outweigh concerns about exposure to different religious beliefs. It also demonstrates how parents make nuanced decisions based on their children’s previous experiences, as exemplified by the Hindu student who experienced bullying in a public school but found acceptance in a Christian school.

This nuanced approach to school choice challenges simplistic narratives about faith-based education and highlights the complex factors influencing parental decision-making in diverse societies. It suggests that the appeal of faith-based schools may extend beyond their religious affiliations to encompass broader perceptions of school culture, behavior standards, and social inclusivity. Ultimately, these responses indicate that parents view faith-based schools as offering a form of “values education” that extends beyond religious instruction, seeking an educational environment that emphasizes

certain moral and ethical standards, regardless of the specific religious doctrine.

Only eight students stated that they had a significant choice in the choice of school that they attended. When asked as to what led them to choose the school, they referred to positive existing relationships with peers in their grade as the primary reason.

Well, at my old school, one of my really good friends left, so I was considering moving schools already. And then, one of my other friends who already went here, I went over to her place and I was just chatting to her and she was talking about how much the school's really good and that she really liked it . . . I spoke to my Mum and she said that I could come for an interview, so we came here. I started at the end of last year. (Female Year 8 Student, Australia)

The fact that only eight students, reported having significant choice in their school selection contrasts sharply with the predominant parental decision-making narrative in school choice. While parents often prioritize factors such as faith alignment and perceived behavioral standards associated with religious schools, these students placed greater emphasis on social connections and peer experiences.

Students frequently cited the faith element of schools as a primary factor in their parents, believing it would foster better behavior and a more positive educational environment. In contrast, the students who exercised choice in their school selection did not mention faith or behavioral expectations as significant factors. Instead, they focused on peer relationships and social comfort.

However, it's important to note that even in these cases of student choice, parental involvement remains evident. The example provided shows that while the student initiated the idea of changing schools based on peer influence, the mother's approval was still crucial. This suggests that while some older students may have input into the decision, parents continue to play a significant role, potentially weighing factors like faith and behavioral standards alongside their child's preferences.

This raises important questions about the balance between parental priorities (such as faith-based education and its perceived benefits) and student autonomy in educational decisions, particularly as children progress through secondary education. It suggests a need for a more nuanced understanding of school choice that accounts for both parental considerations and the growing social awareness of older students.

These participant experiences reveal a consistent trend regarding student influence on school choice, particularly in comprehensive schools and Pacific Island contexts. Participants reported minimal to non-existent input in the decision-making process of which school to attend, with the faith espoused by the school being reported as the primary factor influencing parental choice. This trend was articulated

consistently by participants from Pacific Island nations. When presented with hypothetical alternatives, students consistently reinforced their parents decision by reiterating the faith element of the school. Interestingly, students from different faith backgrounds or non-religious families also valued the religious ethos of their schools, citing improved behavior and more positive peer interactions as motivating factors. This suggests that the religious character of private schools transcends denominational boundaries, influencing perceptions of student conduct and social environment.

### ***Student choice in future enrolment decisions***

To elicit deeper conversation regarding student satisfaction with their current school, students were asked a hypothetical question about if they would choose their current school again if they were given the choice. Of the 192 students interviewed, only 13 stated that they would choose differently if given the opportunity. Of the 13 participants who expressed a desire to choose differently, eight cited challenges with teacher relationships as the primary reason.

Basically some of the teachers are annoying and . . . there's not many options for elective classes or anything. (Female Year 11 Student, Australia)

. . . it's almost like teachers versus student here. Because we've heard a lot of teachers talk badly about students in the staff room and stuff. (Male Year 12 Student, Australia)

. . . if maybe school was a bit more interactive, a bit more fun and the teachers were a bit less intimidating, then maybe I'd stay. (Male Year 7 Student, Australia)

Participants also stated that lack of subject choice in the smaller school was a reason for wanting to choose to enroll in another school. While many students appreciated the positive environment and culture of the school, it was noted that this was at the expense of curriculum opportunities:

I'm sort of on the fence, like, it's the, some of the academic system's pretty good. You're just going to do general subjects, but there's not much sporting opportunities here. (Male Year 11 Student, Australia)

I feel like I would go to a normal public school. Because I feel like, with learning Bible, but it's just . . . I reckon having a free subject slot would be really useful to me. And, also, I feel like, since I've lacked the public school experience, I feel like that is something that I would also want. (Male Year 12 Student, New Zealand)

I'm actually moving to a different school next year, but the only reason I'm moving is for options. I want to do technology, so that's the only, I'd say, almost negative of the school is cause it's so small, the variety of things to do is not that wide. But at this school, if you find something that you want to do that they have, it's perfectly fine. Our great kitchen, great teachers, it's like for very specific things, it can lack a bit. (Female Year 10 Student, Australia)

The high level of student satisfaction revealed by this hypothetical question offers an interesting counterpoint to the earlier findings about limited student choice in school selection. Despite most students reporting minimal influence in the decision to attend their current school, the vast majority indicated that they would choose to remain if given the option. This suggests that, in many cases, parental choices align well with student preferences, even if those preferences were not explicitly considered during the initial decision-making process.

However, the reasons cited by the minority who would choose differently provide valuable insights into areas where this alignment breaks down. The predominance of teacher-student relationship issues among these responses highlights a potential blind spot in the school selection process. While parents often focus on broader institutional characteristics such as faith alignment or academic reputation, they may overlook the critical importance of individual teacher quality and relational dynamics.

The development of this theme has significant implications for how we understand the effectiveness of faith-based and private schools. The perceived benefits of these institutions, such as improved behavior and a more positive moral environment, may be undermined if not supported by strong, positive teacher-student relationships. It suggests that the success of these schools in meeting both parental expectations and student needs relies heavily on the quality of their teaching staff and the school's ability to foster a supportive, engaging learning environment.

The specific complaints about limited elective options and a lack of interactive, engaging teaching methods also raise questions about the curriculum and pedagogical approaches in some faith-based and private schools. This suggests a need for these institutions to continually evaluate and update their educational offerings to ensure they're meeting the evolving needs and expectations of students, even as they maintain their core values and ethos.

Two participants who stated that they had a significant influence in their choice of school said they regretted their decision. One student cited a relationship with a specific teacher that had a negative influence on their faith as the primary reason why they would choose to go to a different school:

She made me feel like if you don't do the right thing then God is going to punish you. . . . She made it feel like God isn't really your friend or loves you. It's like he [God] has this set of rules and you follow them or you get punished . . . it got me to start being like, "Oh well I don't want to be a Christian. That's so gross." I think if I knew about her and what it would be like with her in my class, I'd definitely not have decided to come here. (Male Year 11 Student, Australia)

Another participant who stated that their choice of school was predominantly their own cited the religious element of the school as the reason why they would change their decision if given the opportunity.



Participant: (Male Year 12 Student, New Zealand) If I had my time again, I wouldn't choose this school

Facilitator: Really, why?

Participant: I chose to come here because the teachers seemed nice but . . . I'm not connected to all the faith stuff . . . it makes it difficult for me to feel like I really belong here.

The challenges expressed by these participants are more indicative of issues commonly associated with smaller schools rather than private schools specifically. Only a small number of students interviewed expressed a desire to enroll elsewhere if given the opportunity, with their concerns primarily focusing on limited subject choices and extracurricular options – issues often inherent in schools with smaller student populations. While the majority of students valued the positive culture and environment of their current schools, some felt this came at the expense of broader academic or sporting opportunities typically available in larger institutions. The few instances of dissatisfaction related to teacher-student relationships or discomfort with religious aspects highlight the importance of maintaining professional standards and sensitivity in faith-based education settings. These results underscore the complex interplay between school size, culture, academic offerings, and individual student experiences in shaping satisfaction with school choice. Furthermore, they emphasize the critical importance of considering student perspectives when evaluating the effectiveness of school choice policies and practices, particularly in the context of smaller educational institutions.

## Discussion

### *Limited agency in school choice*

The findings reveal a complex interplay between structure and agency in school choice decisions, with students demonstrating notably limited agency despite their awareness of social structures. Of the 192 students interviewed, only eight reported having significant input in their school selection, reflecting the constraining aspects of existing social structures. This aligns with Giddens' concept of "knowledgeable agents" (1984, p. 15), where children understand their social position but operate within structures largely controlled by others – in this case, their parents.

This limited agency manifests particularly strongly in the context of faith-based schools, where parental decisions were predominantly driven by religious alignment. However, the data suggests a more nuanced understanding when viewed through the lens of social class and mobility. As Brown and Bøje (2024) and Al-Deen (2018) note, parents often view private schooling as a mechanism to either maintain or improve their family's social standing.

The students' responses indicate an awareness of this dynamic, even when they had minimal input in the decision-making process. This awareness reflects Giddens' assertion that children understand their social class positioning and are often guided into educational environments that could enhance their social standing (1984).

The findings particularly resonate with Beech et al. (2021) observation that school choice becomes a vehicle for social mobility, with parents strategically selecting educational environments they believe will advance their children's prospects. This was evident in responses from students from non-Christian backgrounds, whose parents chose faith-based schools not primarily for religious reasons, but for perceived behavioral and social benefits. Such decisions reflect what Amatullah and Dixit (2023) describe as the complex intersectionality of school choice, where religious and cultural factors interweave with aspirations for social mobility.

Interestingly, while the students demonstrated limited agency in school selection, they showed sophisticated understanding of their parents' motivations. This understanding aligns with Giddens' concept of the duality of structure, where social structures both constrain and enable individual actions (Giddens, 1984). While students might be constrained in their initial choice, they demonstrate agency in how they interpret and engage with their educational environment, often recognizing and appreciating the social mobility opportunities their parents sought to provide.

### ***Satisfaction through cultural alignment***

A key finding emerging from the data is how cultural alignment, particularly through religious values, contributes significantly to student satisfaction despite limited initial choice. This dynamic illustrates Giddens (1984) concept of social reproduction, where structures – in this case religious and cultural – are maintained and reinforced through educational choices. While parents often seek social mobility through private education, they simultaneously strive to preserve cultural and religious values, creating an interesting tension between change and continuity within the structuration framework.

This preservation of cultural identity through educational choice was particularly evident in Pacific Island contexts, where students frequently cited religious alignment as central to their school experience. As Taira (2020) notes, education in Pacific communities has historically been intertwined with religious institutions, creating deeply embedded cultural structures that continue to influence educational choices. The data reveals how students internalize and appreciate these structures, even when they had minimal input in the initial choice. For example, when primary school students were presented with hypothetical alternatives to their current faith-based education,

they consistently emphasized the importance of religious alignment in their schooling experience.

Interestingly, this cultural satisfaction extends beyond students from families sharing the school's religious background. As evidenced in the findings, even students from different faith traditions or non-religious backgrounds reported satisfaction with the cultural environment of faith-based schools. This aligns with Ryan's (2006) observation about the broader appeal of religious education's value system beyond specific denominational boundaries. The data suggests that while parents might seek social mobility through private education, as noted by Brown and Bøje (2024), they simultaneously value the cultural stability and moral framework that faith-based education provides.

This dual emphasis on cultural preservation and social mobility exemplifies what Levinson (1999) describes as the balance between private values and public obligations in educational settings. The findings suggest that students, even without initial choice, often come to appreciate this balance. Their satisfaction appears rooted in what Giddens would identify as the recursive nature of social structures, where cultural practices and values are continuously reproduced through daily educational experiences while simultaneously enabling new social possibilities.

This dynamic was particularly evident in comprehensive schools, where students' long-term exposure to consistent cultural values appeared to strengthen their satisfaction with their educational environment. The focus groups revealed how students become active participants in reproducing these cultural structures, even when their initial enrollment was primarily their parents' decision. This process of cultural reproduction through education aligns with Giddens' understanding of how social structures are maintained and transformed through individual agency, even within constrained choice environments.

The influence of cultural alignment on satisfaction showed notable variation across age groups, with younger students particularly valuing the reinforcement of home values in the school environment. Primary school participants consistently expressed appreciation for the connection between their home and school cultural environments, especially in relation to faith practices. As one Year 5 student articulated, "because I'm a Christian, and so if everyone else is not a Christian, I'd feel uncomfortable . . . ." This response exemplifies Giddens (1984) concept of ontological security, where familiar cultural structures provide comfort and stability for younger students navigating their educational environment. Unlike older students who might question or challenge these structures, primary school students appeared to find significant satisfaction in the seamless continuation of cultural values between home and school. This alignment appears to create what Giddens terms a "protective contract" (1984, p. 64) that supports younger students'

developing sense of identity and belonging, facilitating their engagement with the educational environment.

### ***Satisfaction through peer relationships***

The data reveals that positive peer relationships significantly contribute to student satisfaction, illustrating how social structures are both reproduced and potentially transformed through student interactions. While students had limited agency in their school choice, they actively construct and maintain social networks within their educational environment, demonstrating what Giddens terms the “duality of structure” (1984, p. 25) – where social structures both constrain and enable student actions.

Among the small number of students who reported having influence in their school choice (8 out of 192), existing peer relationships were cited as the primary motivating factor. As one Year 8 student noted, the presence of “really good friends” influenced their decision to change schools. This aligns with Mandic et al. (2018) findings that social connections and peer recommendations significantly influence student perspectives on school choice. However, the data suggests that positive peer relationships develop regardless of whether they influenced the initial choice, indicating that students actively create satisfying social environments within their assigned educational structures.

Particularly noteworthy was how faith-based environments appeared to facilitate positive peer interactions across different religious backgrounds. Students from non-Christian families frequently cited improved peer behavior and interactions as key benefits of their school environment. As one Hindu student remarked, “Here, even though it’s a Christian school nobody has ever bullied me for believing different.” This suggests that while religious structures might initially appear constraining, they can enable positive cross-cultural peer relationships, supporting Al-Deen (2018) observations about how religious schools can foster inclusive social environments.

The development of these peer relationships demonstrates what Giddens (1984) describes as the knowledgeable agency of social actors. While students might not choose their school, they actively shape their social environment within it, creating networks that contribute to their satisfaction. This is particularly evident in comprehensive schools, where long-term peer relationships develop and strengthen over time, contributing to what Beech et al. (2021) identify as the development of social capital within educational settings.

These findings suggest that peer relationships serve as a crucial mechanism through which students transform potentially constraining structures into enabling ones. Even when initial school choice is limited, students’ ability to form and maintain positive peer relationships becomes a significant factor in

their overall satisfaction, illustrating how agency operates within structural constraints to create positive educational experiences.

### ***Satisfaction through teacher interactions***

The quality of teacher interactions emerges as a critical factor in student satisfaction, illustrating Giddens' (1984) concept of how structures operate through human relationships and daily interactions. The data reveals that positive teacher-student relationships can effectively mediate between institutional structures and student experiences, even in contexts where students had limited input in their school choice. However, when these relationships break down, they become a primary source of dissatisfaction, demonstrating the crucial role teachers play in students' educational experience.

Significantly, teacher interactions appear to function as what Giddens terms "structuring properties" (1984, p. 19), shaping how students experience and engage with their educational environment. This was particularly evident in among secondary school students, where teacher relationships could either reinforce or undermine the school's religious ethos. As one Year 11 student's negative experience illustrated, poor teacher interactions could significantly impact students' engagement with faith: "She made me feel like if you don't do the right thing then God is going to punish you. . . ." This example demonstrates how teacher interactions can fundamentally influence students' relationship with institutional structures, potentially transforming intended cultural reproduction into resistance.

The importance of teacher relationships transcended religious boundaries, with students from various faith backgrounds citing teacher interactions as crucial to their school experience. This reinforces Brown and Bøje's (2024) observations about how educational relationships contribute to social reproduction or transformation.

Moreover, teacher relationships emerged as a key factor in how students experience and navigate institutional power structures. While students generally had limited agency in school choice, their ability to form positive relationships with teachers represented an important avenue for exercising agency within the educational environment. However, when these relationships failed, as reported by eight of the thirteen dissatisfied students, it significantly impacted students' ability to engage positively with their educational environment.

These findings underscore how teacher interactions serve as a crucial mediating factor between institutional structures and student experiences, capable of either enhancing or diminishing student satisfaction regardless of initial choice in schooling. This highlights the need for schools to prioritize positive teacher-student relationships as fundamental to successful educational outcomes, particularly in contexts where student choice is limited.

### ***Elements of dissatisfaction***

While most students expressed satisfaction with their schooling experience despite limited initial choice, the study revealed important elements of dissatisfaction that illuminate how structural constraints can create tensions in educational experiences. Of the 192 students interviewed, 13 indicated they would choose differently if given the opportunity, with their dissatisfaction stemming from specific structural limitations and relationship dynamics.

Teacher relationships emerged as the primary source of dissatisfaction, with eight of the 13 dissatisfied students citing challenging teacher interactions as their main concern. This finding illustrates what Giddens terms the “dialectic of control in social systems” (1984, p. 16), where power relationships can become problematic when actors feel unable to influence their circumstances. This is exemplified by one Year 12 student who expressed, “it’s almost like teachers versus student here. . . .” This perception of antagonistic relationships demonstrates how institutional power structures can create barriers to positive educational experiences, even within systems designed to enhance social and cultural capital.

Notably, two of the few students who reported having significant choice in their school selection expressed regret about their decision. One student’s experience with a teacher negatively impacting their faith highlights how institutional structures intended to reproduce cultural values can sometimes achieve the opposite effect. This aligns with the concept of unintended consequences within structuration theory, where attempts to maintain cultural structures can inadvertently lead to their rejection.

Limited subject choice emerged as another significant source of dissatisfaction, particularly in smaller schools. This structural limitation reflects what Brown and Bøje (2024) identify as the tension between social mobility aspirations and institutional constraints. While parents might choose private schools to enhance their children’s prospects the limited curriculum options in smaller institutions can potentially restrict rather than expand opportunities.

Interestingly, dissatisfaction appeared more closely linked to institutional limitations and relationship dynamics than to the initial lack of choice in school selection. This suggests that students’ ongoing experiences within educational structures matter more to their satisfaction than their level of input in choosing these structures. This finding adds nuance to Mandic et al. (2018) observations about student participation in school choice, indicating that initial choice may be less crucial to student satisfaction than the quality of their subsequent educational experience.

These elements of dissatisfaction highlight the complex interplay between structure and agency in educational settings. While students might successfully navigate and find satisfaction within constraining structures, specific institutional limitations and power dynamics can

significantly impact their educational experience, regardless of their initial level of choice.

## Conclusion

This study illuminates the complex dynamics of student perspectives on school choice and satisfaction in faith-based private schools across Australia, New Zealand, and the South Pacific. While the findings reveal limited student agency in school selection, with parental decisions primarily driven by faith alignment, the methodology employed presents notable limitations. The focus group format may have constrained individual expression of dissatisfaction or disagreement, as participants might have been reluctant to voice minority opinions in a group setting. Additionally, social desirability bias – the tendency for participants to provide responses they believe are socially acceptable or expected – may have influenced students to report higher satisfaction levels than they actually experienced, particularly when discussing their parents' choices or their school's religious orientation.

Future research should address these methodological limitations by employing a broader range of data collection techniques, including anonymous surveys, individual interviews, and observational methods alongside focus groups. This triangulation would help mitigate social desirability effects and group conformity pressures. Studies should also include a wider range of school types, larger sample sizes, and longitudinal designs to track how satisfaction evolves over time. Despite these limitations, this study offers valuable preliminary insights into the nuanced relationship between student agency, parental influence, and educational satisfaction in faith-based private schools, while acknowledging the potential influence of social dynamics on the data collected.

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## CReDIT statement

**Ben Archer:** Conceptualisation, Formal Analysis, Investigations, Writing – Original Draft & Review

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