

Title: Parents' Perceptions of Quality Education: A Foucauldian Discourse Analysis.

Researcher: Nina Rovis-Hermann

Supervisor: Associate Professor Ngaire Donaghue

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In recent years, the level of autonomy afforded to parents with regards to choosing a school that meets the individualized needs and/or interests of children has increased considerably. As a result, school choice has become readily construed as a key factor in optimizing children's learning experience and ultimately, their future prospects. Although school choices are advocated on the basis that they provide parents with a level of agency in their children's prospects, determining what exactly constitutes the best kind of learning environment for any given child is a highly elusive endeavor. Not only must a parent consider the individualized interests and needs of any given child, but they must also anticipate the interests and needs that a child is likely to develop in the future. This implies that when making school choices, parents are effectively deprived of an objective means with which to assess the options available. Nevertheless, the very presence of school choices implies that some schools will inevitably suit some children better than others. Consequently, making the 'right' choice is likely to be a source of anxiety – and social pressure – for the well-meaning parent.

In the present study, 21 local Fremantle parents attended one of three focus groups that were conducted to evoke discussion around parents' perceptions of 'quality' education. At the time these focus groups took place, there had been considerable unrest amongst the Fremantle parent community as to the apparent lack of 'quality' options available in the local public secondary school sector. Consequently, the dissatisfaction these parents were experiencing with regards to secondary school choice provided impetus for debate around parents' views on children's educational needs. All three focus groups were recorded and orthographically transcribed. A Foucauldian Discourse Analysis was then conducted to explore some of the ideological complexities that problematized the experience of school choices for these parents.

Careful attendance to the discursive devices drawn on by parents in their constructions of 'quality' education in this study revealed somewhat of a paradox. Specifically, these parents perceived the need to choose a school on the basis of their children's unique and thereby *incomparable* attributes, for the purposes of subjecting them to an education system that is legitimized on the basis of *comparable* student outcomes. In this instance, attempting to choose the 'right' school evoked an irresolvable dilemma for these parents, a dilemma that is arguably a product of contradictory parenting and education ideologies. At a time when many schools – and indeed the West Australia Department of Education itself – emphasise the positive implications of school choice on children's prospects, further enquiry as to the impact such irreconcilable choice-making practices can have on parents' sense of agency when making such decisions is warranted.