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ABSTRACT

In 1997-98, parents and students at 1,300 elementary and secondary public schools in Queensland (Australia) were surveyed to measure their satisfaction with their school. Some 38,000 parents and 43,000 secondary students responded to the survey. Results indicate that for parents, there was a conflict between remoteness/isolation and school size/complexity. Those parents whose children attended the most isolated schools reported the least satisfaction with their schools, yet parent satisfaction was highest for small, rural schools. However, with the exception of community school students, students in remote/isolated areas were the most satisfied with their schools. Student satisfaction also increased as school size/complexity decreased. By school type, special schools received the highest ratings from parents and students, and community schools received the lowest. Students reported higher satisfaction levels for schools of distance education than parents. When calculated by district, parent satisfaction levels were lower for the most remote/isolated districts, but students gave the highest satisfaction ratings to the two most remote districts and another district that could be described as remote. The conflict between parent and student perceptions suggests that parents and students apply different criteria in expressing school satisfaction. Community school clients were primarily indigenous Australians, and differences in satisfaction levels towards community schools might relate more to cultural issues than remoteness/isolation. Six tables present results. (TD)

Rural Parents' And Students' Satisfaction With Public Schools In Queensland

John King and Trevor Bond, Australia

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Abstract

In 1997-8, some 1,300 government schools in an Australian state were surveyed as part of a contracted School Opinion Survey Project to measure the satisfaction of parents and students with Australian state government schools. Some 38,000 parents with children in years one to twelve, and 43,000 students from years 7, 9 and 11 responded to the survey. Responses were analyzed using Rasch analysis, which enabled state satisfaction benchmarks to be constructed for parents and students. Satisfaction benchmarks for schools of a similar type (primary, secondary, special, etc.) were also constructed. Individual schools received reports that compared their parent and student item estimates of satisfaction to the state and like-school benchmarks. This paper will report on satisfaction estimates of parents and students in remote/isolated areas who participated in the survey, and will compare them to those for the state as a whole. Parents and students in remote/isolated areas mirrored the major findings of the survey for all parents and students in that parents exhibited higher satisfaction profiles than students; and the lowest item estimates of satisfaction were found for questions relating to the use of technology and behaviour. Interestingly, parents and students from schools of distance education, with student populations residing mainly in isolated/remote areas, reported one of the highest satisfaction profiles in comparison to other school types.

This paper outlines some outcomes of a school opinion survey carried out over 1300 government schools in one Australian state. Aspects that relate to rurality, defined here in terms of remoteness and isolation, are the focus of the paper.

The survey was carried out by means of author-designed parent and student survey forms that were developed in consultation with a state response group and target group consultants. The framework used to guide questionnaire construction was Moos's scheme for classifying human environments (Moos, 1979) and the survey items were cross-referenced with the goals of the state education authority. Forms were trialed before use in the main survey. Reduction of the trial question sets of 35 questions to the final sets of 20 questions used was informed by a combination of:

- the use of an 'importance' response column (which was not included in the final survey form) to glean information from the respondents as to which trial questions they deemed to be important;
- the use of a 'don't know' response column in order to determine the level of understanding of the respondents to the trial questions;
- Rasch analysis of the trial question parent and student responses that highlighted questions exhibiting a good fit to the Rasch model; and
- feedback from state response group meetings.

A sample of parents was obtained across all grades in each school except for small schools (n<30) where all parents were surveyed. Students were sampled from years 7, 9 and 11 at each school site where these years were present. For small schools, a similar allowance was made by surveying all students in the grade involved.

State wide and individual school analyses were carried out by the authors using Rasch analysis (Adams & Khoo, 1993; Adams, Wu & Wilson, 1997) in order to obtain satisfaction estimates and item difficulty estimates for state wide and school samples. Rasch analysis was adopted by the authors as the most appropriate technique for use in the development, validation and analysis of school satisfaction data for a number of reasons including:

- it identified the extent to which items measured a single underlying satisfaction construct;
- it provided measures that are sample and item independent;
- it modelled error estimates that were sensitive to varying sample size; and
- it yielded fit statistics which monitored adherence to the model and assisted in interpreting the meaningfulness of findings.

Further analyses were performed for identified target groups, geographically based districts, school type and size, as well as for other variables of interest. In the following sections, analyses providing estimates of client satisfaction that related to rurality, defined in terms of remoteness and isolation, are discussed.

Location

Of all the school demographics collected, teacher transfer points were considered by the authors to be the best indicator of remoteness/isolation. The teacher transfer points allocated to service at any school per year of service at that school are allocated by the state education authority to each school on the basis of its perceived remoteness/isolation as measured by services and facilities available at that location. Transfer points are based on a scale of one to seven where the seven level equates to the most remote/isolated schools. After accumulating a predetermined number of transfer points, teachers become eligible for transfer to a less remote/isolated area.

For both parents and students, the differences between satisfaction levels according to this remoteness criterion were small but measurable.

Parent satisfaction by location

Table 1 indicates that parents of schools at the 6 and 7 transfer-points level expressed the least satisfaction. Highest satisfaction was reported for parents at the three transfer-points level.

[b] A logarithmic scale unit representing a linear, interval measurement such that any difference in item difficulty or client satisfaction maintains its value anywhere along the scale. The analysis indicates that parents whose children attend the most remote/isolated schools report the least satisfaction with their schools.

Student satisfaction by location

For students, students of schools at the 1 transfer-point level (i.e., city-based schools) expressed least satisfaction, which is quite the opposite response to that of parents. The highest student satisfaction level is reported at schools with level 5 teacher transfer points. Satisfaction estimates for students by location (based on teacher transfer points) are located in table 2.

[a]The average estimate for all students was set at 0.00 logits. Higher values indicate more client satisfaction.

It might be inferred that students at remote/isolated schools perceive the school environment as a place that provides them with social contact with peers that would be otherwise lacking if they had to undertake their education via the alternative option - through a school of Distance Education. On the other hand, parents of students attending non-remote metropolitan schools might be more satisfied because of the level of educational opportunity these schools offer in terms of curriculum choice, or simply because they have a choice of schools available to them. Parents who are not satisfied with one school, can choose to send their children to another, and presumably be more satisfied with the choice. By contrast, students appear relatively less satisfied with these metropolitan schools, perhaps because of their sheer size and less personal atmosphere.
School Size

Satisfaction levels for parents and students were also analysed according to the classification band of the school that the children attended. The classification band is a state education authority measure of the complexity of the school in terms of its management difficulty. It is linked to the classification of the Principal. A crucial aspect of school complexity is size of enrolment, but other factors such as the number of students with special needs in the school and the cultural diversity of the school clients are taken into account when determining the classification band. Hence some small schools such as special schools and schools with a high indigenous population have a classification band greater than what the student population might otherwise suggest. Generally though, the higher the classification band, the larger the school.

For the purpose of this paper, classification band was used as the indicator of school size, where band 4 represents the smallest schools (enrolment *c.* 3-25 students) and band 11 schools (enrolment c. 1500-2000 students) the largest. While school size is less accurate an indicator of remoteness/isolation than is teacher transfer points, most small band 4 and 5 schools in Queensland lie in rural areas with a greater or lesser degree of remoteness and/or isolation.

Parent satisfaction by school size

Table 3 indicates that there is a large range (1.35 logits) between the most satisfied (band 4) and least satisfied (band 11) parents in this sample; indeed the smallest schools (band 4) parents report a greater than 0.5 logits satisfaction difference over the next most satisfied group (band 5). From these data it would appear that decrease in parent satisfaction occurs as the size (and complexity) of the school increases and that the most satisfied parents are generally found in small rural schools

While this result for parents appears to be in direct conflict with that found previously for teacher transfer points, it needs to be emphasised that classification band does not measure remoteness/isolation to the same degree as teacher transfer points. Many band 4 and 5 schools are located at relatively short distances to reasonably sized regional towns. While these schools might be accurately described as rural, they would not usually be described as remote or isolated - at least not by Queensland standards.

Student satisfaction by school size

Table 4 indicates that student satisfaction levels, measured against classification band, also increase as school size/complexity decreases. There is a large overall range of 1.18 logits between the most satisfied group of students (band 4) and the least satisfied (band 11).

The satisfaction levels of students, like parents, are higher in the less complex and smaller rural schools with varying degrees of remoteness/isolation. School size/complexity, as measured by classification band, displays a negative relationship with school satisfaction levels; the greater the classification band, the lower the mean client satisfaction with the school.

School Type

Satisfaction levels for parents and students were analysed according to the type of school that the students attended. In the context of this paper, the school types of interest are schools of distance education (sometimes referred to as schools of the air in Australia) and community schools (whose clients are primarily indigenous Australian). While schools of distance education are physically located in metropolitan or large regional towns, their clients are located largely in remote/isolated areas. The community schools, as well as their clients, are in the main located in remote/isolated areas. Hence the effect of remoteness/isolation on the school satisfaction levels of these two client groups can provide an interesting comparison to the satisfaction levels of clients from other school types.

Parents by school type

Table 5 indicates that the extreme satisfaction levels by school type are attributed to parents of children attending Special schools (highest) and parents of children at Community schools (lowest). Because Community schools are few in number, the sample size of parents is low in comparison to other types of schools. In the case of parents, relative satisfaction levels of those involved with schools of Distance Education are closer to the mean than they are for students (Table 6).

Students by school type

Table 6 indicates that students from schools of Distance Education reported higher satisfaction levels than parents, while the extreme positions were allocated to students from Special schools (above) and those from Community schools (below). The range of relative satisfaction levels according to school type varies considerably (*c.* 2.5 logits). Satisfaction estimates for students according to Type of School attended are located in table 6.

The above results indicate that the remoteness/isolation of the above two client groups, namely distance education clients and community school clients, does not give rise to similar satisfaction with the educational services they are receiving. For distance education clients, the satisfaction levels are relatively high, whereas for Community school clients, satisfaction levels are markedly low.

Educational District

Satisfaction estimates were also calculated by educational district within the state. Districts in Queensland vary greatly in remoteness /isolation. Some eight districts are located in the capital city of the state. The two most remote/isolated districts are located more than 2 000 kilometres from the state capital.

Of the 36 districts, parent satisfaction levels for the most remote/isolated districts were generally lower than the mean level, with only marginal but measurable differences between adjacent levels. This result corroborates that found for teacher transfer points which also indicated low satisfaction levels for parents located in remote/isolated areas.

For students however, the top three districts in terms of satisfaction level included the two most remote districts and another district that could be described as remote. This result also supports that found for teacher transfer points.

The conflicting perceptions of parents and students in remote/isolated areas suggest that parents apply different criteria than do students when expressing their satisfaction with the school.

Discussion

This paper has focussed on client satisfaction with school as it relates to rurality, defined in terms of remoteness/isolation. A number of measures including teacher transfer points, classification band, school type and educational district have been used to uncover links between rurality and client satisfaction with school. While these school demographics can be used to measure remoteness/isolation with varying degrees of accuracy, it is argued that teacher transfer points provides the best indicator, given they have been designed by the state education authority for that purpose.

While there is a common perception that remoteness/isolation equates with lower quality of educational services, the analysis of school satisfaction of those clients who access educational services in remote and/or isolated areas of this Australian state does not suggest that this perception is necessarily strongly held by them.

It is apparent that some differences in satisfaction levels, such as those at Community schools compared to other school types, are related to differences in the cultural background of the clients. Differences in these cases might relate more to important cultural issues rather than to remoteness/isolation per se.

Other differences in satisfaction levels of remote/isolated clients, such as those between parents and their students, may relate to the more intimate knowledge that students have of their school and to a greater sense of belonging compared to their parents. The differences might also relate to the differing expectations parents have of schools compared to their offspring.

Parents of students attending remote/isolated schools have less choice of school compared to their metropolitan counterparts, which could explain their observed lower satisfaction levels. The experience of the authors suggests that rural parents are generally more aware, more critical and more demanding of their local school and generally have more direct contact with it. Hence they may have seen the survey as a more relevant opportunity to have a say about their school compared to their city cousins.

The conflicting results obtained for parents suggest a tension between remoteness/isolation and school size/complexity. On the one hand, the more remote/isolated the school the more disadvantaged parents may perceive themselves. On the other hand, the smaller and less complex the school, the happier they feel. Students do not appear to share this conflict. With the exception of Community school students, students in remote/isolated areas appear to be among those who are most satisfied with their schools.

In conclusion, it seems reasonable to suggest that it is the group of parents, rather than the group of students, for whom the concepts and consequences of remoteness and isolation are more pervasive.

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Table 1
Satisfaction Levels for Parents by Location (Teacher Transfer Points)

Teacher transfer points group	Estimate[a] (logits)[b]	Error	N
1	0.360	0.002	18 274
2	0.381	0.003	9 990
3	0.498	0.005	4 131
4	0.313	0.008	1 726
5	0.402	0.010	961
6	0.195	0.016	346
7	-0.240	0.018	566

[a]The average estimate for all parents was set at 0.00 logits. Higher values indicate more client satisfaction.

Table 2
Satisfaction Levels for Students by Location (Teacher Transfer Points)

Teacher transfer points group	Estimate[a] (logits)	Error	N
1	-0.004	0.002	22 340
2	0.031	0.002	11 321
3	0.082	0.004	3 638
4	0.056	0.006	1 620
5	0.127	0.009	803
6	0.099	0.016	192
7	0.093	0.019	409

Table 3
Satisfaction Levels for Parents according to Classification Band

Classification band	Estimate[a] (logits)	Error	N
Band 4	0.863	0.003	761
Band 5	0.346	0.003	3776
Band 6	0.078	0.003	3162
Band 7	-0.037	0.003	3655
Band 8	-0.065	0.003	7573
Band 9	-0.245	0.003	8176
Band 10	-0.452	0.003	6158
Band 11	-0.488	0.003	2653

[a]The average estimate for all parents was set at 0.00 logits.

Table 4

Satisfaction Levels for Students according to Classification Band

Classification band	Estimate[a] (logits)	Error	N
Band 4	0.727	0.003	269
Band 5	0.365	0.003	991
Band 6	0.034	0.003	1 449
Band 7	0.000	0.002	3 327
Band 8	-0.023	0.002	7 142
Band 9	-0.277	0.003	8 936
Band 10	-0.377	0.002	11 758
Band 11	-0.450	0.002	6 451

[a]The average estimate for all Students was set at 0.00 logits.

Table 5
Satisfaction Levels for Parents according to Type of School attended

Type of school	Estimate[a] (logits)	Error	N
Special schools	+1.153	0.012	876
State schools	+0.516	0.002	26 297
Distance education	+0.313	0.011	237
Infants schools	-0.036	0.012	110
High schools	-0.161	0.003	8 332
Community schools	-1.785	0.012	52

[a]The average estimate for all parents was set at 0.00 logits.

Table 6
Satisfaction Levels for Students according to Type of School attended

Type of school	Estimate[a] (logits)	Error	N
Special schools	+1.035	0.013	372
Distance education	+0.467	0.013	202
State schools	+0.228	0.002	19 133
High schools	-0.286	0.002	20 577
Community schools	-1.444	0.016	39

[a]The average estimate for all students was set at 0.00 logits.

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